# An explorative research on User-generated contents' Influences towards destination image

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**Abstract**

An exploratory research in the case of activity based tourism-volunteerism has been selected to understand the image of destination that is generating via online social networking sites. Qualitative netnographic research approach and interpretation throughout the research project has developed the understanding of online interactions and meanings which created contents by tourists. Tourist interaction on Social networking site "Facebook" provide the impression that people's opinions, experiences and thoughts, align with the tourist perception towards destination Nepal as a volunteer tourism. The tourist level of engagement and their positive - negative feelings and their views are observed. One tourist's expressions on online community play vital role in terms of influencing other tourists in relation to the decision making process.

Key worlds: User-generated content, social networking sites, Volunteer tourism, Nepal, Destination Image, Netnography

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## List of abbreviation

UGC:                                          User-generated Content

WOM:                                          Word of mouth

E-WOM:                                        Electronic Word of Mouth

SNS:                                          Social Networking Sites

## Researcher's interest in the field of study

In the point of departure, selection of the topic has been linked with my past experience in the field.  I have been interested to study this topic because I was myself a volunteer tourist approximately seven year ago, from Nepal to Denmark. Since that, my curiosity has been rising in the volunteerism. Along with my academic knowledge

and understanding during Tourism studies and involvements in Danish volunteer organizations, I found myself, interested to get deeper insights of current phenomena in volunteer tourism. On the other hand, I have been practicing the online platform and its changing communication trends in tourism industry, throughout the semester projects in the last year. Destination Nepal has been chosen for the case study because I would like to establish professional career in Nepal in the future. From the previous gained knowledge in digital marketing and special interest in volunteer tourism, I am motivated to explore more, that will hopefully enhance my knowledge and I believe that this research project will be useful for tourism players, researchers and academics.

## Overview of volunteerism in Nepal

Volunteer tourism is popular as an alternative travel activity in tourism industry. The growth of volunteerism is incredibly rising in the global context. According to (Morgan, 2015), the volunteerism has the reputation mostly as the people from highly developed countries who are travelling abroad. On the other hand, developing countries around the world are popular in terms of hosting volunteer tourists. Nepal is one of the most popular tourism destination for volunteer tourists in the world. Nepal has recognized the possible growth of volunteer tourism thereby projecting to get socio-economic benefits (Upadhayaya, Müller-Böker, & Sharma, 2011). Thus, volunteer tourism is becoming important organ for the tourism development of Nepal. Nepal as a destination is primarily known for its unique natural resources and cultural settings. There are range of impressions that are delivered by multiple tourism suppliers such as National tourism board, organizations, private firms and other tourism actors. However it is difficult to understand how the image of Nepal is created to the potential markets.

The recent natural disaster earthquake in Nepal in April 2015, has influenced in terms of delivering message to global market about the perception in relation to functional and psychological attributes. (BBC, 2015)(Agapito, Oom do Valle, & da Costa Mendes, 2013). The roles UGC on SNS has been observed as an essential in spreading message to the world. Each individuals have the ability to create content such as photos, blogs and video on SNS through internet mobile devices i.e. smartphones and tablets. Since the contents on social media are not in control of national tourism board or other governmental authorities, the destination image of Nepal is likely to be influenced in positive or negative ways. For example, a devastated photo caused by the earth quake can impact on volunteer tourist´s attitude to travel to Nepal. Thus, tourist who is willing to support people might take a volunteer program in Nepal. However, the safety issues, facilities and services could be main concern for some tourists to avoid the volunteer program in Nepal.

Volunteer tourism is not clearly defined in ministry of tourism so called Nepal Tourism Board (nepaltourism.info, 2015). This indicates that there is vital role of intermediaries in terms of creating the image of volunteerism in Nepal. It is most common that volunteer tourism activities are organized by NGO, INGO and other funded organizations (Wearing, 2001). Volunteerism is nowadays shifting towards mainstream tourism activities where a number of new types of experiences are offered by various organizations. For example, a volunteer tourist can travel to the destination for less than two weeks of stay. In the competitive environment in volunteer tourism, the authenticity of the experience offerings are questionable. Sometimes tourist's main purpose of taking volunteer program is going for a short vacation/leisure propose rather than engaging on volunteer activities (ibid). Thus, there could be multiple reasons and several types of experiences which motivate tourist to take volunteer program abroad. In terms of how the image of volunteer tourism in Nepal is created, all the volunteer service operators have direct and indirect influence (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012).

# 1.0 Introduction

## *1.1 Research Background*

The means of communication within the tourism industry are rapidly changing in recent years along with the development of information technology. This change has been observed by several academics and researchers in different areas(Leung, Law, Van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013). Developments of online social networking platforms have been playing important role in people's lifestyle can be traced in the decade. Today, enormous number of people have access to multiple social networking sites in the entire world. Billions of online networking sites users are active in every day basis of their lives (DTTT, 2014). The users are spreading their opinions, knowledge and communicate with their friends and families using different online channels and applications (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Communication through online channels have gone far ahead, for example tourism destinations and operators use SNS (social networking sites) as marketing tools, and customers use SNS in the process of tourism experiences. This is one of the activities that have changed the settings of tourism industry.

SNS platform seems to be highly prioritized by tourist destinations and service providers in all levels of firms and organizations (NTO.thinkdigital, 2014). Online social networking platforms have become more strategic communication/marketing tools rather than just a medium of sharing information (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). On

the other hand, tourism consumers are using SNS as source of information, contents and dialogue with multiple service providers and other people-both known and unknown across the world (Burgess, Sellitto, Cox, & Buultjens, 2011). Customer trends in tourism are becoming more complex than ever in terms searching for their next destinations or products because of the range of information sources available in online SNS. Contents in SNS are accessed and created by both the service providers and consumers. Moreover, there are different types of contents that are present on SNS, may not necessarily be created by neither the service provider nor the customer. For example, this could be the opinions of people who are not directly associated with tourism experiences. There are numbers of social networking sites with multiple functions and layouts that are popular in tourism industry such as Travel text blog, video/picture blog, Comments, sharing, likes etc. All these functions and applications are in some extend interlinked with each other. For example, Facebook is the most popular online social networking site where millions of people contribute to create/generate contents. The Facebook contents could also be linked with travel blogs and review sites such as Tripadvisor.com and Travelblog.org. For example, if a traveler express his/her experience on Travel blog via text, photo, video i.e., the content of Travel blog, could be interacted on Facebook page with other groups of people. This kind of linking possibilities have a great potential to connect the world in a new level of communication. (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008), illustrate that 20 percent of tourists depend on the contents which are created or accessed by the users to make plan for holidays. This trend is rising along with the rapid growth in internet mobile devices.

## 1.2 Problem statement and purpose of the study

Many researchers have claimed that the UGC (User generated content) play important role in terms of creating online word of mouth also known as E-WOM among the users in tourism industry (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009; Filieri

& McLeay, 2014). Research within the User-generated content in SNS has been conducted in some area of tourism activities. However, it has not been comprehensively studied from multiple perspectives. The researcher with this research project is aiming to understand the recent picture of UGC by analyzing one of the activity based tourism – volunteer tourism in terms of the destination image which is generating through social networking sites.

As it is pointed out earlier that great change in communication via User Generated Contents add more complexity in terms of understanding the image of Nepal as a volunteer destination. This research project is intended to explore the recent ways of communication on Social networking sites. Essentially, it will try to understand the users' opinions, comments and their contents that influence the image of volunteerism in Nepal. Moreover, the researcher aim is to find out the reactions of potential tourists from the basis of UGC, which delivered the impressions about volunteer tourism in Nepal. In the point of departure, the research question is outlined as follows.

***How do User-generated-contents on social networking sites, play role in terms of influencing the perception of volunteer tourists, towards destination Nepal?***

In order to answer the research question, certain types of research approach and methods are going to be pursued. Here are some key methods which are concerned to be the most suitable for this research.

The research is based on the data collected from, widely used social networking site Facebook. Within the Facebook, most relevant topic (volunteer abroad) and community has been chosen in the basis of active and associated numbers of people. The mentioned virtual communities and groups are selected because they are found to be the most recent and relevant topic with the highest numbers of users. Netnography (Online participation observation) type of research is going to be conducted (Kozinets, 2002). Additionally, unstructured interview via SNS will be carried on in order to justify few topics.

## 1.3 Structure of the project

This project contains five main sections. The first section started with the introduction to the research paper.

*Figure 1. Structure of the paper*

The second section elaborate the main methodological considerations which have been adapted during the research process. For example, key methodological approaches, exploratory nature, and qualitative online ethnographic (Netnography) data collection and analysis.

In the third section, introduced the relevant previous studies and theories in the area of User-generated contents, Social Networks sites, Consumer behavior, and destination image from consumer perspectives.

In the fourth section, collected data and online participate observation's reflections are analyzed, discussed and elaborated multiple perspectives.

The last section, it provides the researcher's key developed concepts, findings from the whole process of doing the research.

## 2.0 Literature Review



*Figure 2. Structure of the literature section*

### 2.1 Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites are not a new thing in tourism industry, which shows by the level of presence of tourism players and active users' worldwide (DTTT, 2015). According to Cohen (2011) cited in (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014)*, Social networking sites´ contents depend on information technology which allow* to communicate in-between multiple people in interactive way. Along with the development web 2.0 in within information technology, SNSs have become as an effective platform where people share opinions via text, photo, and video and so on. Web 2.0 technology has been extending the compatibly with newer devices, such as smartphones, tablets and other compact devices. (Think-tank, 2015) presents that SNS users on desktop computer are significantly decreasing and on the other hand, user engagements on SNS on

mobile devices are rapidly growing. Thus, tourism organizations and firms are strategically approaching the various range of applications to communicate with target audiences (Munar, 2012). Practices in terms of the use of new mobile devices by tourism players seem to be highly prioritized in current market (play.google.com). Total users of SNS reached the highest numbers ever since in 2015. (Social network updates - smart insights digital marketing advice.) Reports the popular platforms in following order on the basis of number of users and level of activeness worldwide. Facebook reached 80 percent of users with 42 percent active users, YouTube 60 percent user with 23 percent active users, Twitter 56 percent users with 21 percent active users, Google+ 60 percent users with 20 percent active users. In addition, Instagram, linkedln, Tumblr and Badoo have significant numbers of active users worldwide. Most of the given platforms provide the space and services where people are likely to influence each other with contents within the tourism industry. According to (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014) Social networking sites effects the tourist behavior in multiple stages such as searching for information, practicality, alternative programs etc.

(Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014) points out that tourism marketers and suppliers often create interactive pages on SNSs with the intension of communicating with their products and services. In order to have effective communication with audiences as well as creating dialogues in-between customer to customer, tourism player should use SNS strategically (Munar, 2012).

Recent researches indicate that tourists use SNS in their decision making process of holiday. Tourists are nowadays not only searching for the information on SNS which also depends on selecting the destination. (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014) find out that SNS have played an important role in the tourist behavior when searching, evaluating and sharing information in different online platforms, however the traditional ways of communication should not be forgotten.

(Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014) contrast that SNS influences the perceptions and attitudes of any kinds of tourism activities in terms of product awareness and selection of alternative products. Change on tourists' perceptions and attitudes varies in depending on tourists backgrounds such as nationalities, income, age and education (Ibid). Therefore it is likely that the level of involvement with SNS could be different. For example, a business traveler might use different SNS contents in comparison to a student when planning for the trip. According to (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), young tourists are more engaged and influenced by UGC rather than old tourists. SNS contents became enormous and the growth level is remarkably high. Images, photographs and videos are the most influencing contents among all the other types of contents.

## 2.2 E-WOM

Today's clutter of communication channels, where tourist can directly communicate with both known and unknown people across the globe. The new communication applications in multiple channels allow people to share their experiences in unpredictable size. One person's expression towards services and product can manipulate the behavior of other people's perceptions. According to (Senecal & Nantel, 2004), experience that are recommended by users is more likely to influence potential customer rather than searched products. This might not be applicable for every single type of tourists. Tourist's demographic situation could be different on different product. For example, a wealthy person might not evaluate the basic cost of tickets, accommodation and other costs during the product buying process. Conversely, cost of the products and related services could be an important factor for a student.

(Bieger & Laesser, 2004) highlight that WOM has higher impact, if the communication is in-between family members, relatives and friends. WOM can happen both in personal meeting and via online platforms i.e. social media, email etc. In contrast,

WOM is one of the most effective tools which has recently been emerging with online platforms.

According to (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999), image of a destination can be developed from several sources such as marketers' advertising materials, WOM, physiological travel motivation, tourists' demographic backgrounds etc. Many researchers have not clearly defined the electronic word of mouth (EWOM) as a major source in relation to the development of destination image. In this paper, the researcher is entirely aiming to understand the influence on image of destination Nepal, within a specific activity based (volunteer) tourism. There is very close similarity in-between WOM and EWOM (Bieger & Laesser, 2004). Therefore, it is applicable to take into consideration. Moreover, volunteer tourism play important role in terms of tourist psychological experience motivation (ibid).

## 2.3 Concept of User-generated Content

(Burgess et al., 2011) describe that user-generated content can be produced by any individual who have access to the internet platforms, where they can share opinions about destinations products, services, and attractions and so on, through multiple ways such as text, video, audio etc. The online platforms could be provided by any kinds of direct/in-direct linked with service providers and/or virtual communities (ibid). For example, a destination's official website provide a section for users to interact with the target audiences. (Munar, 2012)  Point out that destination official sites intend for positive response for their offering products. The section in website or other applications, allow users to communicate with other users. On the other hand, various online communities provide essential opportunities for people to communicate with each other. Recent studies within digital marketing present the importance of online communities' platforms that are becoming a part of people's everyday life (DTTT, 2015). User-generated content in tourism industry has been

introduced with the development of Web 2.0, this technology allow people to create and share electronic contents among multiple users in global level (Cox et al., 2009; Munar, 2012).

(Cox et al., 2009) illustrate the numbers of stage and activities in relation with UGC that tourist go through the travel planning process. The stages are categorized in three key stages namely; pre-trip, during trip and post trip. All those stages are associated with relevant activities with UGC. For instance, a tourist get to know and find an interest about the destination on SNS platform Facebook, then starts looking for more information on Facebook and/or other SNS such as services, facilities, prices, accommodations, attractions etc. Tourist also evaluates the destination comparing the other interesting destinations by looking at UGC on different online channels and make a decision to travel to the particular destination. After the trip, tourist is likely to share the opinions, feeling and experience on one or more online platforms. (Cox et al., 2009) provides the basic understanding of tourist planning process. However the framework does not touch on the latest development of online channels and the level of engagements between tourist and widely used UGC platforms. (#DTTT trends report | digital tourism think tank.) Includes the latest development of online platforms in relation to the tourism experience in details. It also discussed how tourist get engaged with different online applications and tools. In the pre-travel stage; tourist engage with interactive websites and social media in terms of being inspired, finding information, decision making , planning and buying process. During the travel; tourist engage with mobile applications, location, social media etc. in terms of interactive communication, direct sharing, navigation and information retrieval. In the post travel stage; the tourist is likely to share experience and express opinions on multiple online platforms such as social Medias, review websites and organizations' websites. All mentioned stages are becoming more complex because of the rapid growth in internet facilities and mobile devices (ibid). Tourists' engagement on producing and consuming content might mostly depends on tourists' demographic background. Moreover, accessibility of the internet in the destination can also make

difference in tourists' engagement with UGC. For example, an adventure tourist who travel to the peripheral area in Nepal might be less engaged with UGC during the travel, in compare with a gastronomy tourist who travel to European city. This could be the reason of destination's facilities, tourist interest and other.

´´UGC was not always deemed as credible as travel company information, more recent studies have shown greater trust in UGC than in information provided by travel company marketing departments." (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014).

## *2.4 User-generated content engagements.*

In order to understand tourist engagement with UGC, it is important to look at how tourists make a decision for their next tourism experience. (Dahlén, Lange, & Smith, 2010) outline seven stages that tourist go through during the decision making process, the stages are arguably set as a *tourist recognize the need, look for information based on their functional or psychological needs, evaluates other similar offerings, make a purchase, consumption/ post purchase evaluation*. UGC can make influences on customer decision making process in all levels. For example, a tourist can recognize the need from the exposer of photos, video which are published by other people on Facebook. In the stage of information search, a tourist might be checking details such as opinions and posts from the people who already have experienced the product. Tourist starts looking other types of products which might be better by evaluating different offers in other suppliers.

### *2.4.1Tourist decision making process*

(Cox et al., 2009) introduced a logical model of tourist decision making process in three major stages. The model put the tourist decision making process in following orders. In the beginning of the process so called pre-decision stage, tourist recognizes

the need and desire to travel. Tourist need and desire might be established from different sources such as friends and relatives recommendations, suppliers advertising materials and/or other personal motivations.

After recognizing the need, tourist starts looking for relevant information. It is completely depending on tourist's background and personal choice in terms of what kinds of contents and where to search for. For instance, if a tourist is seeking for a one year volunteer program abroad, he/she might search the information such as safety, living condition, price, learning possibilities etc. (Cox et al., 2009) found out the fact that approximately 95 percent of internet users rely on information from the web as part of their travel information search process and about 50 percent tourist were highly influenced from the UGC in different stages of travel planning process.

When tourist defines the types of products and decide to take travel program, further start at looking the alternative programs to find the most attractive deals. In this stage, tourist tend to purchase the right offer. (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014) identified that the ratio of online purchase is incredibly higher than last couple of years before. Tourist is more likely to purchase the product in the case when they have received the references from their circle on SNS.

Another model presented by (Hudson and dahl) has some similarity in consumer decision making process. Authors have divided decision making process in four major stages namely; (1) Consider, (2) Evaluate, (3) Buy and (4) Enjoy/Advocate/Bond. At the consider stage, tourist get exposed by different source materials that inspire him/her to travel the destination. After being inspired with such a destination or related tourism activities, tourist look for other source materials to compare and find the best option available. At the buying stage, tourist make a clear mind and purchase the products and services. In this stage, supplier's presence play an important role. If there are multiple distributers for one travel experience product,

tourist buys depending on what they find to be interesting among all offers. At the last stage, tourist shares his/her experience with other people. It also likely that tourist take a part in dialogues on SNS.

### 2.4.2 Planning phase

According to Google (2014), approximately 65 percent leisure travelers rely on internet sources during the travel decision making process. Travelers get the travel inspiration though SNS in the highest level among other online platforms. For instance, 83 percent travelers get inspiration from SNS; search engines 61 percent; travel reviews sites 42 percent; destination-specific sites 31 percent (Ibid). (Fotis et al., 2012) contrast that social networking sites play significant role when travelers search for making choice of destination. Travelers look for different types of contents on SNS, it depends on travelers own interest. Contents on SNS could be from the marketers who have made specific page to interact with customer and other independent pages such as interest based community, personal opinion etc. (Senecal & Nantel, 2004) found that travelers tend to look for what other people have said about such kind of services. Therefore the comments, reviews and responses of people who already have experienced the tourism products can influence the tourist behavior especially during the planning process. Similarly, (Burgess et al., 2011) identified that tourists are highly using the contents on SNS to search information and evaluating the alternatives.

