

# Implications of Social Media Use in Personal and Professional Settings

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# 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

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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).

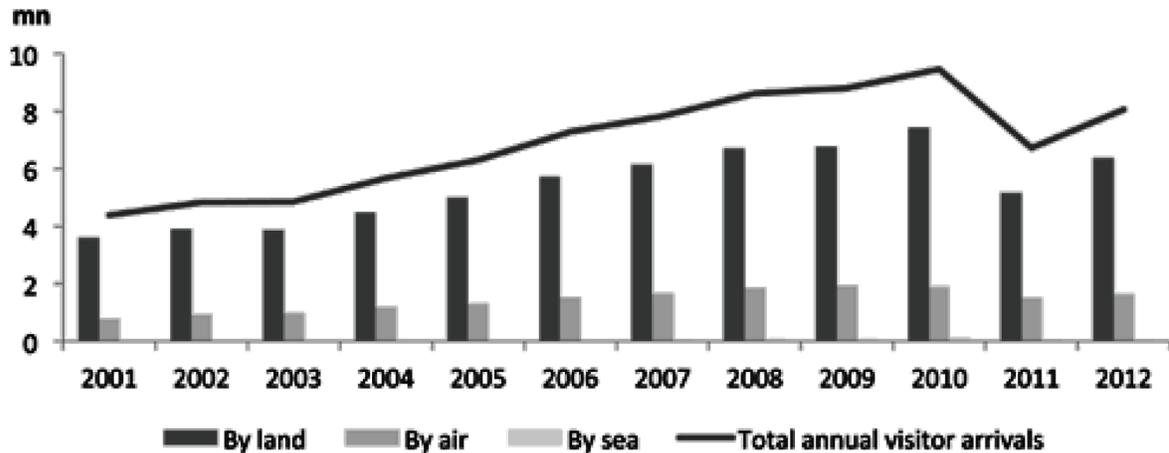
The challenge in the region is to identify the potential of cultural tourism development, as well as to further develop the infrastructure and services to enrich and extend tourist arrivals (Knowles, Diamantis & El-Mourhabi, 2004, p.299). Although, Bahrain offers various events such as the F1, the competition 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](http://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).

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Figure 1. Non-Bahraini visitor arrivals (2001-2012)

Source: Central Informatics Organisation, Ministry of Culture.



It is estimated that in 2015 the tourist arrivals in Bahrain will be 11.459 million and in 2020, 12.198 million (Alpen Capital, 2011, p.4). However, Bahrain has been attracting visitors mainly from Saudi Arabia who are in search for entertainment, as well as business, and not culture.

As Bahrain is an island, new technologies such as social networks including TripAdvisor can enhance the development of cultural tourism as they simplify access attracting new tourists via the information provided on relevant websites.

### Web 2.0 and Social Media

During the last years different authors (Alexander, 2006; Zimmer, 2008; O'Reilly, 2008) have tried to define Web 2.0 from many different viewpoints. Despite the fact that almost all the definitions are debatable, none of them exclude one another. In a recent work (Junco, Heiberger & Loken, 2011), it was stated that social media are a collection of Internet websites, services and practices that support collaboration, communication, participation and sharing. On the other hand, Web 2.0 has been defined as “an ambiguous concept - a

conglomeration of folksonomies and syndication, wikis and mashups, social networks and reputation, ubiquitous content and perhaps even kitchen sinks” (Lindstrom, 2007, p.6).

Bryer and Zavatarro (2011) define social media as new technologies that aid social interaction and collaboration whilst also enabling deliberation amongst stakeholders. These technologies include blogs, wikis, media (audio, photo, video, text) sharing tools, networking platforms (Facebook and Twitter) and virtual worlds.

Some Web 2.0 technologies and services that are contributing to the Higher Education domain are blogs, microblogs, wikis, multimedia sharing services and content syndication through RSS, podcasting and content tagging services, social networking sites and other social software. At the same time, Web 2.0 has been widely used in tourism (i.e. Tourism 2.0 a touristic version of Web 2.0), is an important tool for tourists, as it affects the image and the business of destinations, companies and other organisations (Milano et al., 2011).

