

# Virtual communities and Tourism: Facebook travel communities as a communication platform for SMEs in New Zealand

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## Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of high learning.

Chandrika Ghosh

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## Ethics Approval

This research has obtained ethical approval 21/155 from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 25 May 2021.

## Abstract

With social media platforms becoming the go-to place for tourists seeking reliable travel information, virtual travel communities on Facebook are offering tourism companies a way to tap into large groups of travellers and promote their tourism products and services to them. While a large amount of research has been conducted to evaluate behaviour and motivations of virtual community members, this research aims to offer insight into how tourism entities can successfully make use of such communities to engage with their target audience.

This qualitative research project focuses on a popular Facebook community, New Zealand Travel Tips (NZTT), and uses virtual ethnography, also known as 'Netnography', to uncover the ways in which small and medium sized tourism companies (SMEs) are leveraging the platform to communicate with travellers. Data is collected from the NZTT Facebook group comprising of posts and comments shared by representatives of tourism entities as well as the community's administrator. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews are conducted with some of the tourism entities that participate in the NZTT community. The data is then analysed using qualitative thematic analysis technique which reveal some of the most common ways SMEs in the tourism industry communicate with travellers via the virtual community.

The data revealed the value of virtual communities for tourism businesses in New Zealand, the reasons why SMEs are proactively entering such communities, and uncovered the different strategies they are using to engage with their audience. The research showed that virtual communities can become a viable alternate channel for online communication and thus hold immense potential for tourism businesses.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Overview

The rapid proliferation of Internet technologies has meant that more individuals spend time online to find new information, make purchases and seek help in their purchase decision-making process (Chung & Buhalis, 2008). This has led to the formation of virtual or online communities where individuals can come together with other like-minded people using digital technologies to discuss relevant topics and share their opinions on products and services. This stimulated electronic word-of-mouth quickly became a powerful tool used by people to make purchase decisions (Armstrong & Hagel, 1997), giving rise to a breed of consumers who were smarter and more well-informed (Rodríguez-Fernández et al., 2019).

The emergence of virtual communities turned out to be a boon, especially for the tourism industry. Travel communities bridged the gap between intangible tourism services and potential tourists by giving them an opportunity to hear first-hand reviews before their real-world experience of the destination or activity (Rodríguez-Fernández et al., 2019; Chung & Buhalis, 2008). TripAdvisor was one of the first and most successful communities to be formed online that was entirely dedicated to travel and tourism. By giving tourists the opportunity to share peer-to-peer reviews of hotels and activities, it became an independent platform where travellers could seek information (Katsoni, 2014). This meant that a lot of early studies about virtual communities have focused their interest on such independent platforms (Ayeh et al., 2013; Chung & Buhalis, 2008). Additionally, the behaviour, needs, and motivations of virtual community members, essentially the end consumers, have also been a focus for many researchers (Roth-Cohen & Lahav, 2019).

Early studies conducted by Armstrong and Hagel (1997) and later by Kozinets (1999) also highlighted the value of virtual travel communities for organizations in the tourism industry. As marketing strategies were evolving for small and medium enterprises

(SMEs), the Internet offered new opportunities to such entities to build customer relationships, access new markets and audiences and increasingly personalise the experience for different consumer segments (Alford, 2018). The emergence of social media further enhanced the marketing toolkit for SMEs, allowing them to facilitate consumer's online shopping via social advertising and online communities (Alford, 2018). With the increasing popularity of social media for seeking pre-travel information and reviews of products and services, virtual communities formed on social media platforms like Facebook caught the attention of SMEs in the tourism industry as a lucrative place for sharing their marketing messages and directly reach their target audience (Roth-Cohen & Lahav, 2019). Virtual communities quickly became an "attractive virtual marketplace" for tourism businesses and an additional channel for them to address consumer's needs (Chung & Buhalis, 2008, p. 79).

This research thus investigates how tourism industry SMEs in New Zealand use virtual communities on Facebook to communicate with tourists. Using a large New Zealand-based Facebook travel community as the setting for this study, the researcher examines the different tactics used by SMEs to engage with their target audience within this platform. Further to this, the research also attempts to unravel specific motivations of tourism entities for entering and participating in such virtual communities. The primary aim of this research is to understand how tourism SMEs can make better use of virtual communities on social media and thus contribute to their ongoing online marketing efforts.

## 1.2 Research questions

This research aims to examine the following two questions:

1. How do SMEs in the tourism industry in New Zealand use the Facebook travel community, New Zealand Travel Tips, to communicate with tourists?
2. What are their motivations behind participating in this community?

The first research question will help uncover the different communication and engagement strategies SMEs use to interact with community members. By investigating these strategies in detail, this research hopes to find out how tourism entities are making use of their presence in Facebook communities to form a direct channel of communicating with their target audience and sharing marketing messages. The second research question on the other hand will delve deeper and aim to uncover the reasons behind tourism SMEs entering such virtual communities. This question will help the researcher examine the motivations behind SMEs using virtual communities as a platform for communication, thus shedding light on the perceived benefits of travel virtual communities on Facebook.

### 1.3 Scope of the research

This research explores how tourism entities can make use of virtual travel communities formed on Facebook by examining a large New Zealand-based community called New Zealand Travel Tips, with a membership of almost 29000 people at the time of writing this thesis. The primary reasons for choosing this community for the purpose of research were its level of popularity and engagement as well as the researcher's familiarity with the group by virtue of being a member herself. The presence and active participation of tourism entities within the community gave the researcher an opportunity to explore the dynamics of communication between them and other community members, making it the right fit to answer the research questions discussed above.

As mentioned previously, the bulk of the research with respect to virtual communities has been conducted from the tourism consumers' perspective, with very little mention of how tourism businesses can be involved in such a setting. Thus, this research will solely focus on the perspective of tourism organizations in New Zealand in order to understand their experience of and motivations behind entering and participating in the New Zealand Travel Tips community.

## 1.4 Significance of the research

While the concept of virtual communities, first developed by Rheingold in 1993, has been around and well-researched for a long time, it was much later when researchers started exploring how they could be useful for tourism companies. This research aims at uncovering and examining the ways in which travel companies in New Zealand are communicating with tourists via the Facebook travel community chosen for this study – New Zealand Travel Tips. Virtual communities have been found to be instrumental in tourists' decision-making process of choosing tourism products and services, which makes these communities a lucrative platform for travel businesses to connect with their target audience (Kozinets, 1999; Chung & Buhalis, 2008). While several studies have examined how tourists make use of virtual travel communities, the use of these communities by travel companies, especially of those on Facebook, offer scope for further research. The findings of this research will thus shed light on how small and medium sized travel businesses in New Zealand are tapping into Facebook travel groups as a communication platform to communicate with potential domestic tourists and the different communication tactics they use. Thus, this research hopes to contribute to New Zealand's tourism industry by offering a better understanding of virtual travel communities on Facebook and how marketers can leverage these networks to share information about their products and services with travellers. By shifting focus from consumers to the marketers, this research will aim to develop a better understanding of virtual communities and their value for the tourism industry.

## 1.5 Thesis Structure

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the research topic, established context for the study and identified the significance of the research. Chapter 2 explores the evolution of virtual communities, while highlighting the existing research around the use of virtual travel communities for travel planning, social listening and as a communication platform for tourism entities. Chapter 3 lays out the research methodology framework and discusses the data collection and analysis

techniques in detail. The results and findings from the data are reported in Chapter 4, followed by Chapter 5 which discusses these in greater detail. This chapter also puts the results of the research in context of the literature and aims to answer the research questions. The final section of the thesis is Chapter 6 where conclusions are drawn, and the research summarised for readers. This chapter also highlights the implications of this research and recommends future research possibilities.

## Chapter 2 – Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

This literature review examines the emergence of virtual communities, often referred to as online communities, and their impact on the tourism industry. This is followed by a discussion about virtual travel communities and how the rapid growth of social media platforms fuelled the formation of virtual communities. The review also delves into how consumers, in this case travellers, make use of such communities for their benefit and the ways in which virtual communities support their travel planning activities. This then leads us to examine how tourism businesses use virtual travel communities because of their value to travellers. This chapter will conclude by examining how tourism organizations interact with these communities and what some of their motivations are for doing so.

### 2.2 Virtual communities

The idea of virtual communities was first conceptualised by Rheingold (1993) as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions” (p. 6). It refers to groups of people who come together in a virtual or digital environment based on shared interests. Often, these interests have been found to be focused on consumption behaviour, leading to formation of communities centred around the knowledge of or interest in that activity (Kozinets, 1999).

In the early 2000s, when virtual communities were still in their nascent stage, Kozinets (1999) suggested that such digital congregations of people primarily happened for the purpose of information gathering. While that remains valid, with technological advancement, the growth of virtual communities was propelled by the emergence of Web 2.0 that allowed internet and digital technologies to be used for the purpose of sharing, collaboration, and two-way communication between people (Rodríguez-Fernández et. al., 2019). Web 2.0 thus enabled the exchange of information and interaction among people who were physically distanced from each other.

Online communities also became a rich source of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) referrals because of their ability to encourage conversations among members (Chung & Buhalis, 2008), that have an immense amount of influence on the decisions made by members (Kozinets, 1999). This proved to be of immense value for the tourism industry. The exchange of information about tourism products and services and the opportunity for direct peer-to-peer interaction helped consumers navigate the intangibility associated with such purchases (Rodríguez-Fernández et. al., 2019). Virtual communities allowed consumers to go beyond passive consumption and become producers of information (Wu & Jiao, 2008). This propelled the tourism industry to become an early adopter of Web 2.0 technologies, leading to the formation of virtual travel communities (Stepchenkova et al., 2007).

### 2.3 Virtual travel communities

Virtual travel communities have been instrumental in changing how tourists obtain and share information. Chung and Buhalis (2008) noted that tourists were already making use of internet technologies across all stages of their travel: pre-travel or the planning phase to search for information about tourism services before making a purchase, during travel to share their experiences, and post travel to share reviews of products and services they have made use of. Online communities have been found valuable in all three stages not only as a source of credible information, but also as a platform for voicing opinions and reviews, both positive and negative (Armstrong & Hagel, 1997).

While virtual travel communities are often considered to be aggregators of information and resources, their value lies in bringing people together (Wang et. al., 2002). Given how important members are to the existence of a virtual community, it is essential to understand their needs and motivations to encourage members to continue participating in the community. According to Preece (2000), virtual travel community members have the basic need to exchange and find relevant information, socialize with other members, and engage in conversations. Thus, from the members' perspective, virtual communities fulfil certain social, psychological, functional and relationship

building needs, while for brands, the needs to be fulfilled are those of brand building and revenue generation (Wang et al., 2002). Bringing them together in the same online community thus requires deliberate effort and if executed well, can be immensely valuable for both community members and brand marketers.

In addition to the nature of the consumption activity based on which a virtual community is formed, the strength of ties within the community is another factor that determines the different types of members the community attracts (Kozinets, 1999). Based on these two factors, Kozinets (1999) categorised virtual community members into four types as shown in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1**

*Four types of virtual community members*

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| <b>Tourists</b> | Members with weak ties to the community and very little interest in the activity                   |
| <b>Minglers</b> | Members with strong social ties but little interest in the consumption activity                    |
| <b>Devotees</b> | Members with a keen interest in the consumption activity but very few social ties in the community |
| <b>Insiders</b> | Members high on both social ties and consumption interest  |

(Based on Kozinet's (1999) Types of Virtual Community of Consumption Member scale)

The mix of members in a community may be used by brands to determine which communities might be of value to them and serve their needs. According to Kozinets (1999), travel communities are comprised primarily of Devotees and Insiders who are not only loyal to the community but are also inclined towards the consumption activity. By its very definition, virtual travel community members ought to display a certain degree of personal investment, intimacy and dedication to the community in order for it to be successful (Wang et al., 2002). Marketing activities based on these insights from

a virtual community have thus come to be known as “Virtual Communal Marketing” or VCM, and it is imperative for marketers to partner with online communities to reach their target audience (Kozinets, 1999).

While general members as described above contribute to the ongoing conversations in a virtual community, the role played by the moderator or administrator has also been found to be key to the group’s functioning. Moderators are important in virtual communities to help encourage relevant discussions and often act as peacemakers in case of disputes (Wang et al., 2002). According to Pi et al. (2013), administrators serve three key functions – creating rules of engagement within the community, creating activities to promote discussions, and creating a feedback loop to recognize members who contribute valuable knowledge to the group. Additionally, Wang et al. (2002) pointed out that managers or owners of virtual communities may also play an important role in how brands are able to engage with and gain access to members of the community they run. Based on the rules of the community, the moderator may “adopt provider-based revenue models in which fees are paid to the community by other companies wanting to reach the community members” (Wang et al., 2002, p. 415), giving tourism brands an additional channel to market their products or services.