### 2.4.3 During the travel experience

The use of smartphone and other internet handy devices are growing exceptionally fast in the last few years. Current study shows that internet mobile device users are greater than desktop computer users (Bosomworth, 2015). Mobile

devices allow tourist to share their feelings through SNS with anyone around the world. For example, a tourist takes a picture and write about what he/she is doing while experiencing any kinds tourism products. (DTTT, 2015) estimates that 4.5 billion people will have mobile phone with the internet access and 85 Percent of them will have 3G internet access and 60 percent of them will have 4G high speed internet access. Tourist uses all other kinds of devices while they are on vacation but mobile devices are comparably more used by tourists. (Burgess et al., 2011) revealed that travelers search for relevant information while they are on vacation. For example, a tourist is on a destination where he/she looks for attractions and activities which are happening nearby. According to (Fotis et al., 2012), tourist use SNS in order to connect and share their experience with friends and families.

### 2.4.4 After the experience

The recent study by (DTTT, 2015) illustrated that travelers' engagement with SNS is somehow similar in the experience stage and after the experience. For example, travelers share photos/videos, telling story, writing review, check in location, comments etc. Level of engagement after the experience of travelling might be different than during the experience, because of the various reasons such as internet facility, time, and tourist behavior and so on. Digital travel index (2013), as cited in (DTTT, 2015) found out some of the motivational factors that travelers create the contents on SNS. These are in following orders; intend to be seen by friends and families, persuade to get involved, rewarded loyalty, accessibility on mobile device and location experience. Recent research indicates that more than 50 percent of travelers post photos and video on SNS after their experience of their holiday (ibid).

## 2.5 Destination image and tourist behavior

(Pike & Ryan, 2004) point out that image is peoples' beliefs, ideas and impressions towards destination. Image is something about how customer think about such a destination rather what destination think itself. Therefore the image of one destination could vary in different people's mind. A comprehensive research is important for a destination in order to pursue marketing planning in target market/group. (Beerli & Martin, 2004) emphasis that image of the destination highly influences consumer behavior. Therefore it is essential to understand how consumer react with the destination. Process of understanding the consumer behavior could be complex because image involves different perceptions which are associated with people's feelings and knowledges. People's connections with image are divided in two ways; Cognitive – tourist's personal knowledge about destinations offerings, and affective - tourist feeling towards destination (ibid).

(Baloglu & McCleary, 1999) further discuss that destination image is mainly formed from personal factors namely; social and psychological factors and external stimulus such as previous experience and information sources. User generated contents on social networking sites can be interrelated in terms of tourist perception towards destination. For example, tourist who have knowledge and/ or experienced the destination can express feelings via SNS and people who are in the phase of inspiration/planning, can get influenced when selecting the destination.

Many studies show the consumer behavior in various perspectives, one of the widely use model was developed by (Mayo and Jarvis 1981) in relation to the influences on travel decision maker. Mayo and Jarvis categorized it in two factors namely; Social factors and psychological factor that are affected when tourist make

decision to choose the destination. Social factors are described in terms of culture, subculture, social classes, Role of and family influence and references groups that tourist is primarily belongs with. Psychological factors are described as tourist´s individual personality, perception, attitudes, motives and learning (Mayo and Jarvis, 1981, as cited in Bowen and Clarke, 2009). It is difficult to understand the consumer behavior of tourist because tourism involves many different types of products and services and there are several factors that affects every individual in terms of selecting a destination to travel. (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007) explain that tourist personal factors such as knowledge of the destination, personal income, leisure activities preference and external factors such as social environment, interaction with media and marketing plays a role in decision making.

(Mathieson and wall, 1982 as cited in Bowen & Clarke, 2009), point out the factors that are influencing in different categories. In the beginning phase, tourist finds need and travel desire with personal or environmental influences such as income level, traveling trend in the culture he/she belong too. In the second phase tourist look for relevant destination and evaluate according to the desire. Then evaluate the available destinations regarding price, facilities, distance etc. and select the destination for travel. In the next phase, tourist experiences the destination and perceive the level of satisfaction.

There are more studies that have been conducted about how a tourist make decision to experience the destination. Engel et al, 1993 as cited in (Bowen & Clarke, 2009) contrast the decision process in these pattern. Tourist get stimulated by marketers and other sources, tourist receive information via different ways such as advertisements, friends/family etc. then decision process by searching more desirable details, other similar destinations which influence them in different factors such as, environment and individual priorities. Similarly (Schmoll 1977), recommend three factors that influence tourist to make decision to travel to the destination.

Above mentioned studies outlines some similar factors that influences on tourist behavior associated with destinations. All of the authors categorized and described main influencing factors on tourist were presented differently. In contrast, studies where focus is about how a tourist thinks, feels, senses and select a specific product experience. How the culture, atmosphere, media channels influences tourist decision making process. In addition, tourist individual knowledge, experience and other kinds of information can play significant roles to motivate tourist for specific destination and associated experiences.

Sirgy & Su (2000) argues that image of destination can be examined with two category of attributes namely; functional and symbolic. Functional attribute of destination include the physical benefits such as accommodation, price, transportation, attraction etc. of the destination. Symbolic attributes include the attributes such as personal stereotype image of the destination for example, tourist might have heard from friends, media or his/her own experiences. (Sirgy & Su, 2000) further explains four types of self-images; 1) actual image, 2) ideal self-image 3) social self-image 4) ideal social self-image that are important in terms of understanding consumer behavior of tourist. These self-images might not be applicable for all kinds of tourist in all situation. However, this emphasis on some of the significant factors that motivates tourist to travel to the destination. For example, actual self-image depends on how a tourist characterizes him/herself that leads for interest of specific destination. The ideal self-image depends on what a tourist want to be. The social-self-image is concerned with what could be seen by other people in the society.  The ideal social self-image depends with tourist prestige in the society that is related to his/her involvement in a destination. According to (Sirgy & Su, 2000) if the tourist compare multiple destinations, there is likely for the destination to be chosen which matches the most with his/her self-image. Moreover, authors point out that tourist consider direct function of destination such as natural attractions, historical

architectures, quality of services, location, transport and other tourism facilities, price of the relevant services and products and advertisements, media etc.

There are tangible factors of a destination that tourist can see and touch as well as intangible factors that tourist only can feel and sense. However it is difficult to understand the intangible factors especially, on what extend tourist put priorities on those things.

## 3.0 Methodology

This chapter starts by shortly explaining different research approaches and describe which one have been applied in the research paper. The following section is focused on research philosophies and approaches that have been used. In the next part motivation to the choice of theory and methodology is made. Afterwards, the research strategy is presented. Thereafter, the operationalization of all the dimensions



*Figure 3. Structure of methodology section.*

are made. The sample's ethical consideration are presented in this chapter. The chapter ends with concepts validity, reliability and generalization.
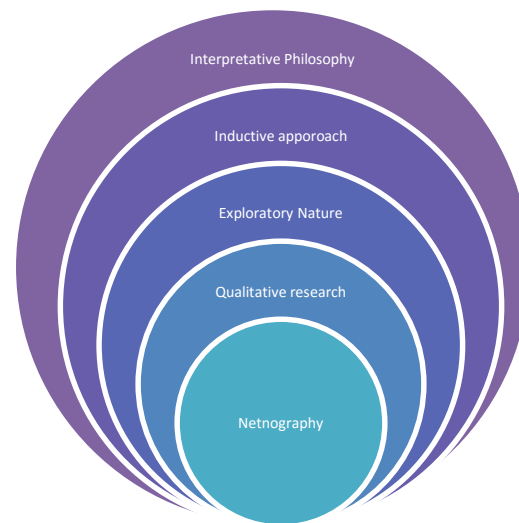
## *3.1 Research Philosophy*

(Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009), explain a comprehensive research design in multiple layers so called '' the research onion''. Research onion layers have different elements which are based on research philosophies, methodical choices, strategies, time horizon and techniques and procedures. In this paper, the researcher have considered the logical order and touch upon important layers of research onion (ibid).

This paper seeks to understand the tourist behavior by observing dialogues, interactions, experiences, opinions etc. Therefore researcher takes an interpretive approach in order to discover some sort of impression that is created in Social Networking Sites (Gray, 2013; Saunders et al., 2009). The physiological perspective of researcher in this paper has been established to observe peoples ways of communication such as languages, meanings, interests and reactions. Researcher does not make any hypothesis of understanding the context in research problem. According to (Saunders et al., 2009), it is important to understand people's role and their perceptions in order to get insight of social activities.

The researcher keeps in mind of understanding, people who are presence in SNS. People on SNS are considered as source of data to answer the research question. An epistemological philosophy is followed to gain knowledge of this project.

## *3.2 Inductive approach*

In terms of reasoning the knowledge of this research paper, researcher has taken an inductive approach. In this approach, researcher carried out the project on the basis of observation and understating the patterns (McGivern, 2009). Some of the Social Networking Sites namely; Facebook, YouTube and individual blogs have been

observed. Thereafter, followed the common patterns in the use of UGC. Since the problem area has been recognized, relevant theory have been used to expand the understating within the research problem. In other words, knowledge from the observation have been tested by theory during the research process (Saunders et al., 2009). Conversely, research can be pursued by making theoretic concept and then making hypothetical assumptions to find out deeper understanding, which is called deductive approach (ibid). Deductive approach is not relevant in this project because the researcher has focused to explore probability of people's influences towards a destination that is not identified in the point of departure. Meaning that the researcher was unknown about peoples engagement on SNS might or might not influence the perception of volunteer tourism activity in Nepal.

### 3.3 Research Approach

As it is discussed earlier, that researcher embarked the project with a very little knowledge about the problem. Problem is formulated on the basis of early stage of observation and researcher personal experience on previous research projects during the study process. (Saunders et al., 2009) argue that researcher get challenged in terms of finding the right direction during the research process because the research area could be changed along with the development of deeper understanding of the context. In the beginning of this project, key research points have been outlined, for example user-generated-content, social networking sites, consumer perception, and volunteer tourism in Nepal. Previous knowledge in those areas had been examined and continued building knowledge throughout the next stages. According to (McGivern, 2009), exploratory is a flexible approach which allow researcher to adapt theories and data collection methods as well as re-structure the research problem formulation.