Many of these applications are relatively mature and they have been used for many years. On

the other hand, new features and capabilities are being added regularly. In the next section we will discuss the features of main Web 2.0 services.

## Blogs

Jorn Barger was the first person who introduced the term 'blog' in 1997. He was referring to a simple webpage which consisted of a few brief paragraphs (containing personal opinions), information and personal diary entries which were called 'posts.' All these posts were arranged chronologically, with the most recent placed first (Doctorow et al., 2002). Most of the blogs allow visitors to add comments below the posts.

## Wikis

According to Ebersbach, Glaser and Heigle (2006) a *wiki* is a webpage or a set of web pages which anyone, who has been allowed access, can easily edit. Wikipedia became very popular because the concept of the wiki as a collaborative tool that facilitates the production of group work, is widely understood and upheld. With wikis we can share ideas, receive updates to and live coverage of events and we can build and trust a community. They can also be used for student projects, collaborating on ideas and organizing documents and resources from individuals and groups of students.

## Tagging and Social Bookmarking

A 'tag' is a keyword that refers to a digital object (e.g. a website, picture or video clip) which it helps to describe, but it cannot actually be used as part of a formal classification system.

Social bookmarking systems help to share a number of common features (Millen, Feinberg, & Kerr, 2005). The users are allowed to create lists of 'bookmarks' or 'favorites' and to store these on a remote service (rather than within the client browser) which can later be shared with other us-

ers of the system. These bookmarks can also be tagged with keywords. Social bookmarking can further be used to create a set of resources which can be accessed from any computer connected to the internet. With bookmarking we can conduct research and share it with peers. We can also rate and review bookmarks to help students decide on the usefulness of resources.

## Social Networking

Social Networks are professional and social networking sites which can be used for meeting people, finding like minds and sharing content (Cobb 2010). The examples of social networking sites are numerous to list but the most popular include Facebook, Twitter, Ning, Flickr, Tumblr, Utterz, NPR, WWWEDU.

## RSS and Syndication

RSS is a group of formats that allows users to access content updates from RSS-enabled websites and blogs without the need to visit the related sites. The information from the different websites is collected within a feed (usually using the RSS format) and it is then shown to the user in a process known as syndication. With RSS feeds we can replace email lists and reduce emailing. Finally, we can keep the course specific WebPages relevant and current.

## Google Educational Applications

Google Apps can be characterized as one of the most powerful communication and collaboration tools. It can be accessed via the web, so everyone can connect with everyone else, no matter where they are. It is very flexible, easy to use and web-based so there is no need for hardware maintenance or software installation. It is a suite of applications that includes Gmail, Google Calendar (shared calendaring), Google Drive (store and

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Table 1. Characteristics of Google Apps

Google Apps	Characteristics
Gmail	Google Apps offer 25GB of storage per user. It also offers powerful spam filtering and a 99.9% uptime SLA. All these are hosted by Google and there is no cost and no advertisements for students, faculty or staff.
Google Calendar	Helps teachers and faculties to organize their time. Anyone can easily schedule lessons and meetings. Multiple calendars can be overlaid to see when people are available - a great way to manage staff schedules (can send invitations and manage RSVPs).
Drive	Provides a storage place for up-to-date versions of files from anywhere. Educators can share individual files or whole folders with specific people or an entire team. Can facilitate the creation of and reply to comments on files in order to get feedback or add ideas.
Docs	With Google Docs anyone can create rich documents with images, tables, equations, drawings, links and more. Gather input and manage feedback with social commenting.
Sheets	Google Sheets can keep and share lists, track projects, analyze data and track results with the spreadsheet editor. There are some very useful tools like advanced formulas, embedded charts, filters and pivot tables to help get new perspectives on data.
Slides	Helps in the creation of slides with presentation editor, which supports features like embedded videos, animations and dynamic slide transitions. The presentations can be published on the web so anyone can view them, or they can be shared privately.
Sites	Sites are shared workspaces for classes and faculties. The students can build their own project sites without the need to write in code. It is as easy as writing a document. There are many pre-designed templates. In addition, Google Site provides a system and site-level security controls.
Vault	Google vault is an added archiving and e-discovery feature to Google Apps for Education. It is optional and adds archiving, e-discovery and information governance capabilities. With vault anyone can define retention policies, place legal holds on users as needed, and can run reports on user activity and actions in the archive.

share), Google Talk (instant messaging and voice over IP), Google Docs, Spreadsheets and Slides (online document hosting and collaboration), Google Sites (team site creation and publishing), Google Vault (Add Archiving and e-discovery to Google Apps for Education), Start Page (a single customizable access point for all applications), Google Video and Google Security and Compliance. Google Apps is causing quite a stir in the academic environment.