## 2.4 Virtual travel communities on Facebook

Tripadvisor, a virtual travel community formed in 2000 was one of the first of its kind to bring millions of people together in one place to share reviews and opinions about hotels, tourism activities and destinations. Currently, the platform caters to almost 463 million users every month and is still a popular place for travellers to seek information (Tripadvisor, 2019). But the introduction of social media platforms changed how virtual communities are created and operated. The popularity and reach of social media networks, especially Facebook, with its unique ‘affordances’ has thus given rise to new ways for brands in the tourism industry to interact with consumers (Cabiddu et al., 2014).

Social media 'affordances' have been defined in different ways by researchers over the years. Bucher and Helmond (2017) indicated that social media affordances don't simply refer to the technology itself but rather the kind of social interactions that technology allows users to carry out. Given the existing technology and infrastructures of Facebook, the platform allows or constrains certain actions that determine the nature of interactions. They also suggested that social media networks could be thought of as an ecosystem with their own unique features and functionalities (Bucher & Helmond, 2017). Schrock (2015) on the other hand talks about communicative affordances which refer to the impact technology has on communication. Thus, it may be said that within social media networks, their proffered affordances influence how users are able to communicate with each other. Social media networks such as Facebook have not only become a place for people to seek information, but they also allow the formation of private groups or virtual communities within the platform that bring users together for exchanging information and engaging in discussions (Pi et al., 2013). Communities formed on Facebook often take the shape of what Kozinets (1999) categorised as boards, or electronic bulletin boards, where members can post messages, read other members' messages and interact with them via comments, thus creating a discussion thread. Such communities, when based on a specific consumption interest such as travel and tourism, bring a large number of members together, providing a lucrative platform for brands to find and approach consumers.

## 2.5 Virtual communities as a tool/platform for social listening

Social listening refers to the process of actively seeking out information, conversations, and market trends, with the goal of tuning in to the customer's needs (Pomputius, 2019). Social listening offers brands an opportunity to get deeper insights into what customers are talking about, their likes and dislikes, and ultimately use that data to customise their offerings and response in a suitable manner (Stewart & Arnold, 2018). What distinguishes social listening as an activity from listening per se, is that the former takes place via electronic, social media technologies. These social media platforms and their affordances impact the way messages are shared and communicated, thus giving

brands a new channel through which to engage with their customers (Stewart & Arnold, 2018).

Virtual communities encourage discussions among members about brands and listening in to these conversations can reveal information about customers' sentiments towards a particular brand or its products and services. Often, the activity of social listening is conducted anonymously when brands enter closed virtual travel communities, as noted by Roth-Cohen and Lahav (2019). This not only involves gaining access to the electronic word of mouth (eWOM) shared among community members in the form of reviews, but it also gives marketers a chance to share their own messages in a way that blends in with conversations happening within the community (Roth-Cohen & Lahav, 2019).

The quality of data collected from virtual communities through social listening activities depends on how much time and effort marketers are willing to dedicate to this, as well as the nature of the community itself (Armstrong & Hagel, 1998). An active community with a large number of members who are invested in the discussions and are willing to spend time participating in conversations, yield richer data that have the ability to influence the brand's marketing activities as well as products and services.

Virtual travel communities make it possible to collect information about customers through informal dialogues stimulated by the sense of community (Kim et. al., 2004). Social listening, thus, takes the focus away from traditional marketing communication to the customer, which permits brands to gain rich insights from the community ecosystem, essentially a form of market research in a closed, electronic environment (Pomputius, 2019; Kozinets, 1999). As a result, virtual community members become partners in the brand's marketing process, as opposed to playing the traditional role of being a passive receiver of one-way marketing messages (Kozinets, 1999). Armstrong and Hagel (1998) rightly noted that virtual communities will enable marketers to "leverage customers' ideas in designing and commercializing products and leverage customers' voices in promoting them" (p. 142). The activity of social listening allows marketers to make use of virtual communities to fulfil these goals by offering an insider view to customer conversations that brands would otherwise not be privy to, and by

giving brands a chance to understand their customers better (Armstrong & Hagel, 1998).

## 2.6 Using Facebook travel communities for travel planning

The experiential nature of the tourism industry prevents travellers from sampling or evaluating the products or services prior to payment or before the actual experience takes place (Si & Jian, 2008). This creates the need for credible information sources to aid travellers in assessing which tourism products and services to purchase. With the emergence of Web 2.0, sources on the Internet have become an important way to obtain that information (Katsoni, 2014). However, Aarsal et al. (2008) noted that heavy dependence on the web for travel-related information combined with the inability to judge the credibility of sources can cause an overload of information for tourists. This set the stage for the emergence of virtual travel communities that allow members to engage in travel-related discussions, get answers to specific questions and also share their own knowledge (Katsoni, 2014). Virtual travel groups on Facebook allow travellers and travel enthusiasts to come together to share their knowledge of travel and related activities. As a result, tourists have resorted to these communities to search for travel-related information to assist their travel planning process and also inform their purchase decisions of tourism services and products.

Travel communities on social networking sites like Facebook gave users an opportunity to interact with like-minded individuals sharing their interest in travel and tourism, which was found to be one of the primary goals of joining an online community (Preece, 2000). This was an important observation since travel information received from fellow experienced travellers and peers was considered to be more trustworthy than communication directly received from brands (Scott et al., 2017). This pointed to the value of eWOM, travel information received from virtual community members who have past experience with the travel destination or service in question (Aarsal et al., 2008).

Arsal et al. (2008) suggested that members of a virtual travel community can benefit from the knowledge of residents of a destination as well as travellers with prior experience of the destination in question. This kind of first-hand information was not only considered credible, but access to travel information from one consolidated virtual group made the process of research more convenient. User generated content is considered useful by tourists because it empowers them to independently take decisions about tourism services and products (Mendes-Filho et al., 2018). This was in line with findings from Chung and Buhalis (2008) that suggested that the reason why virtual travel communities are so effective, was due to their “information acquisition benefits” (p. 79). Although research may not have firmly established a direct link between eWOM and final purchase behaviour, it is an important source of information for tourists while planning a trip that is capable of influencing their opinion. By providing exclusive access to members and their knowledge, virtual travel communities give tourists a chance to receive personalized recommendations which were found to be instrumental in influencing travel-related decision making (Scott et al., 2017).

## 2.7 Virtual travel communities as a communication platform for travel companies

Researchers have investigated how Facebook communities can be utilized as an important platform for marketing and communication activities by tourism companies due to the access they provide to large numbers of potential customers. Kozinets (1999) was one of the first researchers to firmly establish that virtual communities offered immense potential for marketers. Armstrong and Hagel (1997) argued that marketing activities performed by business entities will significantly change within a virtual community landscape. Introduction of virtual communities meant that consumers were now not only making purchases online (e-commerce), but they were also interacting with businesses via a new channel, offering new e-marketing opportunities to tourism companies (Wu & Jiao, 2008). Referring to them as an “attractive virtual marketplace” (p. 79), Chung and Buhalis (2008) highlighted that marketers should consider tapping into virtual travel communities through targeted communication to offer value to information-seeking travellers. This reaffirmed the findings of Wang et al. (2002), according to whom, communicating with potential customers through virtual travel

communities not only promoted brand awareness, but also aided relationship building with the members of the community. Wang et al. (2002) found virtual tourist communities to be a highly effective medium of communication to inform travellers about a brand's products and services, while acting as a credible partner in their travel information search journey.

When representatives of tourism organizations enter virtual travel communities, they are often indistinguishable from other general members and so are their communication patterns (Roth-Cohen & Lahav, 2019). This may reflect in the knowledge sharing phenomenon that occurs within such communities. Virtual communities are a rich source of information generated by members, primarily based on their willingness to share their knowledge (Chiu et al., 2006). It may be said that when tourism marketers are part of that cohort of members, they may also indulge in knowledge sharing behaviour to mingle with the community. According to Pi et al. (2013), knowledge sharing behaviour in virtual communities may be positively affected by the perceived increase in respect, social status, and reputation of the individual. As long as it lies within the rules of engagement in the community, tourism marketers may be able to build a relationship with other community members by freely sharing their knowledge.

However, Roth-Cohen and Lahav (2019) argued that although it is beneficial for tourism companies to make use of these communities, they have often been found to make unfair use of their access. Undisclosed marketing communication messages shared under the guise of organic information was found to be one of the ways many SMEs attempt to influence the decision making of tourists in Facebook travel communities (Roth-Cohen & Lahav, 2019). This may turn out to be counterproductive and may even cause mistrust among travellers about the credibility of the brand in question. According to Wang et al. (2002), trust is an important consideration when dealing with online communities and their members. While SMEs can potentially tap into these communities for engaging in fruitful conversations with travellers, Chung and Buhalis (2008) found that information or communication that have commercial intentions or profit motive may be seen as untrustworthy by community members. Thus, a thorough

understanding of the mechanics of online travel communities and of the members' needs is required for SMEs to gain any real benefit from such communication platforms (Chung & Buhalis, 2008).

While the usefulness of online travel communities for travellers has been well researched, Roth-Cohen and Lahav (2019) observed that the ways and means in which SMEs in the tourism industry make use of virtual networks like Facebook communities is under-researched. Since research has established how extensively tourists make use of virtual travel communities for travel planning and decision making (Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Aarsal et al., 2008), this study aims to examine how tourism companies and marketers may be able to leverage these communities as a medium of communication to influence and encourage domestic tourism in New Zealand.

Virtual communities have been found to help businesses understand the needs of their customers better (Armstrong & Hagel, 1998). Members of a virtual community play a role in generating feedback through discussions and information exchange, which in turn gives businesses a perspective on what works or doesn't work for customers. Virtual travel communities can provide a rich source of direct feedback on a firm's tourism products and services, which can then be used to inform future business decisions, giving marketers a chance to "leverage customers' ideas in designing and commercialising products" (Armstrong & Hagel, 1998, p. 142). Baglieri and Consoli (2009) referred to this as "collaborative innovation" (p. 353), that takes into account customers' knowledge and experience of products or services to develop better tourism experiences for them. They identified the important role played by the customer in tourism innovation which involves their active participation in the process to help businesses get an insight into customers' needs. Virtual communities thus allow brands to leverage their relationship with customers by incorporating this knowledge into their business.

## 2.8 Summary

This chapter explored the existing literature surrounding virtual communities and its various facets. It started with an exploration of the evolution of the concept of virtual communities in the early 90s, followed by a discussion about virtual tourism communities in specific and those that are created on social media platforms like Facebook. The literature highlighted how virtual communities made it easier for eWOM to be shared and used by consumers to make purchase decisions. It also discussed how the emergence of Facebook and its resulting technological affordances have had an impact on the functioning of virtual communities.

This led to a discussion about how travel communities on Facebook have become an integral part of the travel planning process. This section highlighted how travellers are increasingly making use of such communities to make travel-related decisions based on conversations in the community. Finally, this chapter concluded by examining the existing body of research about the primary focus of this study – how tourism companies make use of virtual communities. The literature showed that while researchers have highlighted the importance of virtual communities for marketers, there is still plenty of scope to understand how they can do that successfully.

## Chapter 3 – Research design and methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This research focuses on how small and medium sized tourism businesses in New Zealand communicate with travellers using virtual communities on Facebook such as New Zealand Travel Tips. This chapter will outline the research methodology and design used for conducting the study, highlighting the Netnographic approach for researching online communities and how it was used as the base for designing this research. Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews and Netnographic data collection from the community, which were analysed using thematic analysis. These techniques are further discussed in detail in this chapter.

### 3.2 Netnography

Kozinets (2002) advocated Netnography, a virtual form of ethnographic research, as a tool for conducting research in online environments. Drawing from its ethnographic roots, Netnography offers researchers the tools to engage in participant-observation research techniques in a digital environment (Belk et al., 2013). Similar to traditional ethnography, Netnography is also rooted in “deep appreciations of the context of people’s everyday lives” (Kozinets, 2020, p. 15). While the type of data collected through this method differs from that in traditional ethnography, the human social experience and researcher participation are still at the core of the research. However, it must be noted that in the case of Netnography, participation could simply be the ongoing act of reading, observing, and thinking about the online posts or conversations occurring in the virtual community (Kozinets, 2020).

Netnography, also sometimes referred to as Online or Virtual Ethnography, reflects the nature of the ethnographic setting. In this case, the research setting is the Internet, as opposed to a real-world location, and thus, Online Ethnography or Netnography encompasses research techniques used for data collection specifically in virtual communities (Skågeby, 2011). While the terms Online Ethnography and Virtual

Ethnography have often been used interchangeably with the term Netnography, Kozinets (2020) firmly distinguishes between the two. According to him, Netnography is different because it defines and outlines the specific ways ethnographic research techniques can be implemented to collect qualitative data from social media environments.