'' A type of online or internet, ethnography; Netnography provides guidelines for the adaptation of participant – observation procedures to the contingencies of online community and culture that manifest through computer-mediated communications." (Kozinets, 2010)'' Netnography research has some similarities with ethnography research technique. Both research technique involve researcher direct and/or in-direct participation observation, where researcher seek to understand the people's emotions, languages, reactions, cultures etc. (Kozinets, 2010). However, netnography research process and researchers' engagement with informants seems to be different. For example, Netnography research can only be done via online platforms such as SNSs, online communities, websites and video/audio hosting sites (ibid).  It is obviously depends on researcher's purpose of the study as well as nature of the study in terms of selecting a kind of method (Saunders, et al. 2009). In this study, researcher aim to understand tourist behavior on Social Networking Sites. In addition, to deeply understand people engagements with SNS and interaction within the online community are essential for researcher to identify peoples' perception towards Nepal as a volunteer tourist destination. (Kozinets, 2010), argues that netnography is the best practice in terms of understanding online community such as peoples choices, view, opinion etc.

(Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets, 2010) outlined the netnography research process grouped in four stages which are as follows: entrée, data collection, analysis and interpretation and research ethics.

Entrée:  This is the beginning step in terms of conducting the research when researcher need to identify the most relevant online community in regards to the research question. Researcher took a point of departure by searching volunteer activity based online platforms. Facebook is the most popular SNS in current stage therefore started searching using key words namely; ''Volunteer Nepal'', Volunteer program abroad'', '' Volunteering''. After a comprehensive search and evaluation with the consideration of relevancy, data traffic and large number of members in the

research area, "International volunteer HQ" an open online community fully based on volunteer tourism activity has been selected. In addition, community members and their online activities have been selected in the level of members' interaction with the volunteer tourism activities in Nepal (ibid). Netnographer can get in the part of the community as a professional lurker (Kozinets, 2010). Researcher send a request to the group to be a member. The community was a public group, but needed to be accepted by the administrator. Researcher, started direct observations since August 2015. Sentiment of the community has been kept in mind therefore, researcher did not published any kinds of contents. However, followed the conversations in daily basis as well as notified with appreciation "like and comments".

Data Collection: Researcher encountered a very large volume of relevant data such as community members' text conversations, symbolic agreements so called "Like", comments and sharing information. In order to cover the maximum data, data collection process has been designed strategically (McGivern, 2006). Therefore, all the conversations have been categorized in several themes, codes and time frame. Thereafter, regularly copied the data into multiple theme sections. According to (Kozinets, 2002), netnographer can collect data in two ways namely; copy/download contents and make note based on researcher's own observation. Netnography research should be carried out with consistent observation of the community (Bryman, 2012). After the selection of online community in August 2015 "International Volunteer HQ" researcher regularly took notes, memos and codes and interlinked with downloaded archival data (Kozinets, 2010; Kozinets, 2015). Researcher took advantage of flexibility of netnography, previous online interactions within Facebook group have been collected. Qualitative data involves people's opinions, feelings, language, culture and their different meanings.

In order to clarify and justify the data which have collected through direct and in-direct observation and archival data, Nvivo 10 qualitative research software has

been used. Nvivo software allowed researcher to enter and update data in regular basis in a scientific way. In the Nvivo software, data have been stored along with the fundamental understanding of literature section. This study look for the community act on volunteer tourism in relation to destination Nepal, rather than how many people talk about Nepal. Therefore, Themes were created in a sense that has the nearest connections in terms of influencing the destination image throughout interaction in-between community members. For Instance, members stages of traveling has been categorized (Cox et al., 2009). Meaning that whether a community member is in travel decision making process, evaluating destinations, during travel experience and after travel experience. All the stages have been sub-categorized into numbers of themes so called nodes has been created in Nvivo. Netnography method has been adapted in order to understand the in-depth meaning of community activity though languages, dialogues and other activities. In contrast, researcher did not directly evaluate the data from exact worlds that members were talking, but rather tried to understand symbolic and textual meanings (Bremen, 2012).

Research ethics: Kozinets (2002; 2010) highly emphasis to be careful with the ethics of online community therefore provide the guidelines of main concerns when doing a netnography research. Guidelines includes, getting permission from the community, handling members privacy and practice member checks including the member feedback from member of the community (ibid). The risk factors of all these terms have been considered in the very early phase of the research project. Since the "International Volunteer HQ'' online community is a public group, it was very easy to join the group and the administration allowed to carry out research with the agreement of not violating any personal data from the community. In addition, researcher was only allowed to use the result for academic purpose. However, every single member of the community may/may not be aware of research project because the members have been increasing from the inception of this project.

It has been possible for researcher to inform every single member of the group therefore researcher tried to minimize direct quote from the member. Meaning that the researcher rather outlined and present the meaning of multiple users. Fortunately, the project's aim is to understand the combined meanings and behavior but not a single person's exact view. Moreover, in order to make sure not to violate privacy, all the archival data are not included in the paper and it will only be provided to examiner(s) of this dissertation.

## 4.0 Analysis, Results and discussions

In this section of the paper, researcher is going to present the collected data and analyze it in different stages. In regards to the nature of the research, data collection and research question, researcher discovered a complexity of presenting data in multiple sub-sections because all the collected data both based on archival data and observational data are
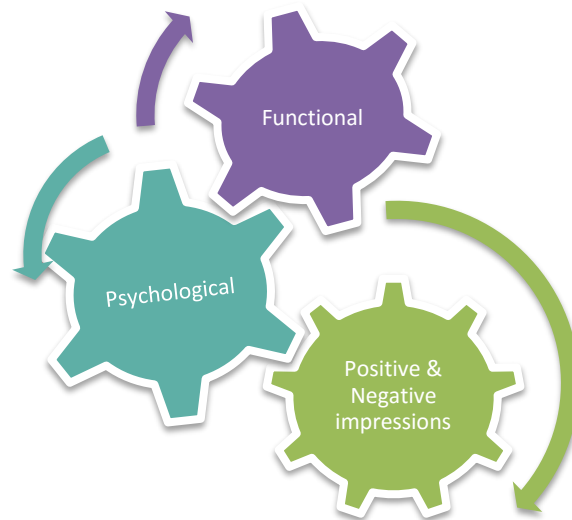
*Figure 4. Structure of an analysis and discussion section.*

interrelated in different explanations. However, analysis will be simplified as much as possible.

In the beginning, online community member's tourism experience phase will be categorized in following different phases; pre-experience- members who have not experienced volunteer tourism in Nepal, During experience – members who are experiencing by the time data have been collected, and After experience- members who have had experience with volunteer activity. The reason for these categorizations is to identify deeper understanding of tourist behavior in all levels rather than combining into one group. It will also expect to provide bigger picture of online interactions.

As mentioned all three phases of tourism experiences will be analyzed in relation to members dialogues, texts, sharing, photos and videos as well as their level of activities and cultural value which observed by researcher (Kozinets, 2010). In the next step, all types of interactions in-between all members in online community will be examined by their meanings with theoretical concept namely; physiological and functional attributes(Agapito et al., 2013). It will also look into multiple norms and values that are connected with the image of volunteer tourism in Nepal.

In this section, researcher adapt the interpretive approach in terms of presenting data (Kozinets, 2015). Interpretive approach is going to pursue by not only what members of the community are talking about volunteer activities but also reflect researcher's own meanings, observational experience, associated values and tourist behavior in multiple angle. In addition, process of the interpretation will involve researcher's imagining, re-memorizing, abduction, visual abstraction, ratifying and cultural decoding (ibid).

*Note: - Researcher considered the privacy of community members, therefore person's name is not cited in the text. In order to navigate the reader, only the name codes are cited. Codes are created in following simple way,*

*First letter of a person's first name/username and first letter of a person's last name/username.*
*For example:*

*To refer: -                      MR. Sundar Bhusal, is cited as **(SB).***
*Another example, to refer: - MRS. Simona Cecil Simonsen, is cited as **(SS)**. ( the middle name is disregarded)*

*Full names and their exact comments/interactions are available in appendix section.*

### 4.1 Functional factors

Destination image is associated with tourist's knowledge and mind set up about destination attributes (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Pike & Ryan, 2004). During the research process, there are some impressions that have been generated through communication in-between tourists on Facebook group "International Volunteer HQ".

Most of the people seem to be highly concerned with destination's situation by the time they are expecting to travel to Nepal. There have been enquiries when tourists were in the stage of planning their volunteer program. (Ø, July) ask, *How is the condition in Nepal?* There have been mixed responds to the questions from tourist who have had volunteer experience in Nepal and those who did not. (JD) replies as follows.

''I have heard that even most hotels are still open, but a friend of mine there is reporting landslides. So not sure what to expect."

This comment on Facebook gives an impression that volunteer tourism activities are not excluded from other mainstream tourism activities in relation to the destination's infrastructures, facilities and services. The respondent's question reflects some sort of worries, perhaps through other media which might have been exposed to a tourist. Commenter, in the other hand, seems to have fair knowledge about destination and the real condition at the destination. The respondent's referring to someone he knows very close and his comment indicate both positive and negative impression to the member in the community. (JL)Another user puts similar thoughts as follows.

> "I was helping in Nepal two weeks ago, back home now. All good, was a bit chaotic at the airport but should be better now" (JL)

This statement also gives slightly positive aspects of Nepal but also some indication of bad infrastructure and services. Her expression here is based on her experience and telling her opinion to others. (Agapito et al., 2013) refer that peoples who had experience, shares his/her opinion can influence the image of destination. The researcher had observed the interaction in-between the members who had asked the question (during the decision making process) and members who have had experience (after the experience). Conversation was frequently responded by each other. Interestingly, it has been noticed that people who have had volunteer experience in Nepal were enthusiastic to share their experience and give advices. (JL) Further explain her experience and advises in detail.