Some other useful Apps from Google include Google Moderator (for creating a series about a discussion topic to which students can submit questions, ideas and suggestions), YouTube (for sharing and accessing videos with educational content), Google Maps, Picasa (for sharing and exploring photos), Scholar (for searching academic literature across many sources) and Blogger.

Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) proposed a taxonomy that classifies social media types according

to their level of social presence, media richness and level of self-presentation, self-disclosure as they are presented in Table 2.

This chapter presents social media use in tourism and more specifically consumer review and ratings website, TripAdvisor as consumer blogs

Table 2. Social media taxonomy

Type	Examples
Social networking websites	Facebook, LinkedIn
Blogs, Content communities	YouTube, Flickr, Slideshare, Scrib
Collaborative projects	Wikipedia, Wikitravel
Virtual social worlds	Second life
Virtual game worlds	World of Warcraft
Microblogs	Twitter
Consumer review and rating websites	TripAdvisor, Epinions
Internet fora	Fodor's Travel Travel Talk

and reviews have emerged as one of the most prominent themes in research in social media in travel and tourism. Buhalis (2003) claims that e-tourism is a process of digitalization of all processes and chains of value in the tourism sector as it is discussed in the following section.

### **Social Networks in Tourism**

The internet and the on-line social networks have become very popular in recent times and have changed the way people communicate and search for information (Twumasi & Adu-Gyamfi, 2013). As Miguens, Baggio & Costa (2008) state these websites are the epitome of the phenomenon known as Web 2.0, as the website is no longer a static page but a dynamic platform where people exchange views and opinions. Tourism has been one of the most important components of online commerce, which has actually changed the structure of the industry. For example, in Europe tourism on the internet represented almost 19.4% of the total market in 2007 (Miguens et al., 2008). Web 2.0 provides user generated content, and access to consumers to comment on products and services, leading to shift from Business-to-consumer marketing to a peer-to-peer model (Miguens et al., 2008). Social media is also influenced by Web 2.0 applications. Especially, social networks have opened new features of social reality (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2002). In addition, virtual communities are growing and are becoming influential in tourism, as consumers as well as bloggers share information and experiences with other members. Social networks allow their members to interact without restrictions in time and space. Nowadays, there are many different types of social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and TripAdvisor, or lonelyplanet for tourism related reviews. Social networking has changed consumer behaviours as at the same time many tourism companies and providers also operate online to support these type of consumers who are seeking for in-

formation and even buy their tourism products via the internet. The more these communities increase the higher the potential for tourism companies and tourism destinations to benefit as the internet and social networks provide an effective medium to communicate (Twumasi & Adu-Gyamfi, 2013). According to Buhalis & Law (2008) "ICT plays a critical role for the competitiveness of tourism organisations and destinations, as well as for the entire industry as a whole" (p.609). Some criticize the use of Web 2.0 technology in tourism, as they claim that "the boundaries between information producers and users is blurred, and the concepts of authority and control are radically changed" (Milano et al., 2011, p.3). According to Buhalis (2003) the Internet has become the primary way used by Destination Management Organizations (DMO) to communicate with prospective tourists. For example, destinations like visitlondon.com are reacting to the content in the website created by users and are incorporating User Generated Contents (UGC) as part of their websites (Inversini & Buhalis, 2009). The Tourism British Council was the first to introduce UGC contents, to include blogs (Miguens et al., 2008). Additionally, the Florence Official Tourist Office embraces geo-referenced contents regarding tourism attractions through GoogleMaps (Miguens et al., 2008, p.2).