In the last two decades, Netnography has become a popular research methodology for studies focusing on online travel communities including groups found on social networking sites like Facebook (Roth-Cohen & Lahav, 2019). Because of its focus on the data available in online groups and forums, Netnography allows the researcher to conduct a “naturalistic and unobtrusive” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62) study, making it a suitable methodology for this research project. Netnography has also been found to be a useful qualitative research methodology to explore the meanings and motivations behind the communication that takes place in virtual communities.

This research focuses on a popular Facebook travel group, New Zealand Travel Tips (NZTT), to understand how small and medium sized travel companies in New Zealand are making use of this community to communicate with travellers. NZTT is a closed Facebook group that the researcher has been a member of since March 2020. Access to the information exchange within the group is only visible to members, who include people who have travelled in New Zealand in the past, potential travellers, and representatives of tourism businesses in New Zealand. The researcher is a member of the group as a travel enthusiast herself and participates in conversations as and when appropriate. Additionally, the researcher has often read through and interacted (by liking or commenting on posts) with discussions happening in the community, also known as netnographic participation, which gave her an insight into how other participants were experiencing the online community (Kozinets, 2010). An insider view of the community allowed the researcher to be aware of its dynamics and functioning, and as a result, gain an understanding of the rules of the community. This understanding is important for a successful netnographic study and has an impact on the data collection methodologies that were used (Skågeby, 2011). According to Skågeby (2011), knowledge of and experience with the online community’s “local

customs” can be useful in helping the researcher blend in and be seen as a part of the community instead of being treated as an outsider. This acceptance has also been found to help during the process of recruiting interview participants for data collection, as described in the following section.

### 3.3 Data Collection

Adopting Netnography as the methodology, this qualitative research used two primary methods of data collection – online data collection from the virtual community and semi-structured interviews. One of the key reasons for choosing these two methods was to allow the researcher sufficient opportunities to engage with the activities and conversations happening within the Facebook community. These are further elaborated below.

In the first phase of data collection, textual content was captured from the NZTT Facebook group in the form of screenshots for a period of two weeks in July 2021. However, following the netnographic data collection process used in their research by Brown et al. (2003), instead of collecting every single piece of content (posts and comments) during those two weeks, the researcher read through, processed, and eliminated content at this stage to only capture the information relevant to this study. According to Skageby (2011), data collection for online ethnographic studies should be guided by the primary research question. For the purpose of this research, relevant data sets included posts and comments shared by representatives of tourism entities as well as those made by the community administrator that mentioned a specific tourism organization. The reason for distilling the data right at the stage of collection was to focus on conversations in the community relevant to the research question. The first round resulted in 55 data points in total which were saved in the form of screenshots and included a mix of texts and images. This was followed by another round of data collection for two weeks in August 2021 using the same methodology and criteria. This round gave another 26 data points, resulting in a total of 81 data points from this part of the data collection process. Each piece of collected data was essentially a

conversation typically comprising of one primary question posted by a community member followed by multiple comments, including at least one comment by a representative of a tourism entity or the community administrator. Tourism representatives were identified either based on the public information available on their Facebook profile which mentioned their affiliation with a tourism entity, or by the commenter publicly disclosing that they represent a particular organization.

According to Ditchfield and Meredith (2017), this method of data collection from Facebook should suffice when the primary goal of the qualitative study is to understand participants' thoughts and experiences. This is also validated by a range of studies compared by Kozinets (2017) such as Logan (2015), which suggests that screen capture is a viable means of data collection from virtual communities that the researcher is a member of. Data collected by this method is asynchronous in nature since they were captured 24 to 48 hours after the conversation occurred in the community. This process of capturing archived textual content from a virtual community is also sometimes referred to as document collection (Skågeby, 2011). Having said that, the screenshots collected for this research also often included images and other multimedia, commonly found in social media-based interactions, which "can provide unique in-depth autobiographical accounts of scenes and respondents" (Murthy, 2008, p. 846). It must be noted here that although the researcher had access to conversations in the community, other members' identities will be kept confidential and anonymous and thus redacted in all screenshots captured.

In the second phase of the data collection process, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with three representatives of tourism entities in New Zealand who have engaged in the NZTT community in some way, in order to understand how they make use of the community and the motivations behind the same. Choosing human participants for a qualitative study of this nature follows a different process from data collection from social media platforms. The selection of interview participants for this study was purposive, as is often the case with many qualitative studies (Patton, 2002). Interview participants chosen via this sampling technique can provide rich, insightful information about the research topic because of their specific

knowledge or experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). When using purposive sampling, the inclusion and exclusion criteria also determine which participants get recruited for a particular study. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), the criteria are based on the questions the researcher is trying to address through the study and to ensure that selection of participants align with that goal. The following inclusion criteria were used to choose participants for this study:

- The participant represents and is directly associated with a small or medium sized tourism business (less than 20 employees) in New Zealand.
- The participant is a member of the New Zealand Travel Tips community.
- The participant has, in some way, engaged with the community members on behalf of the tourism entity they represent.

Using these criteria, three participants were recruited for this study as shown in Table 3.1. The researcher sought the community administrator's permission and shared a post in the community visible to all members. The post briefly introduced the goal of the research to all members and requested interested tourism industry representatives to get in touch with the researcher. Three members responded via this public call out, out of which two agreed to participate in the interview. In order to recruit more participants for the research, this was followed by an email outreach by the group administrator to a group of tourism operators that are part of the community. This resulted in a positive response from an additional tourism operator who agreed to participate in the study. The interviewees were either the owners or employees of the entities who voluntarily responded to the outreach messages.

**Table 3.1**

*List of interview participants*

| <b>Participant identifiers</b> | <b>Background</b>                            |
|--------------------------------|--|
| AM                             | Small tourism business owner in Christchurch |

|    |  |
|----|--|
| PB | General manager of a renowned tourism business in Rotorua            |
| LB | Marketing manager for a regional tourism organisation in New Zealand |

In addition to these participants from the tourism industry, the community's owner and administrator was also interviewed to shed light on how the community has grown to support both travellers and tourism operators. All interviews were conducted via online video conferencing on a date and time mutually agreed between both parties. The interview data was recorded in the form of audio recordings and then transcribed using a software (Otter.ai) which will be discussed further in the next section. This form of semi-structured interviews used to collect data for a Netnographic research is also referred to as online interviews to reflect the use of a technology to conduct the interview (Kozinets, 2020). Past research that has made use of Netnography has found that semi-structured interviews of this nature reveal deeper insight into the conversations going on within an online community, making this a key step in the data collection process (Kozinets, 2017).

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Netnographic data collected from the Facebook community and via interviews were analysed using Thematic Analysis following the steps designed by Braun and Clarke (2013). They defined Thematic Analysis as a process "to find repeated patterns of meaning" in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). The primary reason for choosing this data analysis technique was its flexibility. Thematic analysis was designed to be a data analysis method that can be used to help make sense of qualitative data collected using different methods and from multiple sources, making it suitable for this study (Braun et al., 2015). Although Braun et al. (2015) recommend at least six interview participants to conduct thematic analysis, the three interviews conducted for this study were supported by a larger chunk of data collected from the virtual community. The final analysis was thus based on Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis technique

and Kozinets' (2010) netnographic data analysis methods and followed the steps as shown below.

1. Transcription of interviews
2. Reading and familiarisation of data
3. Coding
4. Searching for themes
5. Reviewing themes
6. Writing the results and findings

As part of step one, audio recordings of the three semi-structured interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai, an artificial intelligence software that helps to transcribe audio data. The Facebook data on the other hand required no transcription since it was collected in the form of screen capture of text messages. In step two, the resulting interview transcripts were reviewed to correct any obvious inaccuracies or manually insert any words missed by the software by relistening to the audio recordings. This also allowed the researcher to acquaint herself with each of the conversations to better prepare for the coding phase. At this stage, the researcher also reviewed the content captured from the Facebook community and the data set was organized in a tabular format according to the dates they were collected on, for ease of analysis in the next stages. This stage was crucial in helping the researcher form initial observations and thoughts about the data.

Step three of the analysis process involved manually coding the entire data set collected from both sources. According to Kozinets (2010), coding essentially labels the data and helps in the process of finding common themes that eventually emerge from the data itself. Codes assigned to the data are always with the research question in mind which means that the same data could potentially be coded in multiple ways depending on what the researcher wants to focus on. For the purpose of this study, the data was coded to identify the key ideas emerging from the data in relation to the research questions, also known as a theoretical approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While some of the codes that emerged were based on the researcher's prior

experience with the existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2015), some other data segments pointed to new codes that were constructed from a review of the data.

Based on the codes assigned to the data, several themes were identified, leading the researcher to the next two stages of the thematic analysis process. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe this part of thematic analysis as one where the researcher identifies and clusters recurring codes with similar meanings into a single theme. As part of his netnographic data analysis, Kozinets (2010) referred to this as a process of abstracting and comparing, whereby the researcher sorts the previously identified codes to find similar phrases and meanings. This helps to categorize the codes into broader themes, followed by the formation of a thematic map that helps the researcher identify relationships between the different themes and how they relate to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It must be noted that the search, identification, and review of themes are often overlapping steps in this phase of the study as the researcher goes back and forth between the steps to refine and finalise the themes. After the themes were identified, the researcher also went through the process of defining them. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this step helps the researcher describe and conceptualise what each theme represents in relation to the research questions and is often a crucial step in effectively writing the results and findings of the study.

This led to the final stage of the thematic analysis process which involved reporting the data using excerpts from interview transcripts and screenshots captured from the Facebook community to illustrate the points being made. These findings and analyses are recorded in Chapter 4 of this thesis. Braun and Clarke (2006) also recommend choosing an appropriate number of themes to share in the report, ideally not more than six. A thematic analysis of the data for this study revealed five primary themes and four sub-themes, all of which are reported in the next chapter. An in-depth discussion of the findings to contextualise them with respect to the literature will be shared in the chapter following the results.

### 3.5 Summary

This chapter discussed the data collection and analysis techniques used in this research. Using Netnography as the research design approach, data was collected from the Facebook community, New Zealand Travel Tips, in the form of screenshots of relevant conversations where small and medium sized tourism entities in New Zealand participated in conversations. Supporting data was further collected using in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of tourism entities who are part of the community being researched and have used it for the purpose of communicating with travellers. Interview participants were selected via a purposive sampling technique to meet the researcher's criteria. Additionally, the community's administrator was also interviewed to share insights about the different ways tourism entities have made use of the community. Finally, the data was analysed using thematic analysis which resulted in the researcher identifying several key themes to be discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4 – Results and Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

Based on a Thematic Analysis of the data collected from New Zealand Travel Tips (referred to as NZTT in the rest of the chapter) Facebook group and the interviews conducted with representatives of tourism entities, this chapter summarises the key findings of this study. While the data were collected using two different methodologies and were analysed separately, several common themes emerged from both sets of data.

The next section begins by providing an overview of the two data sets and a brief background of the interview participants. The following section will then identify all the themes, briefly describing what they mean in the context of the data collected. This is further supported by excerpts from the interviews and snippets from the Facebook data.

An assessment of the data collected from Facebook shows that there are several ways in which small and medium sized tourism organizations in New Zealand are using the NZTT online community to communicate with their audience. Out of the 82 data points collected over two periods of two weeks each, sharing local knowledge with community members by answering their questions and directly promoting their own business (by mentioning business name) whenever there is an appropriate opportunity, were two of the most common ways tourism entities were found to communicate within the group. This was closely followed by posts about formal collaborations established between the community and a tourism business. These themes that were uncovered during data analysis will be explored further in the next section of this chapter.

A similar pattern of themes also emerged from an analysis of the four interviews conducted, which included two representatives of tourism businesses, one representative from a regional tourism organization and finally, the owner and admin of the virtual community in discussion. Interview data collected from all four participants

not only offered an insight into their thoughts on virtual communities on Facebook and how they make use of New Zealand Travel Tips Facebook group but also what their key motivations are for doing so.

## 4.2 Summary of themes

Both sets of data revealed several themes that point to the different ways tourism entities make use of virtual communities. These are:

- Answer queries by sharing local knowledge
- Self-promotion
- Community-business formal collaboration
- Creating destination awareness

**Table 4.1**

*Summary of themes*

| Themes                                    | Description   |
|---|---|
| Answer queries by sharing local knowledge | Business representatives voluntarily shared useful travel-related information in response to questions asked by community members. Many business representatives in the community have a lot of knowledge about the region/destination they operate in and both sets of data show that they share this information with the community to help a member, often without any commercial benefit to themselves. |
| Self-promotion                            | This theme includes posts and comments made by representatives of tourism entities in order to promote their tourism products and services. Typically with a motive to gain new business and increase sales, this kind of engagement within the community involved business representatives actively sharing information about their  |

|                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
|                                  | products and services, often mentioning their business name.  |
| Community-business collaboration | This theme included posts or comments from a business entity or the group administrator that indicated a formal engagement or partnership established between the community and the business. These collaborations could be in the form of a special tourism service/product created exclusively for the community or a provision for members to gain access to a discount/promotion code to use when they make a purchase from the operator. |
| Creating destination awareness   | Representatives of regional tourism organisations were found to use the online community to promote the destination they represent. Their posts often included inspirational and informational content about the destination, things to do in the destination or activities/services offered by tourism operators in the region.  |

#### 4.3 Communication strategies used by tourism entities

This section reports the themes that emerged from the data in relation to the different communication strategies used by representatives of tourism entities in the NZTT community. They are as follows:

- Answer queries by sharing knowledge
- Creating destination awareness
- Self-promotion
- Community-business collaboration

#### 4.3.1 Answer queries by sharing local knowledge

Answering questions posed by community members was one of the most common ways representatives of tourism businesses were found to engage within the online community. Both the Facebook data and the interviews revealed that business representatives made use of their knowledge of the local tourism landscape to engage in the community. This kind of engagement was primarily in the form of information sharing via comments to help community members plan their travels.

