Chapter 12

The Impact of Social Media on Cultural Tourism

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ABSTRACT

Social networks have become very popular recently in the tourism sector. This chapter presents the use of social media and more specifically Trip Advisor in reference to reviews of cultural attractions and their potential influence on the development of cultural tourism in Bahrain. The findings propose that people use Trip Advisor to collect information about a destination and share experiences with other community members. They also suggest that cultural tourism has a potential to grow in the region; however, there should be more information available. The cultural attractions should be more organized, offer more information, and enhance the cultural experience. This chapter recommends that social networks and Trip Advisor should be used by the local tourism authorities for the development and promotion of cultural tourism in Bahrain. Finally, the attraction websites should be further enhanced and other social media could be used to communicate with visitors in Bahrain.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has become the most significant phenomenon today. Moreover, the development of Information and Computer Technology (ICT) during the last decades has provided new opportunities to the whole tourism industry (Buhalis, 2003). The diffusion of the interactive Web 2.0 features and applications has offered tourism markets the potential to have real conversations (Milano, Baggio & Piattelli, 2011). Internet marketing has also impacted on both marketers and consumers, influencing and changing consumer behaviour in tourism as well. Hence, consumers nowadays take part in the communication of products including tourism products, and in many
cases via online social networks they decide what information to share, how the information may be used, creating many challenges for marketers and other stakeholders (Stewart & Pavlov, 2002). Therefore, these new consumer demands have created new consumer needs, which means that organisations have to start rethinking the ways they operate and they communicate with their consumers. Social media has not only changed the communication with the customer, but have also made information easier to access anytime. At the same time they are a very good source of information on customer needs, demands and reviews on products and services, social media “are taking an important role in travellers’ information search and decision-making behaviours” (Yoo, Gretzel & Zach, 2011, p.526). For example, TripAdvisor is “the leader among travel related consumer review websites, as 50 million users per month seek advice about their travel plans” (Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides, 2012, p.15). The research objective of this study is to identify the potential to develop further cultural tourism via social networks and reviews on TripAdvisor on the various attractions and cultural sites in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Tourism in Bahrain**

The Middle East offers a wide collection of centers of touristic appeal, and many rank these attractions among the most important places to visit (Knowles, Diamantis & El-Mourhabi, 2004). As the flow of oil income has been decreasing, the GCC members have turned their attention to other economies and sources of income and have been following the path of economic diversification through the development of tourism (Karolak, 2012). For example, tourism accounted for 16.6% of UAE GDP in 2010, making UAE a global leader in the higher-end leisure market (WTTC, 2011, p.19). Tourism in the region is considered as a major source of foreign exchange, and is important to the Arab countries economy. Tourism is also a crucial generator of employment to many of these countries including Bahrain. Bahrain has a strong financial sector, contributing 30% to GDP, and is making an effort to liberalize the economy by encouraging the government with positive results. Tourism in this context is seen as a growing market that may contribute 8% of the country’s GDP (Amado, 2011).

The challenge in the region is to identify the potential of cultural tourism development, as well as to further develop the infrastructure and services to enrich and extend tourist arrivals (Knowles, Diamantis & El-Mourhabi, 2004, p.299). Although, Bahrain offers various events such as the F1, the competition is high from its neighbours such as Abu Dhabi, hence should focus on additional sources of international tourism income, such as cultural tourism. In terms of culture and heritage, Bahrain offers a rich history of religious, Hellenic, Roman and Ottoman sites. For example, Manama was the 2013 Capital of Arab Tourism, as part of UNESCO’s programme to promote culture capitals across the world. There are also a number of cultural festivals taking place every year such as the Cultural Spring Festival and the Bahrain Summer Festival. With a blend of music, theatre, poetry, art exhibitions and dance performances, these attract tourists from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) mainly (www.multivu.com).

Due to these cultural and heritage sites Bahrain, among other countries in the GCC, has attracted the attention as a center for tourism from international bodies and companies. According to Knowles, Diamantis & El-Mourhabi (2004, p.304) “the country is increasingly encouraging investment in the tourism sector”. At the same time it has become attractive to business and leisure visitors. In 2010, almost 9 million people visited Bahrain (Figure 1).