Tourism providers are understanding that "ICT if managed properly, can generate tremendous positive value for their organisations" (Marchiori, Dedekind & Cantoni, 2010, p.326). In view to this, Milano (2010, in Milano et al., 2011) proposes three phases that are influencing in the travel experience formation process:

- **Pre-Experience:** Built on other people's travel stories, before travelling;
- **Experience during Travel or Stay:** With real time shared experiences mainly via mobile phones;
- **Post-Experience:** Which disseminates comments, evaluations, emotions.

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In addition, Inversini & Buhalis (2009) propose that destinations are providing information to travelers in a factual way. Many tourist companies have started changing the way they approach their customers and present their businesses online (Au, 2010). Xiang & Gretzel (2010) state that there are official destination and attraction websites such as cultural heritage attraction websites, as well as unofficial sources of information such as blogs, online communities, social networks, personal websites etc. The latter are significantly contributing to the massive growth of information on destinations on the web. The hotel industry is also seeing hotel bookings via Facebook increasing; in fact, they have surpassed the hotel bookings made by TripAdvisor (Astbury, 2011).

Studies have also been conducted on the effects of ICT tools on the image and the popularity of the destinations or other tourism operators, mainly in the hospitality sector (Sigala, 2010; Burgess et al., 2009). In general, these studies propose that tourism operators have not fully understood the importance of technology in tourism. Moreover, there are credibility issues as the information provided online especially visitors' comments, may be forged for particular interests by unscrupulous competitors. In other cases there is overload of useless information (Milano et al., 2011). These have created some tension between the tourism providers and users, for example Xiang and Gretzel (2010, p.186) state:

*Social media websites are ubiquitous in online travel information search in that they occur everywhere [...] no matter what search keywords a traveler uses. Certain social media websites, which can be considered more comprehensive and travel-specific websites, are becoming increasingly popular and are likely to evolve into primary online travel information sources. The results confirm that tourism marketers can no longer ignore the role of social media in distributing travel-related information without risking to become irrelevant.*

Nevertheless, social networks referred to as 'electronic word-of-mouth' (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008), have widely been used by users as means to provide online feedback, communicate and share information with potential travelers about a wide range of topics, such as products, services and events. These comments have been found to contribute to the web reputation of these organisations or destinations. Dellarocas (2003) proposes that the consumers' ability to understand the credibility of reviews has developed by analyzing the consistency and ratings. Chen, Cheung, Luo & Sia (2009) suggest that this should wary marketers as they should manage this word-of-mouth. In view to this, Inversini (2009) suggests that this 'online reputation' can be managed by destinations with the use of Web 2.0 in order to attract more tourists. Tourism offers services and products that are intangible, perishable, inseparable and heterogenous (Cooper, 2012), hence tourism organisations should invest more on their reputation and developing their image (Buhalis, 2003). Many hospitality and tourism products are considered as high risk purchases, hence the emotional risk of reference group evaluation is an important aspect of the decision making process, raising marketing stress levels for providers (Litvin et al., 2008). For example, 67% of US travelers used the Internet to search for information on destinations or check prices and schedules (Travel Industry Association of America (2005 in Litvin et al., 2008, p. 8). Moreover, loyal customers are encouraged to post links to tourism provider's website, in order to nurture a community of interest in which tourists talk about the destination. Monitoring these reviews and uploads allows managers to post responses to critical comments; they may even identify popular bloggers that appeal to their customers and coordinate and cooperate with them. For example they may invite them to the destination for a complimentary visit. This marketing strategy may contribute to the reputation of the organization. Further, Marchiori et al. (2010) claim that tourists are keen on selecting