This pattern was evident in several posts and comments captured from Facebook, in addition to interview participants AM, SC and LB confirming it. AM, who owns and runs a small tourism business in Christchurch, located in New Zealand's South Island said, "I was helping answer a lot of questions that are starting to come through from people that were looking to travel around all parts of the South Island" and "the majority of what I've done is probably commenting on other people's posts, particularly when they've asked a question." His thoughts were resonated by LB, who represents a regional tourism organisation. She said, "I see someone's asking a question about restaurants I'll always answer. I'm supposed to be writing a bit of a blog post for SC about where to eat in [redacted], because it's a commonly asked question, apparently."

Tourism operators and regional tourism organisations were found to be actively participating in conversations in the online community with the motive of helping travellers with relevant information. Here are some comments from such conversations captured from the community:

"Three days is a bit of a rush. The way the towns are spaced it takes longer than you'd expect - one day to Fox Glacier; 2nd day do the Lake Matheson walk in the morning when the lake is still then continue on to Hokitika and visit Hokitika Gorge; Day 3 over Arthurs Pass to Chch. Allow six hrs if the weather is fine - lunch in AP Village and perhaps Devils Punchbowl waterfall, then an hour to explore Kura Tawhiti (the limestone rocks near Castle Hill)."

**- Accommodation provider from Akaroa, South Island, New Zealand**

“Contact [redacted] tours - I have found them very good - They need two people to run or one person paying for two people. They will know what vineyards do tastings on a Monday”

**- Director/GM of tour operator based in Auckland**

Depending on the nature of the query, their responses sometimes included a mention of their own business or a different tourism entity if relevant in the context of the query. The Facebook data showed that business owners mentioned other relevant tourism operators to community members, especially when the question requested for recommendations. As evident in the snippet shared above, the response from the Auckland tour operator included her personal recommendation of a specific tourism business, not her own, in an attempt to share information based on her industry knowledge.

The community administrator, SC, and other members seemed to appreciate the domain expertise that tourism operators have which makes them a credible source of information. SC, who owns and runs the community and is heavily involved with every aspect of the community’s functioning suggested that:

“We also have operators who are quite selfless in the way that they share information. And it's really about building up knowledge in that particular area. And they don't necessarily promote themselves, some of them truly do just love our group...And they aren't necessarily mentioning themselves in the posts.”

Answering queries gave businesses an opportunity to directly interact with their audience and engage in a meaningful conversation. It should also be noted that all business representatives engage in the community as an individual via their personal profiles and not as a business entity. LB shared an example of how she has found this to work in favour of operators (specific identifiers redacted):

“The lady at [redacted] had posted under her own name. And that's the other valuable part of this. So, when [redacted] posts, [redacted] have got a new experience. And she uploads some beautiful images. And she describes what it is. Not many people would click on. She works at [redacted], they just see [redacted] has posted about this experience. It's four years since she went, she said it's awesome. So, we should go. I think it's great that businesses can't post, it's individuals.”

However, they also thought that it was a good idea to disclose their affiliation to any tourism organisation, if appropriate, which can be a great way to build relationships – an opportunity to building credibility by engaging in the group. According to LB,

“When it doesn't sound like it's the business talking about itself, that adds to the viability or the reliability of that being a good experience...When people go, ah we work here and this is really cool, I'm less likely to believe them. But if someone else says I was on holiday here...then I'm more likely to trust the consumer who's experienced it first-hand”

#### **4.3.2 Creating destination awareness**

Both the Facebook data and interviews showed that local/regional tourism organizations in New Zealand make use of online communities to create awareness about and promote the destinations they represent. In case of the Facebook data set examined, it was found that the posts were meant to provide general tourism-related information to community members such as places to visit or things to do in the region, in order to pique their interest and keep the destination alive in the minds of travellers.

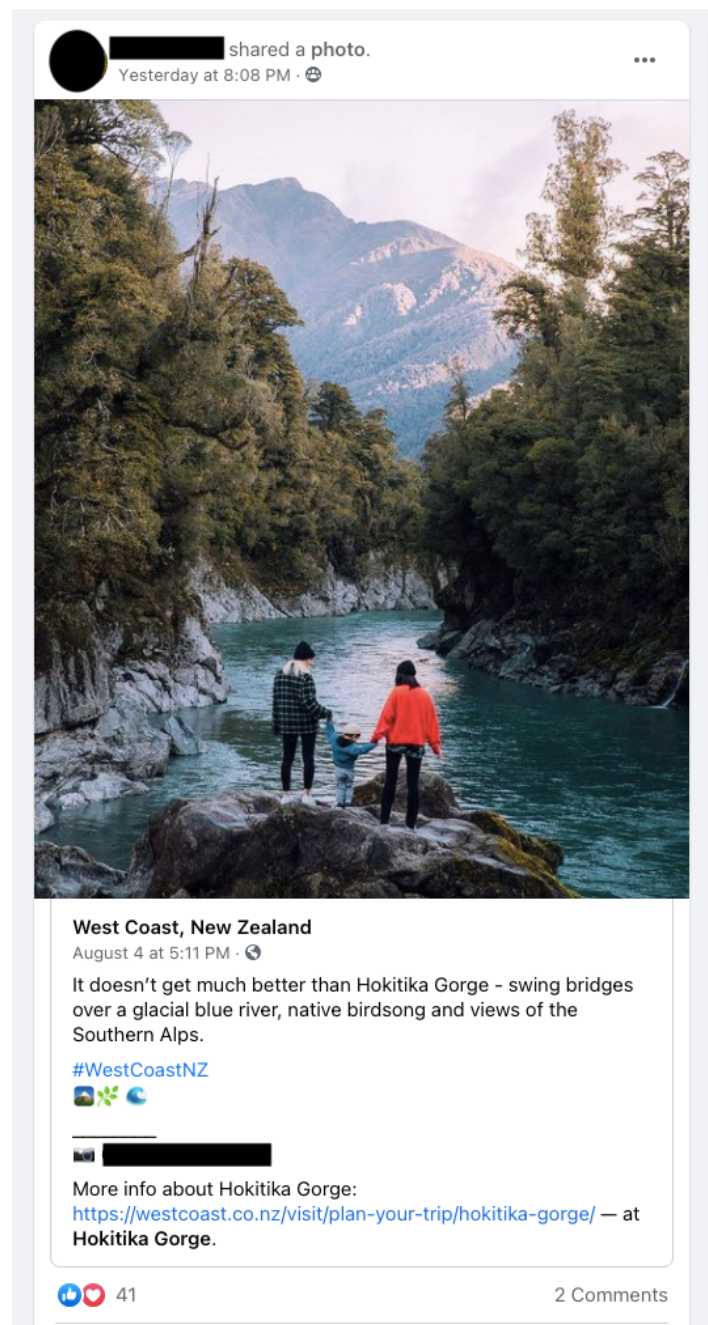


Figure 4.1 – Screenshot of post from New Zealand Travel Tips community dated 5 August 2021

The communication in such instances is inspirational in nature, typically alongside beautiful imagery, in order to encourage community members to visit the destination. As evident in Figure 4.1, a user generated image was used to share the tourism organisation's message about a specific place in the region and show why community members should consider adding it to their travel itinerary.

Some posts in the community also mentioned a local tourism business or activity offered by an operator in the destination. In such instances, although the communication did not originate directly from a tourism operator, there are benefits for them if destination marketers highlight their service or business when promoting the destination as a whole. As shown in Figure 4.2 below, a post in the online community shared by a tourism organisation highlighted several local businesses, drawing community members' attention to those businesses.

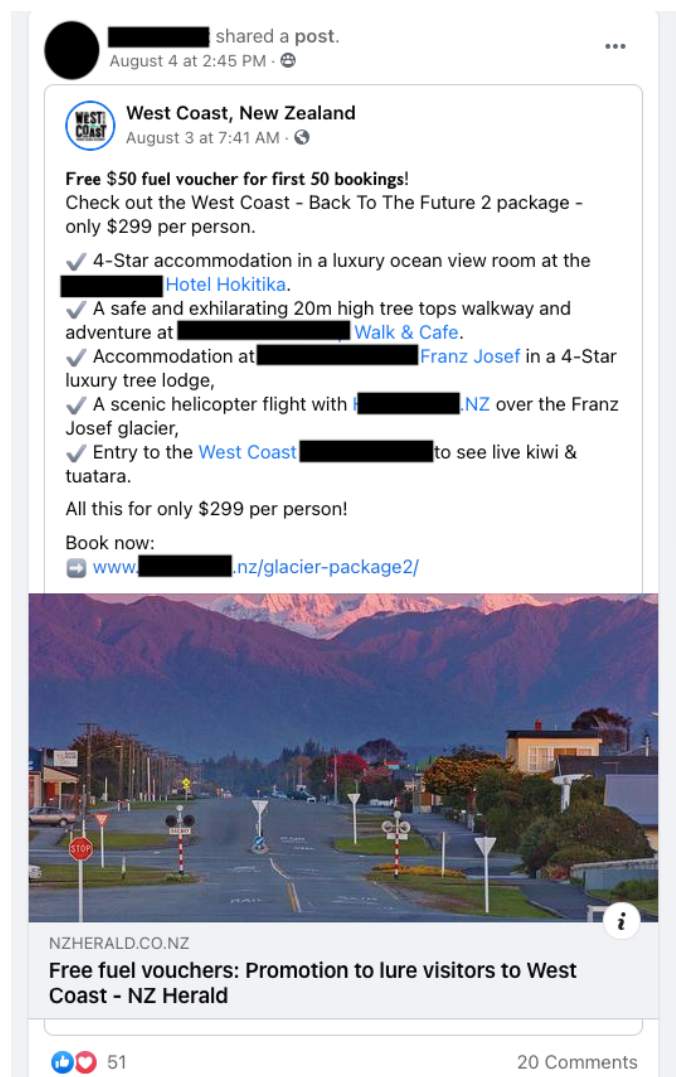


Figure 4.2 - Screenshot of post from New Zealand Travel Tips community dated 4 August 2021

The interview data reflected a similar pattern of engagement. LB, who is a destination representative herself, also indicated that there is value in sharing content about the region to keep it alive in the minds of travellers. She said,

“So I wrote a post, which SC approved and posted, which was, ‘Hey, I live in Rotorua and work in tourism. It’s raining here. Sorry about that. But luckily, this is still a really cool destination if you’re here, and it’s raining. So, here’s a bunch of local tips. And that was a really popular post”.

Furthermore, LB also suggested that this activity has benefits even for those travellers who may have already visited the destination, because “even if they came five or six years ago, we’ve still got so much new stuff. So, for us, it’s really important to keep reinforcing the message that we’re developing our products, that we have new things, that it’s not the same”. In addition to that, LB said that she also actively encourages tourism entities in her region to join the community and promote themselves using the channel. She says, “I saw an opportunity to promote our region” and considered the online community as a viable platform to help tourism operators engage with travellers.

#### **4.3.3 Self-promotion**

The Facebook data showed that actively promoting their own business is another popular way by which tourism operators communicated with the online community members. This activity typically happened in response to queries from members and on several occasions, business representatives were found to mention their business name, links to their website or social media channels and the tourism services/products they offer. The group admin SC suggested that “we now do allow advertising in response to questions” so that “if someone says I’m travelling to a certain part of the country, the operators are able to respond to that comment promoting themselves”. The online community not only gave them an opportunity to bring attention to their business, but it also enriched conversations within the community by giving members a chance to plan their travels based on these recommendations.

In response to a query from a community member looking for recommendations about a travel destination, a local business owner shared information about their accommodation that might be of interest to the traveller (see Figure 4.3). Although the query was not directly about accommodation, it is of relevance to the traveller visiting a

new destination, making this a good opportunity for this business owner to promote their offerings.