> "Things are alright in Kathmandu but if you're heading to the villages, there may be food & water shortage. Bring water purification tablets (I didn't need to use but had brought some), flashlight (electricity does not run 24 hrs)" (JL)

Commenter express strongly and input some of the destination physical attributes that may effects tourist decision making process. This may effect members

mind if she/he was concerned with the facilities that are available in the destination. This comment does not necessarily gives the impression of bad image about Nepal but provide practical information which may help to prepare for the trip. In contrast, given comment creates an image in mind of pre-experience travelers, that Nepal lacks basic facilities namely; fresh drinking water, food and electricity.

Researcher has observed more interactions in-between community members from different phases of their experience with volunteer program in Nepal. One of the comments regarding the question in the early phase of decision making was responded as following.

"If you're going with a NGO organization, get a letter to certify. There's a counter for NGO's and you get thru customs faster. Apply for the visa online before departing. Change money before exiting Customs or at Thamel, Kathmandu. Visit Patan before you leave. Watch where you walk coz the roads are pretty terrible (pot holes, not proper roads)"

This comment elaborate even further details about how the situation is in Nepal. Airport facilities, attractions and transportation has been indicated to be taken into consideration for those who are planning to travel to Nepal. For example, "pot holes and not proper roads" refer to the comfortless travel experience throughout the country. In other key words "Apply Visa" and "Change Money" highlights the certain procedure which may need to be considered such as a tourist need to have cash to purchase things and credit cards payment system may not be available everywhere. After making decision to take a volunteer program in Nepal, (AS) requests some specific advices for mountain trekking activities. Mountain trekking is not directly a part of volunteer program. However, volunteer tourism is also associated with other tourism activities, services and facilities (Wearing, 2001). (KR)'s perceptual/cognitive evaluation comment seems to be very influencing other

members in terms of selecting Nepal as destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). She replies on Facebook with this suggestions:

> "I wouldn't recommend the trek in January anyway. I went in early November and developed a bit of a chest infection on the way down. Fortunately the doctors clinics were still set up but they were closing within the next few weeks as the trekking season ends in December. It's doable throughout the year but weather conditions and lack of resources outside the season make it much harder"

Her own experience and perception represent the holistic functional attributes about trekking in particular area (Pike & Ryan, 2004). Nevertheless, it does not apply to other trekking routes. It is also depending on how other members in the community perceive the comment. Whether it is difficult to do trekking in that area? Or is it everywhere? How about her health background? Did she had previous experience with trekking? This kinds of questions could be evaluated by the users. She also outlined the necessity of medical help which is the indication of adventure. In overall, her comments raise the importance of seasonal factor when travelling to Nepal.

### 4.2 Psychological factors

Researcher observed various range of psychological factors such as people's feelings and emotional values during the research process. Psychological factors are very difficult to standardize because members were expressing their thoughts, level of enjoyments and sentiments throughout the communicative interactions. Before we analyze we need to consider that the community members have had various cultural, demographic and economic background. Therefore, variation on thoughts seems to be natural. Researcher took various opinions and in some level tried to understand

the languages as well as their emotional attachment with image of destination Nepal. Some of the members who were in pre-experience phase, were asking questions as follows:

"I was planning on going with volunteer Nepal - all depending on if the programs are up and running again after the quake"(BV)
"How are things with the quake?" (JD)
"How's the current situation in Nepal?" (AJ)
"Hi D##P## I am going to Nepal next year. Can you give me some info?? How was your time there? Is it safe?" (PC)
 "Hey A ##, I am planning to go to Nepal on January, can you give me some tips? How is it after the earthquake??" (PC)

Table 1. Common types of psychological inquiries on Facebook.

These inquiries gives an impression that tourists have had some sort of sentiments regarding natural disaster earthquake, which occurred in April 2015 (bbcnews, 2015).  All mentioned comments related with safety issues surrounded with earthquake. Meaning that the image of Nepal in the basis of psychological attributes have recently became one of the main concern for the tourist during the decision making process (Cox et al., 2009). All the members seems to be in different stages of planning their volunteer program abroad.  For instance, some of them are in the process of scanning the important information, some are evaluating Nepal with other alternative destination, and the rest members are seeking details about how to prepare for their already confirmed volunteer program in Nepal. When members were asking about the safety issues in Nepal, there were no direct information about how and where they have heard about safety problems. It only reflects uncertain worries with their writing style.

The effects of UGC through EWOM are found to be quite influential in this case (Fotis et al., 2012). For instance, members of the community could have easily accessed information from Nepal's tourism official website and other online and print media.

The understanding evolve here by asking why those members of the community want to hear from other members. One of the reason could be that the people who have had experience could give real information. On the other hand, Nepal's official website might be providing only the limited and positive side of destination attributes because official websites are likely to be established for promotional activities (Park & Gretzel, 2007).

In relation to the psychological inquiries that are responded by the members' cognitive and conative image of destination Nepal has been observed and found both positive and negative reactions (Fotis et al., 2012). Those respondents' opinions indicate how the image of destination Nepal is forming in the groups of people who have had experienced but also to the groups who did not have any volunteer experience in Nepal. Some of the respondents' opinions were observed as follows:

> "I just watched a friends video from there at the exact time of the 2nd quake. Cleaned up, crashed again!. There would be post traumatic for sure. They are positive but need soo much help!. People living in makeshift tents with a stick n rocks holding them..made me cry.." (JH)

His opinion is based on what he was exposed by a video content via EWOM. This comment is one example of, how UGC is linked in multiple online platforms(Burgess et al., 2011). (JH) did not even experienced himself but he shared what he had in his mind about destination Nepal. The comment underlines two significant factors namely; sentimental storytelling which may encourage people who are willing to help, to take volunteer program. On the other hand, conveying a message of devastating situation which may create fear to travel to Nepal.

However, the credibility, relevancy and truths could be questionable, which will be discussed later in the next section.

Another respondent (MR) puts similar description regarding the situation in Nepal.

> "I'd be cautious of Nepal, Yes they need help but there is a lot happening there at the moment not all good. I was recently there not with IVHQ Tho. You can pm me if you want more details." (MR)

She also points out that there is disturbances in whole infrastructure and livelihood. She took active participation in terms of conveying message to other members in the community. It seems like she does not know members personally but she is very keen to share her experience and perception. As it is mentioned earlier, researcher tried to understand meanings of members' interaction in different stage of tourism experience. (LS) Responded while she was doing volunteer program in Nepal.

> "I'm in Pokhara Nepal now. I've been here for 5 weeks and have 3 weeks left.(yes, I went through the earthquakes.) I'm doing the childcare program and also teaching English at a local school. I would recommend Pokhara cuz it is safe here" (LS)

Her comments may have a stronger influence to the other members in the community because her story provides the picture of updated current situation (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). For instance, those who have travelled three months ago explains what he/she had experience by that time. Thereby, the condition now in Nepal is different as compared to few months before. The comment reveals such information that not all part of the country is devastated so there are places where tourist feel safe and enjoying their volunteer experience.

Researcher observed the changes in topics and frequency of communication level over the different periods of time. For example, there were more inquiries and discussions relating to earthquake topic before the summer season and the discussion related to earthquake gradually declined in the winter season. (See

appendix). Discussion about such a topic gives an impression that people slowly disregard the past event and therefore get updated with new circumstances. This kind of pattern in tourist behavior could be an advantage for national tourism board and other tourism players to re-develop the image of Nepal. On the other hand, it signifies the importance of consistent marketing activities strategically via online platforms (Munar, 2012).

During the last few months, respondents who have had volunteer experience in Nepal, shared relatively positive thoughts in the community. Remarkably, earthquake 2015 is found to be least discussed by members where emotional sentiments have been declining.

(AL) answered to the inquirer as following;

> "Hey B###! Overall had an fab time in Nepal - met some amazing people so don't worry about travelling alone" (AL)

Similarly, another respondent express her feelings in this way.

> "I've been to Nepal twice now, and my heart aches to get back over there. Such an incredible place with the kindest and most generous people" (TJ)

Both comments emphasis that Nepal consists of rich cultural resources. Because the ''amazing people'', '' generous people'' gives the meaning that the Nepalese society is friendly, unique and welcoming for tourists. To be noted, respondents meanings are indexical and symbolic interpretation by researcher which reflects own knowledge and cultural background (Pennington & Thomsen, 2010). Therefore, it could give different meanings to members of the community. According to the conversations, the culture and people seems to be the most satisfactory factor among the visitors. This comment adds more clarification

> "Nepal is truly an amazing place. The culture, the food and most importantly the people. They need us right now." (MR).

She has connected Nepal with some sort of empathy, even though she did not mentioned whether she had experienced any trouble in people of Nepal.

### *4.3. Semiotic Analysis of a UGC video*

A video posted by Kris Michelle Hugo, on Facebook community page (IVHQ) in November 2015 with the title "A little video of my 4 weeks in Nepal" will be deconstructed and analyzed in order to understand the messages which are likely to convey through user generated video content on social media channels. Video content and its containing elements such as sign, object, sound and color can represent the sense of destination's offerings, attractions, and culture etc. (Pennington & Thomsen, 2010). Therefore, all the elements will be interpreted from the researcher point of view. The interpretation of this video will be based on iconic, indexical and symbolic meanings (ibid).The video is available in following links. https://www.facebook.com/groups/volunteerhq/search/?query=Nepal (Please scroll down to the date 12 November 2015.)And/or https://vimeo.com/145363465

In the beginning of the video, a spanning scene of local streets and people are captured. This gives a clear view of how a city in Nepal looks like. It includes houses and transportation which are quite unique in comparison to the Western world. Therefore the architecture of the city is distinguished from other places. Afterward, the video shows a traditional dance and identical costumes. This has a symbolic meaning of unique culture as well as, what really is happening in Nepal. An elephant ride in the river could be a symbol of unusual experience and availability of forest/Jungle tour facilities. Goats playing in the middle of road in remote area, gives an impression that tourist can experience unexpected and unseen things. A girl taking

hands out of a vehicle, symbolizes the freedom. A mountain scenario from an aeroplane could be an example of what tourists can see and do in Nepal. It also indicate the exceptional natural beauty and geographical mystery. A group of people hanging together and listening live music, describe the cozy, happy and friendly livelihood. Two persons using smartphones while riding in a single bike, express the craziness and unbounded fun. This could also give an impression of unsafe traffic system. Young local girls dancing in a hall, shows the harmony in peoples lifestyle. A nightclub video illustrate the mixed culture and varieties of leisure activities in Nepal. At the end, a glass of water doing cheers with the clear view of mountain give a meaning of purity and untouched destination. This video is more like a mainstream tourism activities rather than a volunteer activities. Despite several tourism activities and attractions, content did not showed how it to be as a volunteer experience is.