tourism service providers upon their reputation. The study of online word of mouth is important to support and enhance the reputation of destinations. Lee, Law & Murphy (2011) propose that the credibility of an opinion leader can be ascertained through analyzing their rating and the consistency of their reviews. Their main objective is to help others make better decisions, but at the same time they enjoy posting their experiences. Moreover, expert websites such as TripAdvisor are perceived to be more trustworthy and useful (Bronner, Ridder, Neijens & Willemsen, 2011), hence marketers should closely monitor them. In addition, "when the amount of positive reviews outweigh negative reviews it is considered credible" (Stead, 2012, p.5). Chen et al. (2009) also propose that a comparison of reviews of the same product/service in other sources may contribute to the assessment of credibility. They add the timeliness of the review, as the closer the review is written to the experience the more fresh is in the consumer's mind, hence the more credible. The lack of negative reviews may show evidence that the website is filtered by other sources. Finally, anonymous postings are not considered credible, on the other side, personally identified reviewers are considered to be more credible and genuine (Stead, 2012). According to TripAdvisor reviewers on their site are trusted members of the travel community, although an investigation from the UK's Advertising Standards Agency proved that in some cases there were some fake reviews. This result forced TripAdvisor to change the site for hotel listings from 'Reviews you can trust' to 'Reviews from our community' as it was found that some hotels had hired freelancer reviewers to comment on their establishments (Stead, 2012). Nevertheless, consumers are more positively influenced by consumer-generated reviews (Buhalis & Law, 2008). A study by Stead (2012) reveals that negative TripAdvisor reviews have stronger effect on the consumer. She also adds that assessing the consistency between large amounts of reviews is the most commonly used technique to ascertain

review credibility by participants in her study. She concludes that consumers approach TripAdvisor in a critical way which makes their reviews more credible. The effective management of such social media can facilitate tourism managers (DMOs, hotels, or any other tourism company) to market effectively their own organization online.

Although there are conflicting opinions about the use and the impact of UGC in tourism, the importance of Web 2.0 cannot be ignored for the survival and the success of tourism companies (Scorrano, 2011). Hence, social networks facilitate interactivity and promote the formation of communities that share content for tourism products and services. As Scorrano (2011) claims "they are also generators of image of the destination" (p.950). The development of social networks has also attracted the attention of governments, and has changed the way provide online information and services as well as the way they interact with stakeholders. Danis et al. (2009) claim that governments can use social media to procure and position resources and local knowledge, monitor and resolve problems and engage their constituents in a cooperative atmosphere. They can be used by governments to rejuvenate their services and products, hence to rejuvenate or develop tourism. Mergel, Schweik & Fountain (2009) also suggest that specific ministries and entities could use blogs to communicate with public hearings, wikis and RSS feeds to coordinate work, and wikis to internally share expertise. Social networks provide governments with information on tourists, which when filtered is capable of conveying important tourist flows (Scorrano, 2011). They may use the reviews and information available via social networks to highlight the destination's services and factors of attractiveness, and therefore offer respective products and services that may attract more visitors.

TripAdvisor is considered as a place that travelers may leave their comments and give advice to other consumers; it provides information on destinations, flights, hotels and other tourist

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services (Stead, 2012). It also provides users a forum to add their personal opinion on the products and services they consumed. According to TripAdvisor LLC (2011) the TripAdvisor Media Group websites generated \$486 million revenue. TripAdvisor facilitates the reviewing of tourism products and services around the world and brings together individuals in discussion forums, as well as it allows interactions between peers. It also provides a powerful platform for experts in tourism to interact with the users and consult their comments and posted views (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Hennig-Thurau & Walsh (2003) claim that consumers are reading such views and they use them in a way to save time in decision-making in choosing a tourist product, service and/or destination. In fact, TripAdvisor users in January 2011 were 4.6 million (Cochrane, 2011). Interestingly, TripAdvisor launched in 2007 a new feature called the Traveler Network, which “allows users to add acquaintances to their travel maps, by connecting to pre-existing sources” (Miguens et al., 2008, p.2).