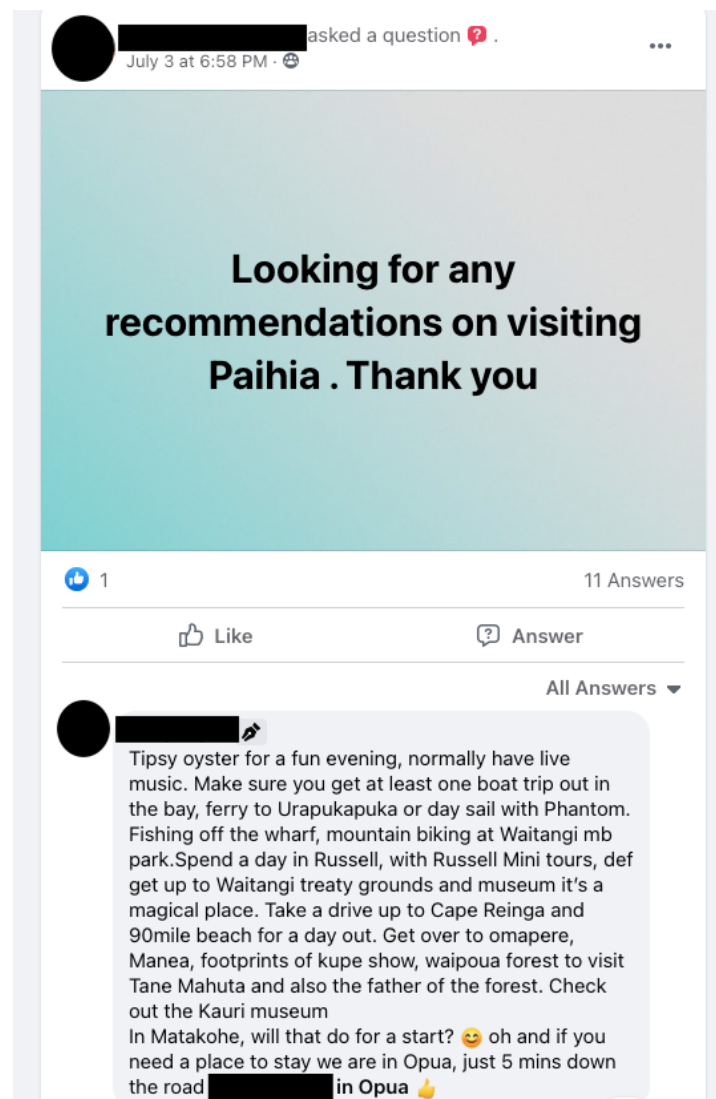


Figure 4.3 – Screenshot of post from New Zealand Travel Tips community dated 3 July 2021

While this mode of engagement was quite popular in the Facebook data, some of the interviewees noted that effectiveness of such communication depends on how the message is being communicated. Since this activity involves the use of written words, interviewees thought that the tone of the writer impacts whether the message is considered credible, with the genuine intention to help, or overly promotional. AM also added that “I know the group admin don't like as if you're pushing your own business too hard through the community, I think, the odd reference to your own business is ok as long as you make it clear that this is your own business, in terms of things that you

might be able to offer clientele". In addition to promoting their own business, some representatives of tourism entities also share relevant information about the destination in question such as places of interest, activities to do etc. depending on their own expertise and the query of the member. As shown in Figure 4.3 the promotional part of the message was organically woven in with the rest of the recommendations shared.

Although several tourism operators were found to promote their businesses in this manner, it was interesting to note that one of the interviewees, PB, who runs a popular tourism organization thought that self-promotion through online communities may not be the right way to reach the audience. While his organization does make use of online communities in other ways, he said that "we don't do a lot of promotion of [redacted] through these channels. We let that be quite organic". Thus, organic, indirect ways of promotion were thought to be more effective because he believed that "if your strategy is to sell, I think your audience can see through that very quickly" and he believed that community members don't always want to be sold to aggressively.

#### **4.3.4 Community-business collaboration**

A formal collaboration between the community and a tourism entity was found to be an indirect but popular means of engaging with group members. In the context of the NZTT community, a collaboration between the group and business entity meant that the latter was able to offer a discount or unique service/products, available exclusively by members of this community. This partnership is typically facilitated by the group administrator, SC, who vets suitable operators and their products/services and acts as the moderator between the community and the business. She suggested, "they are able to offer discounts to our members. So, we have promo codes that we pass on to our members, which then give them a discount". Thus, in most cases, community members are provided with an exclusive promotion code that they can use when making a purchase from the particular tourism operator. This not only increases incentives for people to join the community, but it is also a way for businesses to increase their visibility among the member base and in turn, increase sales.

The group administrator, SC, said, “we invite operators to partner with us. And we promote the activities and the accommodation that we really believe as a quality offering in New Zealand, to our members...these are tried and tested activities that we really recommend as a group”, indicating that an official collaboration with the community signals to the audience that those tourism operators come highly recommended.

One of the interviewees, PB, who represents a popular adventure activity company also mentioned creating an exclusive tour package for the community to avail because of the value and potential they see in an active, engaged community of this nature. He said, “our strategy is for relationship...SC has made, she's made time to build a relationship. And she's seen value in our brand”. This indicates that one of the key drivers of this kind of engagement between the community and tourism entities is the administrator who not only ensures that the community remains active, but also does the background work of building relationships with tourism entities to help them see value in being associated with the community.

The data collected from Facebook also reflected these findings from the interviews. Several Facebook posts made reference to a specific business in the tourism industry that had entered into a formal agreement with the community owner to offer membership-based privileges to community members. For example, the Facebook post in Figure 4.4 shown below was posted by the admin, SC, informing community members about a collaborative offering from one of the tourism operators who have partnered with the community to provide members an exclusive discount. The post mentions the specific code that needs to be used by members in order to avail the discount during the booking process, which also informs the tourism operator that a member from this community has made a booking.

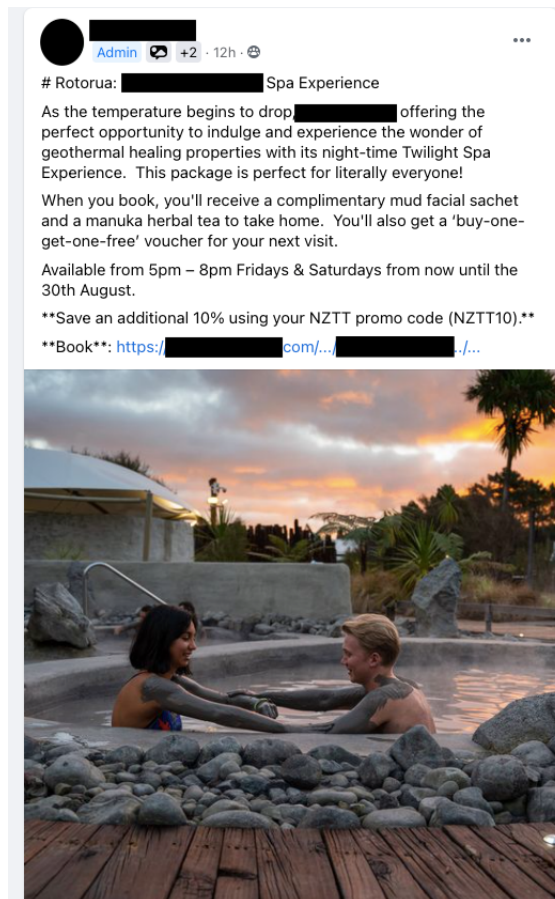


Figure 4.4 – Screenshot of post from New Zealand Travel Tips community dated 1 July 2021

Figure 4.5 shows a comment posted by SC in response to a community member's query. Her comment informs the questioner about relevant offers from a tourism entity that has partnered with the group and how to avail the discounts.

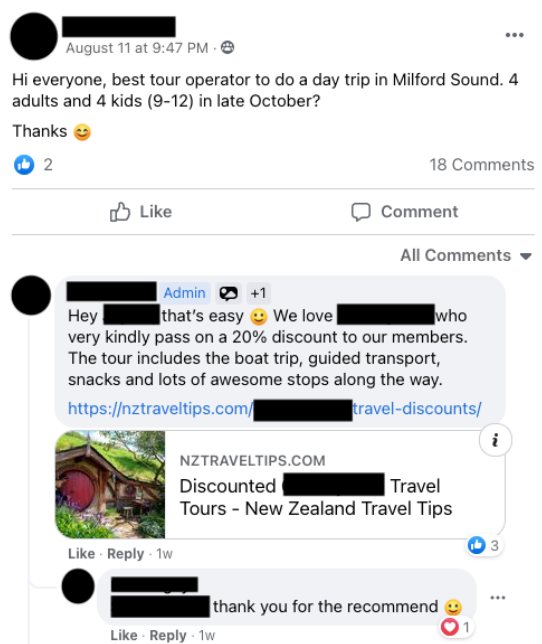


Figure 4.5 – Screenshot of post from New Zealand Travel Tips community dated 11 August 2021

This kind of collaborative arrangement not only allowed the business entity to tap into the large audience base in the community, it was also an incentive for members to stay in the community in order to be able to access such membership-based benefits.

#### 4.4 Motivations behind participating in virtual communities

In addition to the different ways tourism SMEs communicate in virtual communities, an analysis of the interviews revealed underlying motivations behind their activities and why they choose to make use of this channel to connect with their audience. These are the primary motivations that were found:

- Commercial benefits
- Word of mouth referrals
- Access to targeted audience
- To feel a sense of community
- Building a mutually beneficial partnership with the community manager

#### **4.4.1 Commercial benefits**

Commercial benefits in term of sales and bookings were found to be one of the key motivations for tourism entities to join an online community. Due to the presence of a large number of travel enthusiasts in the community, tourism representatives found it beneficial to either be actively involved in the group or engage with members in other ways to create awareness of their products and services. All interviewees agreed that there are direct or indirect financial benefits to being part of such communities. PB mentioned that “I was aware that they were these, these commercial tourism companies were actually making significant sales”, motivating him to join the community and find out how his business could benefit from it. He went on to share his sales numbers had increased as a result of their collaboration with the community.

Some of them have already seen thousands of dollars in revenue while others have found potential clients and are hopeful of conversions in the future. As AM suggested, “there's certainly quite a quite a number in there that would fit the profile of clientele that I'm looking for” while tourism businesses LB works with have seen organic conversions from being mentioned in the community. She says, “So when you sell something, and it's just because it's been mentioned on New Zealand Travel Tips, they booked directly with my operator, they're getting 100% a bit ticket price, unless I've used the coupon code”.

According to LB, “It's free...Usually, I can't advertise anything without paying \$10,000”. Financial benefits can thus be realised by tourism entities from the opportunity to freely promote one's business without having to pay large sums of money typically charged by conventional media channels.

#### **4.4.2 Word of mouth referrals**

The interviews showed that the representatives of tourism entities recognise that there is a lot of value in organic word of mouth referrals in online communities. This is especially true if the service provider is an active participant in the group and can generate goodwill through positive interactions with community members. PB highlighted the need to cultivate word of mouth in online communities – “I believe that

word of mouth is the future and whatever we can do to feed into that group by word of mouth is really important". The group admin, SC, suggested that the value lies in the community being able to generate ongoing conversations.

"A lot of the referrals and the recommendations ran almost in a cyclical manner, where it's not just one booking and then that person leaves, but there's a booking and then that person will refer another person or recommend it or share a photo with the group"

Another form of referral in the group happens through the admin, who is considered to be a credible source of information. When she gets the opportunity to experience a service in the process of collaborating with an entity, she shares her thoughts with the community, thus creating awareness of the brand in question. According to SC:

"we've gone and visited some of these operators in the process to then allow us to actually share our thoughts, and an honest review on what it is they're offering. And then we can go ahead and share that with the group"

#### **4.4.3 Access to targeted audience**

All interviewees agreed that being part of a virtual community on Facebook gave them access to an audience that had come together solely with the intention to discuss travel and tourism related topics. As LB rightly said, "for whatever reason, a community of 10s of 1000s of people that are all talking about New Zealand. I can't think of many other places where that takes place". A community like NZTT that has a large (approximately 29,000) number of members who are interested in tourism activities in the country, makes for a targeted, niche audience for businesses to engage with. But the number of members alone was not considered to be enough incentive for tourism operators to join such communities. For tourism operators such as AM, "The NZTT team already had the connections, they've already got a large, captive audience customer base", where the level of engagement of the audience was considered to be a key factor in making it worthwhile for businesses to participate in the community. LB added to this by suggesting that "you're also reaching a relatively high number of people that are actively engaged...And it's actually quite unusual to see the level of engagement that a lot of the NZTT posts have".

The decision to join a virtual community was also closely connected to the audience profile and their interests. According to PB, “we don't need a lot of people, we just need the right people”. Along the same lines AM also suggested that “they're (the community) pushing well up into the 20,000 plus members. And while they may not all be the exact audience that I'm looking at, there's certainly quite a number in there that would fit the profile of clientele that I'm looking for.” If the audience profile matched the tourism businesses’ target audience, it seemed that they would be more inclined towards engaging in the community more because there would be a higher chance for them to attract potential buyers.