### 4.4 Tourists before experience

According to the empirical data and researcher's online participated observation, the highest numbers of topics were based on those members who were in the stage of pre-stage and/or consider phase (Cox et al., 2009; Hudson & Thal, 2013) . The results showed that most of the communications begun by an inquirer asking questions and answered
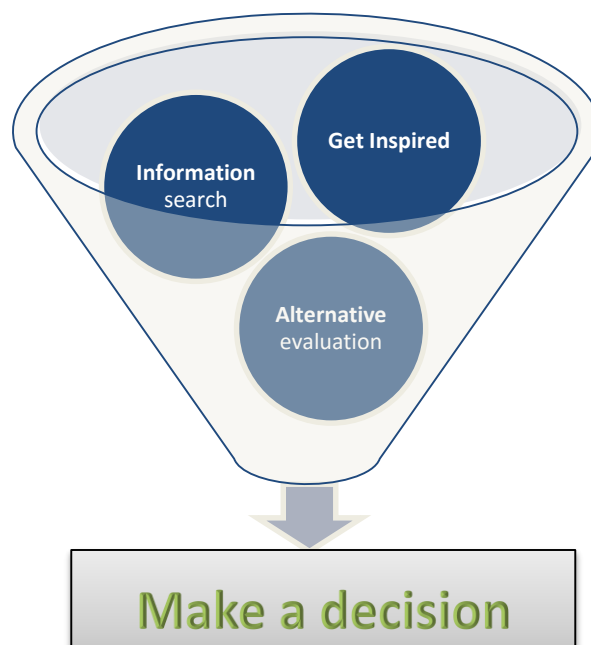


*Figure 5. Tourist engagement with SNS during the phase of decision making process:*

by members who have had experience with Volunteering in Nepal. However, there were also members who were answering without any volunteer experience. As it is discussed in the literature section of this paper, tourist go through process such as getting inspired to travel, searching for detail information and evaluating alternative products/ services/ destinations.

In the pre-experience phase, it is observed that people were getting inspiration to travel to Nepal ´through communicating directly with each other, with the exposed of UGC such as photos, videos and texts that were posted by other members (Filieri & McLeay, 2014).

Researcher took numbers of benchmarks to understand whether members get influenced by UGC in terms of getting inspired to travel to Nepal. One of the benchmarks is Facebook's "Like" bottom system. Facebook "Like" bottom is a symbol of appreciation and acknowledgement of a content. Additionally, numbers of responds/ comments and its frequencies have been followed.

One tourist who already made a decision to do volunteer program in Nepal, seeks some advices regarding how to be better prepared for her stay.

> "Has anyone gone to Nepal to volunteer, I am going in January and need some advice on suitable clothing to take? : ))" (BH)

Respondents stated commenting promptly right after few minutes. This indicates the communication is quite active.  This is one of the advantages for tourist because they can get relevant information already in few minutes. It might not even be that fast getting information about destination offerings on official website and other suppliers.

(BH) comments had been appreciated by (12 likes) and 23 reactions/comments within one day. Comments were mixed of all kinds, those who are also planning to travel to Nepal, those who have had confirmed their trip, those who had share their experience. On a same day, replies (ST),

"I am going in January too", "AH I'm going in May/June to volunteer, let me know how it goes"

"Oh I'm going in February, and any advice would be good. Thanks".

These comments gives us an interesting understanding about how UGC is circulating around the globe in just a moment (Filieri & McLeay, 2014). Through the SNS (in this case Facebook) people are able to discuss with other who are planning to travel to the same destination discussing each other before the trip.

| Get inspired | Anybody for Nepal?<br>I was thinking sept/oct (BV) |
| --- | --- |
| Information search | Hey there! I've been thinking about volunteering in Nepal and I was wondering if anyone has information regarding organizations, dates, etc... Any help would be appreciated (KS<br><br>Please share your experience. I'll be there in Jan. Good luck to all of you (AS)<br><br>Hey everyone Thinking about doing the remote health post work program in Nepal in January. Just wondering if anyone has done this particular program and what they thought of it (PW)<br><br>Have you done the medical program in Nepal? If so, please comment - I'm interested but I have questions! (MC)<br><br>Hey A##, I am planning to go to Nepal on January, can you give me some tips? How is it after the earthquake?? (PC) |
| Alternative evaluation | Hi                                                                                      everyone!<br>Just wondering if anyone here has participated in the medical projects in Zambia, Tanzania, or the rural medical post in Nepal? Any experiences, thoughts or recommendations?<br><br>Would love to hear to from you. (MM)<br>I'm seriously stuck in where to go, such a hard decision but I may be steering towards Nepal. Has anyone had any experiences with Nepal? Thanks (SS)<br><br>Hey Guys I need help! where should I go for 4 weeks, would love to hear from you about childcare program in South Africa Cape town and childcare in Nepal and for how long you volunteered And would love to know if there is anyone starting this November or will be already there<br>(MK) |

need help!! I'm having trouble deciding wether to volunteer in Laos orNepal, I'm going to do childcare either way but just wanted some feedback from any
of you guys that have been to either one of these countries and maybe that will help me decide (SN)
Hey, has anyone been to India-Delhi/or Nepal? How did it go?

And will anyone be planning to go next year, say around summer?
I'm still deciding whether i'll go to delhi or nepal in mid july. When are you thinking of going?
Has anyone done a medical volunteer programme in Nepal or Vietnam? Can't choose! Also anyone planning one for this year? (GH)

I'm seriously stuck in where to go, such a hard decision but I may be steering towards Nepal. Has anyone had any experiences with Nepal? (SS)

**Make a decision**

**After making decision**

Heading to Nepal on the 14th June, just wondering if anyone else will be there during my trip? (OF)

Thanks Jess P Lim do you recommend I take anything specific or any other recommendations?

I'm coming from the UK by myself so it would be nice to get to know a few people beforehand

My friend and I are planning on going to Nepal in the the fall this year. We are going into childcare and are trying to learn as much as we can before we go. Does anyone have any tips or advice? Or is anyone else planning on going to Nepal? (AF)

I'm also planning on going to Nepal in the fall! Also stuck on whether I should leave in October or November (LW)

Hello I will be traveling from Philadelphia, PA to Nepal in late January, working in childcare. Any thoughts or feedback on which airline? Thanks! (AS)

Hey guys! Heading to Nepal in a couple of days for the childcare program! Much excitement...(some worries though :P)
Anyone going or been there?
Any last minute tips? (GC)

Hi D### P## I am going to Nepal next year. Can you give me some info?? How was your time there? Is it safe? What about the accommodation? (PC)

Ah I'm going in May/June to volunteer, let me know how it goes (TN)

*Table 2. Overview of online members' discussions during the pre-experience phase.*

Above presented in table 2, provides an overview the types of topics, inquiries and other interactions during the pre-stage of volunteer experience in Nepal. Conversations in the table is outlined in order to understand the patterns and overall impression that has been delivered through Facebook group. More members' interactions is available below in the appendix section (under *pre-experience phase*) of this paper.

The findings discovered that, tourists who are in the pre-experience phase, use Facebook to get more information about Nepal's current situation, facilities, attractions, practicalities, volunteer programs etc. Research has also identified the fact that, highest numbers of tourists rely on Social Networking sites after they have already decided/confirmed their trip, in comparing with *information search* and *evaluation of alternative destinations*. It has been observed that tourists joined Facebook group to make sure before make a decision to purchase a trip. Therefore, tourists who were interested in travelling to Nepal, were asking to the group about questions which might support them to make the decision. During the pre-experience phase, it was difficult to understand in what level members were inspired with the UGC because the conversations did not clearly stated whether members had changed their mind. Therefore, in order to explore the effects in people's first stage so called *getting inspired* could be an interesting topic for further research in tourism behavior and information technology.

Majority of members who were in the stage of planning their volunteer trip especially after recognition of the destination, have had similarities of meanings and conveyed messages in their comments and inquiries. However, the variation in language styles and ways of communications have been observed. The main similarity in their comments was, to hear experience stories, opinions, guidelines and

advises from the people who are during the experience phase/After the experience phase (Table 2). Tourists who have used Facebook to search for desired information seemed to ask questions such as; what they can do, what they can see, what are the exciting factors, what is the best season in Nepal etc. In addition, tourists who have used Facebook to evaluate with other destinations seemed to ask more specific questions such as; which destination is the best, which kind of program is most interesting, what exactly they can get out of their volunteer experience in Nepal. In the evaluation stage, tourists compared with other destination just before making a final decision. Therefore, researcher believe that users' opinions play important role in terms of influencing tourist behavior.

This findings highlights that volunteer tourism organizations, Nepal's DMOs and other tourism related firms must follow up the E-WHOM and its effects to understand, how the destination Nepal is known, seen and perceived by target tourists(Fotis et al., 2012). Thus, tourism players can imply the effective marketing strategies to build and sustain better brand image.