From the group administrator’s perspective, hosting a virtual community of this kind on Facebook also meant that it would be possible to gain access to vital audience data. SC considered this to be a viable mode of marketing for tourism businesses because “we've got almost 27,000 members majority of which are based in New Zealand, we can see the demographics about their age, which part of the country they live in, all of that”. A community that matches its audience to the tourism industry’s target market seemed to be valuable for both travellers as well as businesses.

It is also possible for tourism businesses to consider even smaller niches that may serve their purpose, such as, communities targeted at solo travellers, or family travellers, etc. PB added that “the future of marketing will lie in these little niche audience type groups”. Such an audience, if the fit is right, makes it worthwhile for operators to try and promote themselves to this audience, at minimal monetary expense.

#### **4.4.4 Sense of community**

A review of the Facebook data shows that a strong and cohesive sense of community has developed over time within the group which has resulted in a mutually beneficial environment for members looking to travel, as well as entities in the tourism industry. LB thought that this was made possible because “people are trusting other people, and there's no brand, like people don't realise that NZTT is a brand. They just see it as people talking to each other and cross promoting”. The community is built on general

members and operators helping other members to answer their travel-related queries, get personal recommendations or help plan a trip, giving rise to a communal feeling.

Additionally, the data also revealed that tourism businesses foster this sense of community by mentioning and sharing information about other relevant businesses in response to questions from members looking to plan a trip. Such actions do not seem to have any commercial motive but instead increase their goodwill in the community. As can be seen in Figure 4.6 below, a tourism operator, who is also labelled as a 'group expert' within the community, not only shared information to answer a community member's question, but she also shared a link to the specific business and activity she was recommending.



Figure 4.6 - Screenshot of post from New Zealand Travel Tips community dated 11 August 2021

These gestures contribute to fostering the sense of community among tourism business entities as well. As AM indicated during the interview, NZTT is “the biggest and probably the only real online community that I'm attached to at the moment”.

#### 4.4.5 Building a mutually beneficial partnership with the group administrator

The community administrator who owns and runs the group's activities seems to be one of the key factors driving tourism entities to join the group and engage with members. SC was found to be instrumental in building relationships with the industry

and inviting them to join the community. Some of these relationships resulted in ongoing collaborations whereby members were able to secure exclusive offers when purchasing a service from specific tourism operators. PB added that, “SC has made, she's made time to build a relationship. And she's seen value in our brand. And so, then I've communicated and more of that. Yeah, just for her to, so that she can leverage our brand”. Tourism business representative such as AM also elaborated on why he thinks it has been valuable for him to be a part of the community and the nature of support he has received from the group admin’s domain expertise and by being amidst other business entities:

“At least one of the admin staff on NZTT has helped me out with a lot of stuff. Including some updates or subs that I've subsequently made to my business name and operating method. And I think those handsome tips that have come from within that wider NZTT community have been a big boon”

The admin also sets the rules of engagement within the community which determine what actions businesses are able to take when interacting with members. For example, they are encouraged to promote themselves only in the context of a member asking a question which the business representative can respond to by mentioning themselves. PB added that,

“I know the group admin don't like as if you're pushing your own business too hard through the community, I think, the odd reference to your own business as long as you make it clear that this is your own business, in terms of things that you might be able to offer clientele.”

SC explained the reason behind this saying that “initially, we actually had a rule where we weren't having operators into the group. And people could join as travellers. But it wasn't initially designed to promote operators”. Over time, tourism businesses were invited into the community, which led SC to create basic rules of engagement to ensure that the communication by business entities provides value to the rest of the community.

The group admin also plays an important role in promoting tourism operators that have engaged in a formal collaboration with the community. As shown in Figure 4.7 below, in response to a member's queries, the admin responded by sharing one of the partnering businesses that has agreed to offer an exclusive discount to community members.



Figure 4.7 – Screenshot of post from New Zealand Travel Tips community dated 9 August 2021

This not only offers tourism operators the opportunity to gain visibility among an audience highly interested in tourism, but this also signals to members that the tourism operator being recommended is credible because according to SC, "if anybody is going to advertise on NZTT, it's really important to us that we've either been out in already experienced that activity, or that it comes highly regarded by people that we trust. And so, we make sure that we do plenty of research around that before we will consider adding anyone to the site".

#### 4.5 Summary

This chapter reported the findings from the analysis of the Facebook group data as well as the semi-structured interviews. The analysis revealed that representatives of tourism entities who were members of New Zealand Travel Tips, communicated with other travellers in the community in three primary ways: by sharing their travel knowledge, by

indulging in self-promotional activities or discussions, and by partnering with the community's administrator.

In addition to that, the data also showed that tourism entities had five main motivations behind joining virtual communities such as NZTT: for gaining commercial benefits in the form of increased revenue or bookings, building a mutually beneficial partnership with the community administrator, harbouring a sense of community, encouraging word of mouth referrals, and getting access to a large, targeted audience.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the results of this research in further detail based on the findings shared in the previous chapter. Inferences are drawn from both data sets to answer the following primary and secondary research questions –

1. How do small and medium sized entities in the tourism industry in New Zealand use the Facebook travel community, New Zealand Travel Tips, to communicate with tourists?
2. What are the motivations of tourism entities in New Zealand behind using this travel community?

This chapter is divided into sections to elaborate on the themes that emerged from the analysis of the data and to showcase how they help to answer the research questions. The first section will discuss how tourism entities in New Zealand make use of their local knowledge to answer queries of community members, contributing to the discussions within the virtual community and how they are able to promote their products and services among a large, targeted audience interested in travel and tourism. The next section will delve deeper into the formal collaborations and partnerships tourism entities have forged with the NZTT community in particular and how these benefit both parties. This will further lead to an analysis of how virtual communities can become a relationship building tool for tourism entities, followed by a discussion about the underlying reasons and motivations behind why tourism entities are increasingly taking more interest in joining online communities. This section will thus highlight the perceived benefits of communicating with online community members.

### 5.2 Sharing knowledge

When representatives of tourism businesses enter virtual travel communities, they bring with them their vast knowledge of the tourism landscape which they are willing to share with the rest of the community (Pi et al., 2013). In the context of the NZTT community, they were found to frequently participate in conversations to respond to queries raised by members as a way to interact within the community. These interactions typically involved sharing their knowledge of tourism in New Zealand and recommendations to help community members plan their travels. AM said that he spends one hour on average every week to answer questions asked in the community. A review of the Facebook data also showed a pattern where the same individual representing a tourism entity was found to be commenting on queries and sharing information about their business multiple times over the duration of the data collection period. An example of that can be seen in Figures 5.1 and 5.2 below. Sharing of knowledge thus offers tourism entities a means to communicate with members in a virtual community.

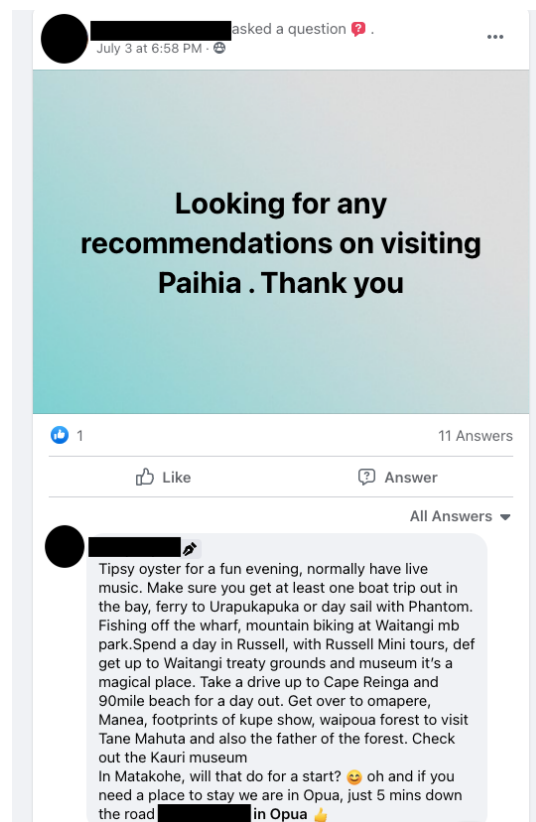


Figure 5.1 - Screenshot of post from New Zealand Travel Tips dated 3 July 2021

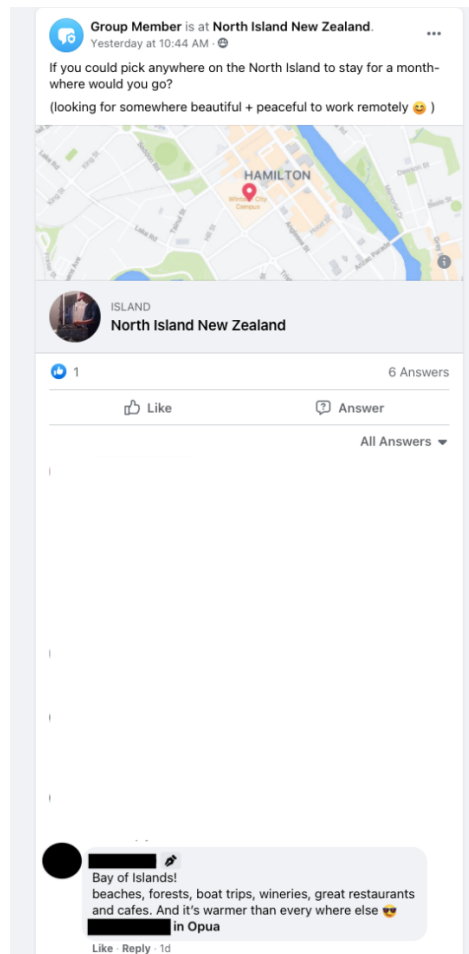


Figure 5.2 - Screenshot of post from New Zealand Travel Tips dated 3 July 2021

Although it may seem unreasonable for them to spend valuable time sharing their knowledge and answering queries with no apparent direct benefits, it may be argued that there are other underlying benefits. Both the interview and Facebook data indicated that tourism businesses were not communicating with members solely to gain commercial benefits. According to SC, the community's administrator, "they don't necessarily promote themselves, some of them truly do just love like our group". While commercial benefits cannot be ruled out as one of the key motives, as will be discussed later in this chapter, there was also a genuine interest in being part of the community to offer help in any manner possible, usually by sharing their knowledge of tourism. The real value of virtual travel communities lies in their ability to bring people together to facilitate the exchange of information (Wang et al., 2002), and the active participation from tourism operators and destination marketers has contributed to that process in this case. SC, the community administrator, referred to these tourism operators as

“selfless” and noted that they are happy to share their knowledge with members, because “it’s really about building up knowledge in that particular area”, pointing to the rich discussions happening within the community.

One of the goals of sharing knowledge with the community could also be to establish domain expertise and be seen as an authority when it comes to tourism in a particular region. As can be seen in Figures 5.1 and 5.2 shared above, the tourism representative owns or runs a business in the Bay of Islands region in New Zealand. Therefore, by sharing their knowledge of the area every time there is a relevant query, they are able to showcase their expertise about tourism activities in that region, in addition to mentioning their business name, thus resulting in higher brand visibility. While research has not yet established a direct correlation between increased brand awareness in virtual communities to an increase in revenue, small and medium sized entities have a lot to gain by making their presence known in communities like these as part of their brand building efforts (Wang et al., 2002).

The Facebook data as well as the interviews revealed that the community administrator and members appreciate the expertise and industry experience that tourism operators have which makes them a credible source of information. AM realised that “because I’ve worked in tourism previously, prior to starting my own business, specifically based in the South Island...I was helping answer a lot of questions that are starting to come through from people that were looking to travel around all parts of the South Island”. Participating in conversations of this nature can potentially help tourism entities build authority within the community over time. AM also added that “I’ve subsequently been invited on board, as a group expert...around stuff on the South Island”, a status that is also visible to other community members as can be seen in Figure 5.3.



Figure 5.3 - Screenshot of post from New Zealand Travel Tips dated 23 November 2021

Being labelled as a 'Group Expert' can have several implications for representatives of tourism operators. It firstly indicates to other members that these individuals are not only active participants in the community, but they also contribute to ongoing discussions with valuable information. It also signals that the community's moderator has identified these individuals to be designated experts and are thus credible sources of information. Sharing their knowledge gives businesses an opportunity to directly interact with their audience and engage in meaningful conversations. It is possible that once a business representative has established themselves as an expert, it may be easier for them to share promotional content about their business as well, and impact how well such content is received by the community.

Members of virtual communities seek credible information to plan their travels. While Arsal et al. (2008) suggested that information received from other members with prior experience of the destination or service are considered to be valuable, it may be argued that by blending in with general members of a virtual community, tourism entities with expertise in a certain destination or service are able to offer the same value to

community members. AM pointed out that almost all tourism providers including him are participating in the community using their personal Facebook profile and not their business accounts. This may also contribute to general members viewing tourism representatives as an organic part of the community, instead of an external business trying to make a sale. According to Scott et al. (2017), communication received from businesses is often considered less trustworthy in comparison to those received from fellow travellers. Thus, using this tactic to reach customers may be more effective. LB also noted this through her interactions in the community – “I think when it doesn't sound like it's the business talking about itself, that adds to the viability or the reliability of that being a good experience...When people go, we work here and this is really cool, I'm less likely to believe them”. However, it must also be noted that there is a fine line between using individual Facebook accounts to communicate with members and not disclosing their identity or business affiliations. Roth-Cohen and Lahav (2019) have found that businesses often try to share promotional messages in virtual communities under the guise of organic knowledge or information. However, no such instances of unscrupulous messaging were found during the analysis of the data collected from the NZTT community.

In addition, interview participants LB and AM also highlighted that the community guidelines encourage disclosure of business affiliations. An example of this can be seen in Figure 5.4 below. As evident in this example, tourism business representatives can be identified from the kind of language used in the comment. Use of words such as “we” or “us” indicate the individual’s direct association with the tourism entity, thus avoiding any ambiguity for community members.

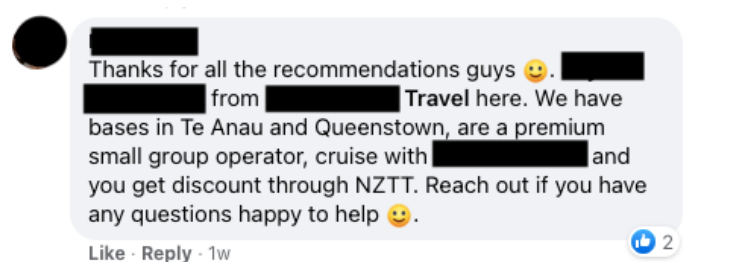


Figure 5.4 - Screenshot of post from New Zealand Travel Tips dated 11 August 2021

Sharing knowledge in the virtual community thus allowed tourism entities to engage and communicate with members by not only supporting their travel planning activities but also establishing their authority and credibility. Therefore, the act of sharing knowledge, typically by responding to questions from community members, became one of the primary ways tourism entities participated in the virtual community.

### 5.3 Harnessing the power of collaboration with community administrators

A review of the Facebook data and the interviews clearly indicated that the virtual community's moderator played an important role in shaping how tourism brands engaged and communicated with the community. Private groups formed on Facebook such as NZTT are often closed in nature, which means that every member that enters the group must be vetted and accepted by the individuals running it. SC, the administrator, revealed that the community was originally created for travel enthusiasts and travellers who were interested in discussing how to plan trips in New Zealand. It was only later that she decided to open up the group to allow local brands and tourism operators to enter the community. She indicated that this decision was based on what value travellers wanted by being part of the community – “my intention with the group was always that it would be travel planning... having operators and people within the industry there to help give really specific information certainly helps to support that for sure”. She has been responsible for finding suitable brands and vetting them before giving them access to the community's growing member base.

After a tourism operator entered the community, the data reflected a heavy influence of the administrator on what actions the operator can take. By establishing the rules of engagement in this community, one of the key functions performed by the administrator (Pi et al., 2013), business representatives were prevented from directly posting marketing messages in the group, and thus had to find other ways to tap into the community. In addition to actively sharing their knowledge as discussed in the previous section, tourism operators were found to build a new form of partnership with the community by harnessing a relationship with the community administrator. According to SC, “we invite operators to partner with us. And we promote the activities

and the accommodation that we really believe is a quality offering in New Zealand, to our members". All interview participants confirmed that they were invited to share their offerings with members in the Facebook community and also get featured on the community's website (<https://nztraveltips.com/>). A collaboration of this nature always involved an exclusive discount or promotion available to community members offered by tourism operators. LB confirmed this by sharing that, "we had a number of tour operators who were able to get a deal listed on NZTT". AM also shared that he had availed the opportunity to collaborate with the community – "I've now got an ongoing discount offered through [the group] and exclusively to group members".

One of the key drivers of this kind of partnership is the administrator who not only ensures that the community remains active and thus lucrative for tourism organizations, but also does the background work of building relationships with tourism entities. Roth-Cohen and Lahav (2019) found that degree of involvement of the community administrator or manager has a direct impact on what activities are considered acceptable in the group. This has several implications for the community, its members and the tourism entities looking to be a part of this ecosystem. According to SC, "if anybody is going to advertise on NZTT, it's really important to us that we've either been out and already experienced that activity, or that it comes highly regarded by people that we trust. And so, we make sure that we do plenty of research around that before we will consider adding anyone to the site". Thus, tourism entities entering a formal partnership with the community signals to members that they have been vetted and have a seal of approval from the administrator. These collaborations also benefit community members by giving them access to special discounts that non-members cannot avail. Facilitated by the administrator, these collaborations gave tourism brands unique opportunities to market their products and services to a highly niche audience interested in travel, with minimal financial investment. As a result, not only does this contribute towards gaining financial benefits by virtue of their engagement in the community, but this also gave them an opportunity, albeit indirectly, to engage with other members and influence their travel-related consumption decisions.

Facilitating collaborative engagements of this kind was one of the primary ways in which Wang et al. (2002) suggested community administrators could help brands in the tourism industry to engage with virtual communities. This also gives rise to “provider-based revenue models” for the community (Wang et al., 2002, p. 415) as tourism entities interested in enlisting their services on the NZTT website or seeking to be featured in the Facebook group either pay a small fee to the administrator for every sale and forgo a small percentage of the revenue by offering a discounted price to community members.

PB and his organization even found value in curating a special service offering for the community members based on the relationship he was able to form with SC. According to him, “[SC] made time to build a relationship. And she's seen value in our brand. And so, then I've communicated and more of that...so that she can leverage our brand”. This kind of partnership with online communities is now an integral part of the organization's sales strategy, paving the way for a shift towards unconventional modes of communication with their audience and an inclination to adopt and incorporate digital communication by SMEs. Thus, building formal collaborative partnerships with the virtual community was one of the ways tourism entities were found to engage with their audience and potential customers. This shows that there is value for small and medium sized tourism entities in participating in such virtual communities as a way to effectively communicate with tourists. By partnering with the community manager, tourism organizations can potentially open up an additional channel to engage with tourists and eventually influence their travel related purchase decisions.

#### 5.4 Building relationships in the virtual community

Relationship building via different forms of communication in the group was found to be at the core of how and why tourism entities participated in the virtual community. Whether they chose to share their tourism knowledge with members, collaborate with the group administrator or found a way to promote themselves directly in the group, building and nurturing strong relationships was one of the key outcomes of their actions.

Tourism operators appeared to have formed relationships with two sets of people in the community: other members and the community's administrator. While their goal was not always to directly promote their business or destination, building strong relationships ultimately contributed to increasing brand visibility and destination awareness. Members of virtual communities have been found to seek meaningful relationships through their participation in the community, making it worthwhile for tourism entities to spend time and effort in nurturing these relationships (Wang et al., 2002). AM mentioned during the interview that he often used his knowledge to help travellers plan trips to New Zealand's South Island, a region he is familiar with and where his business is based. By sharing useful information repeatedly over a period of time, he was able to gain a level of familiarity in the group and was also tagged as a 'group expert'. When a member is labelled as an expert, the label is visible to other community members as can be seen in Figure 5.5. This may help representatives of tourism entities build trust and credibility in the messages they share in the community, creating an environment for building stronger relationships (Wang et al., 2002).



Figure 5.5 - Screenshot of post from New Zealand Travel Tips dated 6 January 2022

While AM and LB had plenty of experience interacting with community members and building a direct relationship, PB on the other hand found it useful to build a mutually beneficial collaborative relationship with the group administrator. According to him, building a relationship with the community administrator itself is their strategy to help them tap into the large member base of the NZTT community. This not only gave him indirect access into the group, but it also gave his tourism business a seal of approval from the community administrator, a valuable asset in an ecosystem where the administrator's opinions hold significant weight. Kozinets (1999) highlighted the importance of such partnerships to help tourism entities "learn how to form alliances with the powerful communities that are brewing online" (p. 261).

According to Wang et al. (2002), tourism organizations are increasingly making use of virtual communities to engage in relationship marketing. By blurring the lines between general members and representatives of tourism entities, virtual communities allow the latter to seamlessly interact with members, engage in meaningful conversations, and thus cultivate an environment that fosters a relationship of trust and loyalty (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). Trust in the recommendations received from a tourism representative can go a long way in establishing this relationship and creating a space where marketing messages are accepted by members without the fear of being manipulated. However, Kozinets (1999) cautions against thinking of marketing activities in virtual communities as traditional relationship marketing where one size is assumed to fit all. He introduced the idea of Virtual Communal Marketing that takes into account the different types of members in a virtual community, highlighting that community members are not passive receivers of information anymore and have the power to influence each other's consumption choices. Thus, relationships are key to a tourism entity getting maximum value out of their presence in a virtual community like NZTT. Building and nurturing the right relationships is an effective way to connect with tourists and can be valuable for tourism entities looking for opportunities to connect with their target audience outside of traditional channels.

## 5.5 Motivations for participating in virtual communities

A review of the interviews alongside the comments posted by tourism entities in the Facebook community showed that each had some underlying motivations for participating in the virtual community. When a representative of a tourism entity enters and actively engages with community members, they are using valuable time to do so. The community administrator, SC, shared that their motives are often altruistic, and they genuinely want to be a part of the tourism community in New Zealand. But it can't be denied that as a business entity, in return for their investment in the form of time, effort, and knowledge, they hoped to gain something from the community. The data revealed that these motivations were primarily in the form of commercial benefits, cultivating a sense of community, increasing brand awareness, receiving word of mouth referrals, and access to a large audience base.

Interview participant PB shared that his organization has been able to receive an increased number of bookings for their services from community members, thus positively impacting their annual revenue. Although past research has shown that tourism entities motivated to engage in virtual communities solely by commercial benefits are often considered to be untrustworthy (Chung & Buhalis, 2008), PB's statements may seem contradictory. However, the data indicated that whether tourism entities are seen as credible or not, depends on how they communicate within the community. When virtual community members find marketing messages "invasive" or "unethical", they don't shy away from rejecting those organizations (Kozinets, 1999, p. 258). According to PB, even though his primary motive to engage with the community was to find more customers for their tourism business, his strategy has never been to directly sell to members or push his products because "if your strategy is to sell, I think your audience can see through that very quickly". So, although firms can be motivated to participate in virtual communities by financial profits, it is often an organic outcome of their efforts to nurture relationships in the community and communicate with members in the right way.

Commercial benefits for tourism businesses also depend on the kind of members the community attracts. As AM suggested, "there's certainly quite a quite a number [of members] in there that would fit the profile of clientele that I'm looking for",

highlighting the importance of finding a community with the right target audience and its relationship with financial returns. Reaching an active, engaged audience who can potentially become paying customers is thus often one of the motivations behind tourism entities entering online communities. A mismatch between a tourism entity's ideal target audience and the members of the virtual community can prove futile in helping the entity gain any real benefit. But if they are able to identify and tap into the right virtual community, "it's one of the quickest and easiest and still relatively cheap advertising platforms and social media platforms" according to AM. This aligns with research findings of Kozinets (1999) who suggested that virtual communities offer access to potential customers and marketing opportunities for businesses. An understanding of the type of audience in a virtual community is thus imperative in helping tourism entities strategically choose which communities and audiences to target (Valck et al., 2009).

Participating in a virtual community also gave tourism entities a sense of belonging to the community of travel enthusiasts as well as other small and medium enterprises in the industry. While building a connection with travellers allowed them to respond to queries and get a glimpse of their needs, being in the same community with other tourism businesses gave them the opportunity to support each other and seek help from people who understand the industry. By engaging in ongoing communication to either answer queries from community members or simply share travel-related content, representatives of tourism businesses were able to seamlessly blend in within the community, making it easier for general members to see them as an integral part of the group (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). As LB said, "I think one of the things I like about the group is that it feels that it comes from a place of authenticity and honesty. And it's Kiwis by and large or people that reside here, Kiwis advising Kiwis". The local knowledge held by her and other representatives contributed to building this communal feeling, without making members feel bombarded with sales and marketing messages. Although Roth-Cohen and Lahav's (2019) research revealed that marketers were often found to be doing so anonymously, indicating unscrupulous motives, this study didn't find any instances of such behaviour. In fact, in most cases, representatives of

businesses declared upfront about their professional involvement with or ownership of the entity or their Facebook profiles revealed their affiliation.