As it is mentioned earlier that tourists who have made a decision to take volunteer experience program, rely the most on user-generated contents (ibid; Appendix). After making the decision, tourists were keen on finding practical information such as; must have accessories, to meet other interested people who are doing similar programs, weather condition, cultural understanding, preparation guidelines etc.

In this stage, members were sharing their exciting travel planning with other members meanwhile asking questions to members in the group. Sharing tourists travel planning with other could also contribute to the image of a destination. For example, their sharing information could be read by other members and SNS circles so that would possibly create an awareness of the destination. Moreover, the exciting

travel planning of one member could motivate and inspire other members to travel to Nepal.

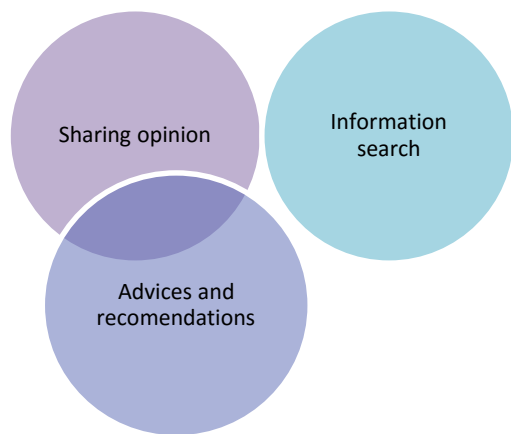### 4.5 Tourists during/after experience phase



*Figure 6. Tourist interactions on SNS in experience phase.*

In the experience phase, researcher observed that tourists use Social Networking sites relatively less, compare to pre-experience phase and after-experience phase. However, there have been multiple interactions on Facebook group. Tourists who were in the volunteer program, have been communicating with other tourists who were experiencing volunteer program as well as with tourists in pre-experience phase and after experience phase. There could be various reasons that volunteer tourist less rely on UGC during the experience. For instance, destination Nepal is not well internet facilitated, which has only 15.4% of internet penetration (alphabetical. link, 2015). Meaning that tourist do not have access to the internet to share their opinions during the experience. This findings may/ may not be valid in other destinations. The other reason could be the type of tourism activities tourists are

involving. Tourists may have been immersed in tourism experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Tourist's social and cultural background could also be the reason.

Despite the fact that, there were fair respondents but those responds provide us important insight on how the tourists' online interactions impact the image of destination Nepal. (RJ) comments on Facebook as follows:

> "I was in Namche Bazar when the earthquake strunk on April 25th! The place is amazingly beautiful and people are some of the humblest and happiest you will ever meet." (RJ)

This comment significantly impact the tourists who are in the stage of planning their trip to Nepal. The information has relevancies because, people's curiosities and worries are clarified with his own experience. He explained his situation with all the other members in Facebook group.

Another responds has slightly different experience. His own experience shares as following.

> "Nepali houses don't have heating, so planning on taking my thermals." (DL)

She tells her opinion about the importance of heating. This helps to the people to predict such kinds of facilities. She also gives the information about thermal possibilities. Which could be an exciting attraction for some tourists.



*Figure 7. Tourist interactions on SNS in after experience phase.*

## 4.5 Tourist engagements and positive – negative impressions

| | |
|---|---|
| Positive | I just finished my child care program in Pokhara, Nepal. I was a volunteer in orphan house and my guest house really close to it. It was fun! (NM)<br><br> Yep last Nov..went to Chitwan district, taught english at Sunlight English Boarding School.great host family..will think of them and the experience forever☺☺ goin back soon as possible..my friend there says people need mental counselling help etc. N the children I reckon need stuff AND hugs!! (JH)<br><br>Hey Bree! Overall had an fab time in Nepal - met some amazing people so don't worry about travelling alone ☺ Learned a lot on the medical elective, although I have a few tips for you to get the most out of the experience! We can FB message if you want a bit more info? (AL)<br> You wont regret going to Nepal. I am in kathmandu on my fourth trip right now. Love this place and the people. ! (TB)<br><br>best country in this world! dont think about it twice! (CS)<br><br> I just finished my trip in Nepal and you should go! Best trip experience (CK)<br><br><br> Nepal is amazing! Beautiful people, amazing landscape and sights, wonderful food - you couldn't ask for more!<br><br> I've been twice, such an amazing place, you'll love it!!! (JN)<br><br>Nepal is truly an amazing place. The culture, the food and most importantly the people. They need us right now. (MR)<br><br> Nepal was one of the best experiences of my life!! I highly recommend it!! (VN)<br><br> I've been to Nepal twice now, and my heart aches to get back over there. Such an incredible place with the kindest and most generous people. (TJ)<br><br> Nepal is a wonderful place that I have visited and volunteered in many times, enjoy (LG)<br><br> Nepal is such a beautiful country! It is full of very genuine and kind people.. I had a wonderful experience when I went there! (JT)<br><br> The place is amazingly beautiful and people are some of the humblest and happiest you will ever meet (RJ)<br><br>I absolutely fell in love with the country and the people. Never been to South Africa, so can't really say. But Nepal is a safe bet, I met some amazing people, I plan on visiting them again next year. Best experience in my life (EW)<br><br>If you want something exciting and life changing, go to Nepal. Personally, I prefer being immersed in a new, unfamiliar culture where I can teach and learn the most so Nepalwas the place for me (LL) |

| | |
|---|---|
| | I was there for 2 weeks only  but the kids, the local people and the culture are AMAZING! I really want to go back there next year (<br><br> Nepal is amazing, I have been twice in the last year or so... feel free to reach out with any questions! (TJ) |
| Negative | Just be careful, i went to volunteer as a paramedic to provide medical treatment for the injured durig the earthquake and ended up get robbed, bashed and stabbed. Flown back to Australia for emergency surgery but will never regain full use of my hand again. Dont judge a whole country based on 2 idiots with machete's but at the same time please please be careful Flown back to Australia for emergency surgery but will never regain full use of my hand again(MR)<br><br>I'd be cautious of Nepal, Yes they need help but there is a lot happening there at the moment not all good. I was recently there not with IVHQ Tho. You can pm me if you want more details. (MR)<br><br> touring nepal might be difficult now due to the recently devastating earthquake . So i hope you go prepared... (DB) |

Table 3. Positive and Negative respondents based on members interaction.

It is sometimes difficult to categorize UGC in particular positive side or in the negative side because throughout the observation process, researcher discovered the mixed meanings in members' opinions. However, above table 3 has been categorized solely from the researcher's understanding of language and meanings in research context (Kozinets, 2015).

In terms of understanding members relative respondents and their effects toward image of Nepal as a volunteer destination, (Doh & Hwang, 2009) research design has been adapted to this research. Authors have examined the positive and negative effects of EWOM in consumer interaction with different types of products and services. The research design evaluated consumers' relation with products such as attitude, purchase intention and credibility along with their knowledge and involvements. In this research, tourists' level of involvement in conveying messages and overall attitudes toward destination is examined.

To evaluate the level of involvement and engagement with the volunteer tourism experience, Members of group IVHQ is categorized in four different groups 1) Tourists, 2) Minglers, 3) Devotees and 4) Insiders based on their behavior in Facebook online community (Kozinets, 2002). In this case, tourists is characterized as the person who has more like a layback relation with Facebook community and volunteer tourism activities in Nepal. They may not show the active participation in communication but their presence influences the perception about destination Nepal. In this study, tourists* are identified, those members who have joined the volunteer online community IVHQ and followed the conversation but did not really take part in conversations. It has been observed that people who have seen respondents' comments and other contents, there were no reaction to it. Therefore it is assumed that those tourists* are exposed by User-generated contents. Accordingly, their perceptions toward destination Nepal would have EWOM effects (Doh & Hwang, 2009). Minglers are defined in this project, for those members who are slightly responding in the conversation but not directly contributing with contents. Thereby, members who only appreciated the contents by symbol of appreciation "LIKE" on Facebook. Researcher observed the members who were taking part in conversation by expressing their opinions and reacting to other members thoughts such as peoples experience sharing and travel planning. Therefore those members were categorized as devotees. Devotees are in this case have shown the interest to travel to Nepal but did not have concrete planning. Another group of members who were actively participated in the conversation namely; expressing their opinions, sharing opinions, keen to answer the questions and quick replies, have been categorized as insiders. Insiders play the most important roles in this case study because, their interactions have been actively observed and the data have been used as archival data source.

Following tables presents the overall pattern in members' interactions in different levels along with the different types of topics. Tables have been created using Microsoft Excel, based on researcher's archival data. In order to see more details

please see in Appendix section, under the title "Member engagement". These tables are presented here to understand the types of online interactions which convey message through Social Networking Sites that influence tourist perceptions about destination Nepal. Tables are divided in two main sections namely; Inquiry and Experience sharing. Inquiry section consist all the comments and their responds that were discussed in the pre-experience phase (ibid). In the same way, Experience sharing section consist all the comments and their responds that were discussed in the experience and after experience phase (ibid).