In addition to interacting with end customers, the virtual community provided a supportive environment for local tourism operators. As LB said, “the more I think about that community, I think it's played a really vital part, probably in the wellbeing of the people but also supporting the tourism industry”. SC, the group’s administrator, also agreed, mentioning that “we also have some operators, who are part of the community and I think work with us because they just really believe in what the group is doing as a whole in the way that we all get in behind tourism and New Zealand and we love travelling”. AM added to this by sharing that “the admin staff on NZTT have helped me out with a lot of stuff, including some updates that I've subsequently made to my business name and operating method. And I think those handsome tips that have come from within that wider NZTT community have been a big boon”. This opportunity to be a part of the community and the industry in a mutually beneficial virtual environment was one of the key drivers in encouraging local tourism entities to join and actively participate in the group.

Past research also suggests that participating in a virtual community can result in an increase in brand awareness, further contributing to transmission of word of mouth (Flavián & Guinalú, 2005). Figure 5.6 showcases an example of how active participation in conversations within a virtual community can not only lead to higher visibility for a brand, but also encourages other members to share their positive referrals about the brand in question. In response to a query about Milford Sound, a popular tourist destination in New Zealand, the conversation shows a brand representative sharing the services they offer while mentioning the exclusive discounts available for community members, indicating a formally established partnership between the brand and the community. Additionally, the conversation shows several other community members, who have availed the services of this same operator in the past, recommending this brand and generating organic word of mouth. By making themselves visible in the community and talking about their services, the brand ensured more chances of being recalled and referred by other members.

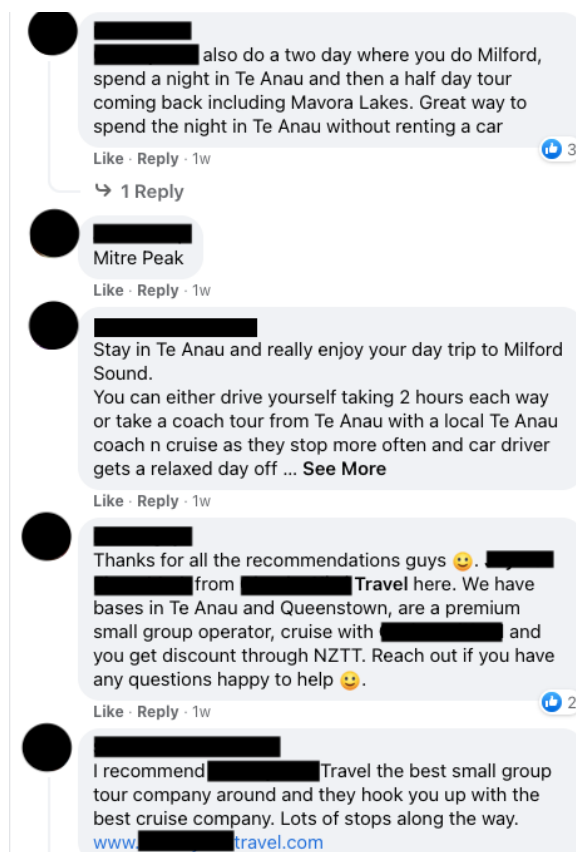


Figure 5.6 – Screenshot of post from New Zealand Travel Tips dated 11 August 2021

Based on the results of this study, it can thus be said that tourism entities often have more than one underlying motivation to join virtual communities. As is evident from the discussion above, while financial benefits in the form of increased revenue may be their ultimate goal, representatives of tourism entities were also keen to build relationships with their target audience, nurture a sense of belonging with the community, and also aim to increase brand awareness.

## 5.6 Treading the fine line between profit motive and value creation

While tourism entities were found to be motivated to join virtual communities by different reasons, they certainly had at least one of the motivations discussed in the previous section driving them to participate in a virtual community. This is in line with research findings from Wu and Jiao (2008) and Wang et al. (2002) who suggested that virtual communities not only offered a new channel for tourism businesses to interact

with customers, but also increased brand awareness. Data from this study showed that increased awareness is partly a result of brands actively promoting themselves in the community with a clear motive of getting their business name in front of the community members. For many tourism entities in the NZTT community, self-promotion was a popular means of communicating with other members. This was done with the aim to inform members about their business, especially at the travel planning stage to help them decide which travel-related purchases to make.

However, such expectations to gain or profit something from the virtual community would not be possible without business entities contributing to the community in some way. An analysis of the interviews also showed that by entering a group like this, tourism entities not only expected to increase revenue or brand visibility, but they also understood the importance of giving back to the community. One of the most common ways representatives of tourism entities were found to do that was by sharing their knowledge and information about tourism activities in New Zealand as discussed earlier in this chapter. According to AM, “I was helping answer a lot of questions that are starting to come through from people that were looking to travel around all parts of the South Island” to help community members plan their travels. The community administrator, SC, also supported this by sharing that “we also have operators who are quite selfless in the way that they share information. And it's really about building up knowledge in that particular area. And they don't necessarily promote themselves, some of them truly do just love like our group...And they aren't necessarily mentioning themselves in the posts”. The online community thus not only gave them an opportunity to bring attention to their business, but it also enriched conversations within the community by giving members a chance to plan their travels based on credible recommendations.

While this mode of engagement was generally quite popular, the interviewees noted that effectiveness of such communication depends on how the message is being communicated. This confirms Chung and Buhalis's (2008) research which found that virtual community members are often sceptical about business entities that participate in discussions with the sole motive of profits and are considered untrustworthy. This

indicates that hard selling of products and services by tourism entities can backfire if they have not put any effort to building relationships within the community or have not created any value for members. Sharing valuable information to help community members generates goodwill. Tourism entities and their representatives that have successfully made use of virtual communities as a platform to communicate with travellers have come to understand the value of supporting community members in achieving their goal of travel planning. According to SC, “having operators and people within the industry [in the community] to help give really specific information certainly helps to support that”. Thus, it is evident from the data that while the means of communication used by tourism entities is important, their success depends on the reasons why they have chosen to be a part of a virtual community and how they balance the need to gain financial benefits versus managing their relationships in the community. This will ultimately dictate their choice of communication tactic – while for some tourism entities a more direct profit-oriented approach of self-promotion might be suitable, others may choose to generate value for community members through knowledge sharing.

## 5.7 Summary

This chapter elaborated on the results and findings of this study based on the existing literature to showcase how small and medium sized tourism entities in New Zealand use the NZTT Facebook community to engage with tourists and potential customers. The discussion subsequently shed light on their motivations behind their actions.

The research revealed that representatives of tourism entities in New Zealand use different tactics to participate in the community and engage with its members. Sharing of knowledge stood out as one of the most popular means of engagement whereby tourism representatives were found to freely share their expertise to help community members plan their travels by sharing information about tourism activities and destinations in New Zealand. While the act of sharing knowledge was found to be altruistic in nature, to enrich the conversations in the community, it helped tourism representatives gain the trust of other members. By becoming credible sources of

information, tourism representatives found a way to build relationships within the community.

Tourism representatives also actively forged a collaborative relationship with the community's administrator. This resulted in the formation of partnerships between tourism entities and the communities, as part of which community members could avail exclusive benefits and discounts when making a purchase with a specific tourism organization. While this was not a direct way to interact with community members, these partnerships gave tourism entities a seal of approval from the administrator, thus increasing brand awareness and credibility.

This chapter also discussed the various motivations behind why tourism entities choose to participate in virtual communities like NZTT. The results from this study showed that commercial benefits, a sense of belonging to the travel community, and increasing brand awareness were the key motivating factors for tourism entities. While some tourism operators promoted their own brand to community members directly to increase sales and revenue, others took an indirect approach by collaborating with the administrator and offering exclusive membership-based benefits. However, more than direct profit, all tourism representatives felt a sense of belonging to the community and were heavily invested in being part of the conversations and helping travellers travel better. Finally, by engaging in the community, tourism representatives hoped to increase brand awareness among community members which would eventually result in higher sales.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

### 6.1 Introduction

This study explored the different ways small and medium sized tourism entities in New Zealand make use of virtual communities to communicate with tourists. It also aimed to uncover their motivations behind choosing to enter and participate in virtual communities created on a social media platform such as Facebook. For the purpose of this research, New Zealand Travel Tips, a popular Facebook travel community was chosen which allowed the researcher to study the dynamics of communication between community members, the community administrator and representatives of tourism organizations who are a part of the community. This final chapter will summarise the research findings and its implications for the tourism industry, and aim to shed light on recommendations for future research.

### 6.2 How and why tourism entities use virtual communities

By analysing conversations between community members and tourism representatives in the virtual community on Facebook and the data collected from interviews, this research has shown that tourism entities can successfully interact with travellers in the community in multiple ways. Based on a qualitative analysis of the data, it can be concluded that representatives of tourism organizations use three primary modes of communication in the virtual community: sharing of knowledge, self-promotion, and partnership with community administrator. The results indicated that by sharing their knowledge of tourism activities in New Zealand, tourism entities were able to communicate directly with community members and respond to their queries. In addition to that, many tourism entities chose to bring attention to their offerings by directly mentioning their brand names in conversations with community members. This was often the case when a tourism entity offered a service relevant to the member's query. Finally, a formal collaboration with the community administrator highlighted the important role they played in helping tourism organizations connect with their target

audience. These kinds of partnerships between tourism entities and the virtual community often entailed the former offering an exclusive discount for community members if they chose to avail their services.

The data also revealed some of the key motivations of tourism entities based on which they decide to participate in virtual tourism communities: commercial benefits, brand awareness, sense of community, access to target audience, and relationship building. Using thematic analysis, this study showcased that tourism entities can benefit by participating in such communities irrespective of what their original motivation was. Thus, virtual communities can be valuable for tourism organisations by helping them reach potential customers and give them opportunities to interact with them in a virtual social environment.

### 6.3 Implications for tourism industry

The findings from this study have direct implications for the tourism industry in New Zealand, especially for small and medium sized organizations. Virtual communities formed on social media channels like Facebook offer tourism entities the opportunity to form direct connections with their target audience and tourists in general. By participating in such communities, it is possible for them to not only build relationships with other members, but also build trust and credibility for their brand. Virtual communities are also a low-cost way to reach customers making it a more lucrative option than expensive advertisements and can be valuable for smaller tourism organisations that may not have a large marketing budget. While it may be argued that company profile pages on social media platforms serve the same function of communicating with customers, virtual travel communities allow tourism entities to create a more personalised experience for tourists and provide brands with an opportunity to impact their travel planning process. With more and more travellers relying on social media and peer-to-peer reviews to gather information about destinations and other activities, engaging with them in those platforms gives tourism organizations the opportunity to influence their decisions.

## 6.4 Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

While most studies about virtual communities tend to focus on the community members and their behaviour, this research explored the value of such travel communities for tourism organizations. However, a lot remains to be uncovered when it comes to how small and medium tourism businesses can further make use of virtual communities to their benefit. While this study focused on a generic tourism community, future research can explore how virtual travel communities in specific niches such as solo women's travel, luxury travel, food and wine tourism among others, have an impact on communication strategies used by tourism organisations. The size and scope of this research also limited the researcher to one community, so it would be of immense value to explore other similar communities in New Zealand to find out what role they are playing in helping the tourism industry connect with travellers.

It should also be noted that the data and the findings of this research are limited by the number of interview participants. Although the three interviews conducted proved to be very valuable for this study, it is likely that more interviews with tourism industry stakeholders would capture richer data and possibly help answer the research question in deeper ways. Overall, a larger scope of study would result in uncovering more about the virtual community dynamics in relation to the tourism industry in New Zealand, thus offering wider understandings for business entities in relation to engaging with their audience via social networks.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Indicative Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews for Tourism Entities

1. How did you come across the New Zealand Travel Tips community on Facebook?  
What motivated you to join it?
2. How often do you engage with members in the group?
3. In what ways do you typically engage with members?
4. How has your experience of being part of the community been so far?
5. What impact has the group had on your business?
6. Why did you decide to use this platform rather than any other traditional mode of communication?
7. What challenges or opportunities have you faced while using the community?
8. Are you a member of any other similar communities? Do you engage with those as often as this one? What motivated you to join multiple groups?
9. Have you directly interacted with the group admin of New Zealand Travel Tips with respect to how you can engage with the community or to discuss what services you could offer? What was the purpose or nature of the interaction?
10. What role has the admin played in how you engage with the community?
11. Have you found the community to be of use for your business? In what way?

## Appendix B: Indicative Questions for Semi-Structured Interview for NZTT Community Administrator

1. What were your reasons for creating this Facebook travel community?
2. Did you have any previous experience of managing or being a member of an online tourism community?
3. When you started, what goals did you want to achieve out of this community?
4. Why did you want tourism entities to be an active part of the community?
5. At what point did you decide to allow tourism businesses to be a part of the group?
6. At that stage, did you invite tourism businesses to join the community or did they reach out to you to gain access to the community? Now that the group has grown so much, have you noticed any changes in that?
7. Based on your experience of running this community, why do you think tourism businesses want to be a part of the group? What are their motivations?
8. What incentives do you think a small business has in being part of an online community like this?
9. What are the different ways you have seen tourism businesses wanting to engage with community members?
10. What kind of impact have you seen this community make on small/medium tourism businesses?