> Note: - Vertical line in the table, represents the numbers of "Like".
> Horizontal line in the table represents the respondents. * Respondents' names and other details is available in appendix section, under the title "Member engagement"
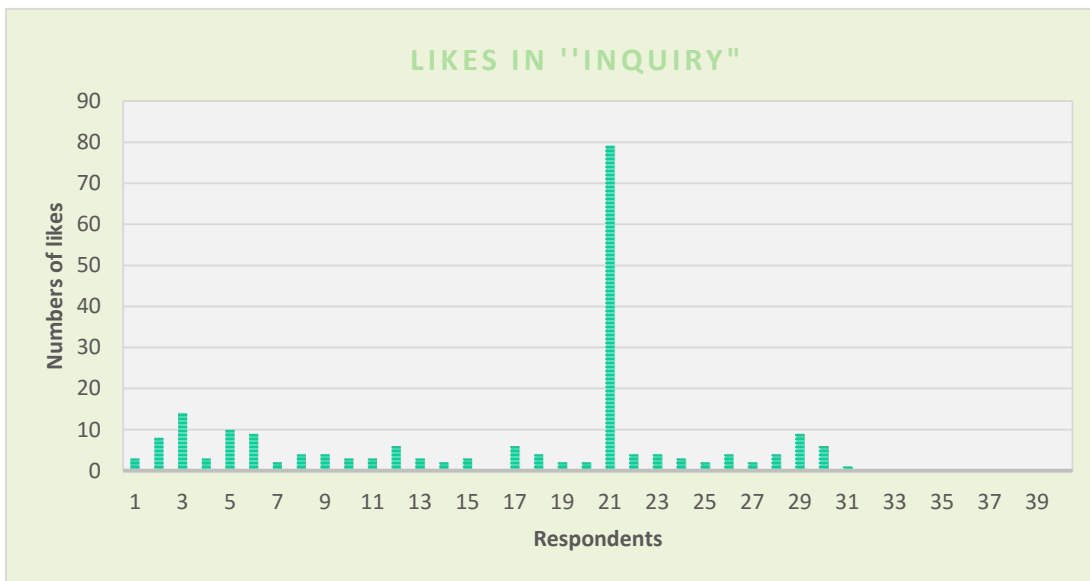


*Table 4. Respondents' engagements level "Inquiry 1"on Facebook group.*
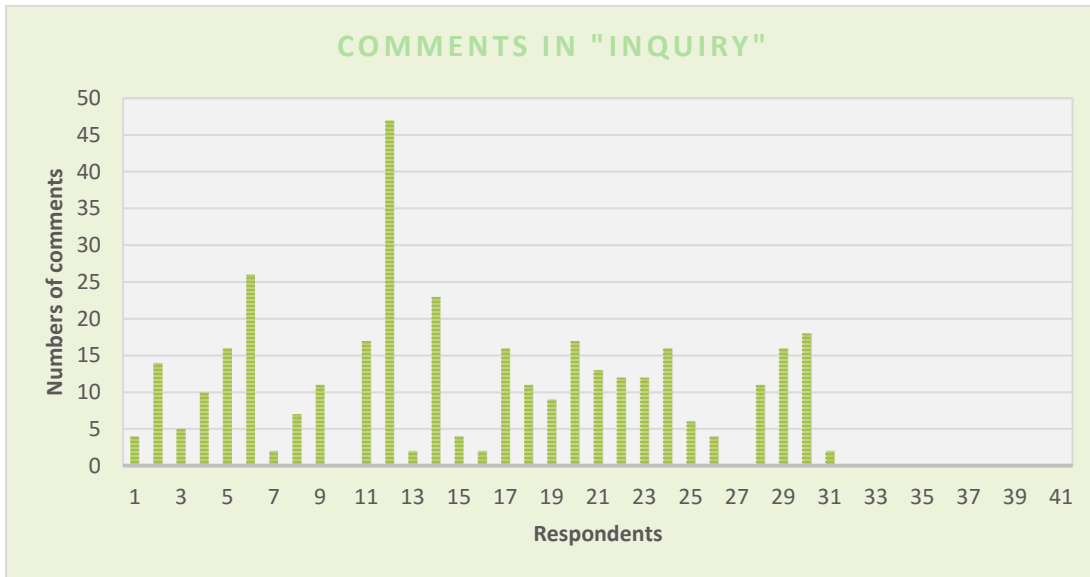
*Table 5. Respondents' engagements level "Inquiry 2" on Facebook group.*
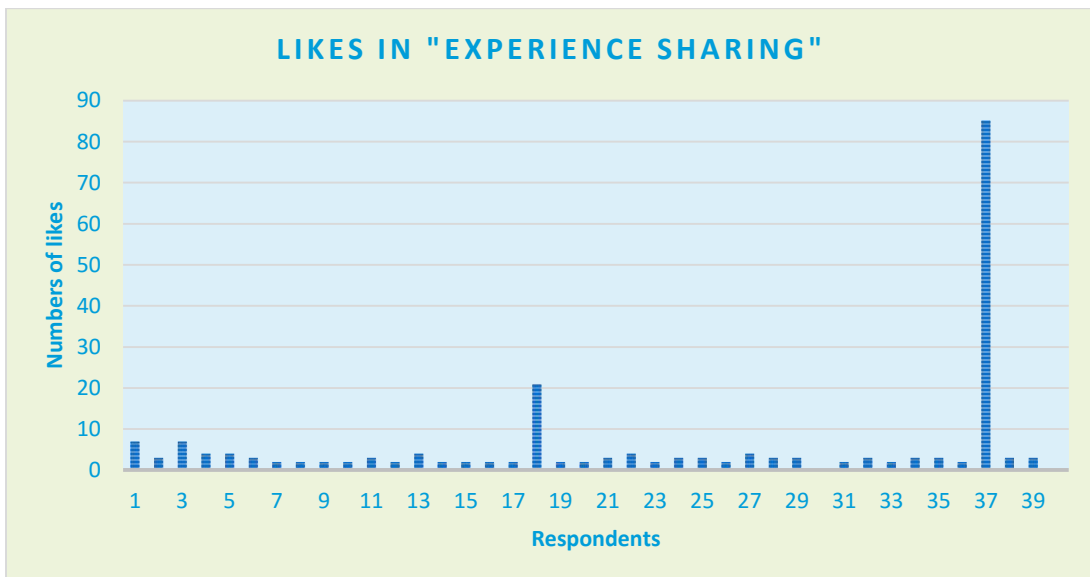


*Table 6. Respondents' engagements level "Sharing experience" on Facebook group.*

According to the data, it clearly gives the impression that tourists are relatively more engaged with User-generated contents in pre-experience phase rather than after-experience. Importantly, data shows tourist use Social Networking sites to get more information after making a decision (ibid). This result has fully supported

researcher's online participation observation. Meaning that, researcher has noted the tourists were commenting and reacting more when they were planning their volunteer program in Nepal.

## 4.6 Described Nepal by tourists



*Table 7. Words cloud, based on tourist communications on Facebook (IVHQ).*

Above table presents the most common worlds which were used by members of the online Facebook community (IVHQ). All the members in all experience phases in connection with destination Nepal, have been put all together. The reason is to understand people's perception towards destination Nepal thorough words frequency. It also provides an overview of how the image of destination as volunteer tourism is generated via Social Networking Site.

Obviously "Nepal" is the most used word because this project merely focused on Nepal. Second largest words group consist " Anyone", "People", "Going", "Just", "Program", "Amazing", "Back", "Earthquake", "Place", "Volunteer", "Volunteered", "Help", "Need", "Childcare".

These words and their inter-relations gives the accumulated meaning. The meanings supports the findings that has been discussed earlier chapters 4.1, 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4. Combination of these words, signify that the majority of tourist used Facebook in order to get information about destination attributes i.e. functional and psychological attributes (ibid). The words also indicated the positive attitudes towards Nepal. Earthquake is attached with the brand image of Nepal which has found to be relatively negative for whole destination but positive for those tourists who were only focused on volunteering. Childcare seems to be the most common volunteer program in Nepal. This indicates that Nepal could be a right destination for people who are interested working with kids.

Third largest words group consist "Experience". "Went", Weeks", "place", "Love", "Beautiful", " great", "Pokhara", "Kathmandu", "Next", "Want", "Country", "Everyone". All stated words also gives a positive attitudes toward destination Nepal. It also covered the cities names which refers to the popular places where tourists are associated with volunteer programs.

## 5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

In this research, the researcher has explored the use of User-generated content by the tourist and their attitude towards Nepal as a volunteer tourism destination, by understanding online interaction through Facebook. Throughout the research process, the researcher have followed the recent context in online communication trend in tourism, and gathered the insights of several previous authors' theories and findings. Online ethnography (Netnography) research has been adapted to reach the goal of the research project, which was the first experience in researcher's academic experience. Netnography research approach has proved to be an effective practice in this case. This method significantly encouraged researcher to get constantly engaged in understanding the deeper meaning of tourist ways of communication in current online platform.

The analysis in this paper has supported some of the theories in terms of tourists' behavior and their engagements with User-generated contents (Cox et al., 2009). In addition, researcher did not encountered any strong disagreements with previous authors in this field of research. However, observational findings and qualitative data analysis, highlighted the level of agreements and disagreements in this particular case study. The research has examined the effects of EWOM on Social Networking Sites to the image of Nepal by categorizing factors in different groups. Thereby the influencing factors to the image of Nepal as a volunteer destination have been recognized. This research explored that tourist emotional connection is highly presented on the Social networking site and functional attributes of the destination also evaluated by tourists, in the basis of User-generated content. In this case, tourist used the SNS mostly after making their decision to travel to Nepal. Therefore, the paper recommends tourism marketer and other tourism players to make strategic marketing planning with the

focused group of people. This could be done perhaps by carefully segmenting the target group.

Another major finding shows the necessity of following the tourist behavior in communication on online social networks. During the research process, frequency of respondents and their perception is identified, which plays a vital role in conveying message to people around the world. The conveyed messages found to be relatively positive.

This project outlined the importance of User-generated contents in terms of influencing the image of Nepal as volunteer tourism destination. Some areas such as, how tourist get influenced by UGC contents in different phase of their experience, how tourist behave in SNS and how different factors are associated when tourist think and feel about Nepal as a volunteer tourist destination. This paper has presented the tourist interactions in online community which has been viewed from different angles. It was a good leaning process, however researcher's curiosity in this field of study is expanded to a new level. Therefore, outlines the following key area of research for further research.

- Understanding the online community members' level of trust, in user-generated content.
- Investigate the possibilities of strategic marketing plan for a tourism organization, which could be fully based on User-generated contents.

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*\* Appendix is available in attached documents.*

*Thank you.*