Although the impact of the internet and social networks is growing, there is very little research on the influence of these social networks such as Trip Advisor, on the buying behavior of travel consumers, and how their views and expressed shared opinions may provide an indication of further tourism enhancement and development. According to Zaugg (2006 in Twumasi & Adu-Gyamfi, 2013, p.106) the issue of online travellers’ buyer behaviour has received limited attention. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to present the potential to develop and promote cultural tourism with the use of comments from TripAdvisor, who are the immediate consumers of the tourist product.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study attempted to explore the impact of online travel communities in TripAdvisor in the

decision making for developing cultural tourism in Bahrain. The nature of the study demanded that a qualitative approach be used. Secondary data of visitors’ reviews from Tripadvisor.com has been collected. TripAdvisor is a company established by Expedia in 2000 and has been chosen for this study due to its large scale of coverage on travel destinations and accommodation reviews (Twumasi & Adu-Gyamfi, 2013). TripAdvisor has been chosen as it is considered to be amongst the most successful social networking communities in tourism, and provides a powerful platform for interaction between peers (Buhalis & Law, 2008). On Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> April 2014, a review of the website showed 563 topics under the Bahrain Travel Forum section available at <http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowForum-g293996-i3669-Bahrain.html>. At the same time there were 1.507 forum posts from members who are knowledgeable about the destination. From Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> until Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> April 2014, under the section ‘Things to do in Manama’, there were 19 attractions identified and in total 192 reviews (see Table 2). Fifty (50) cases were purposively selected and analysed for the study. According to Twumasi & Adu-Gyamfi (2013, p.106) ‘the obstructive measures used in the data collection are frequently used by sociologists and psychologists in their studies of group behaviours and interactions’. Instead of actually interviewing all these people, the researchers observed the participants behavior and used raw data of the communication that people produced.

Content analysis was performed to the data, on the complaints, advice and reviews from people using the website. The grounded theory approach was used with keywords analysis, which provided four main categories experience, facilities, customer service and recommend the attraction. Content analysis is used for this study, as it ‘allows researchers to study written, visual, or aural data to understand what they mean to people and what information is conveyed’ (Hvass & Munar, 2012, p.96). Content analysis of social media or

travel is used by other studies such as Wenger (2008) who analysed the content of blog postings and Xiang & Gretzel (2010) who studied social media and its role as an information travel search. All the postings were read and their content was analysed to identify the key themes that emerged in the reviews. Firstly the overall evaluation of the site was identified and then the main themes that emerged were the facilities, the service, the additional information (i.e. brochures) and directions. All were evaluated and discussed as follows.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Description of the Sample

The characteristics of the individuals that provide reviews on TripAdvisor are important in order to understand their decision making process and their background. Prior to analyzing the data, the researchers explored the characteristics of the participants. According to Um & Crompton (1997) the travellers' characteristics influence their decision making process and they are widely used to explain and predict their destination choice. These characteristics are mainly socio-demographic including age, education, income and marital status, as well as psychological, for example whether those with low income are less likely to pursue travel arrangement involving expensive airfares and hotels than those who are more worthy.

For the purpose of this study, pre-determined variables designed by TripAdvisor were used, which included the location, the self-description of the members, their travel style, when they are travelling, their age and gender. In addition, the final participants were chosen based on the date (the most recent, from November 2013 until April 2014) they posted their reviews in order to have the most updated data. The majority of the participants did not meet all the above mentioned criteria, therefore the researchers decided to

include those reviews from people who met the following criteria gender, age, location and time of posting the review as shown in Table 3.

Most of the participants were male (76%) and 24% were female, between the age of 10-25 (66%), from the UK, US, UAE and Saudi Arabia, as most of the visitors in Bahrain are from neighbouring countries (Wells, 2011). The sample characteristics also showed evidence that there are no geographical boundaries of online communities, members are from all over the world who visit the site to comment, seek advice, share travel information and purchase travel products and services. In addition, these demographics were in line with Buhalis' (2003) claim that 78% of worldwide internet users are in USA and UK.

### The Impact of Social Networking Site Reviews on TripAdvisor on Cultural Tourism in Bahrain

Cultural heritage tourism is defined as "a form of tourism that highlights the cultural heritage and

*Table 3. The characteristics of Bahrain forum sample members (n=50)*

Variables Used	N=50	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	38	76
Female	12	24
<b>Age</b>		
20-25	33	66
26-35	11	22
36-50	3	6
50+	3	6
<b>Location</b>		
UK	12	24
USA	13	26
Saudi Arabia	13	26
UAE	9	18
Other	3	6
<b>Time of Posting</b>		
March 2014	24	48
April 2014	26	52

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artistic aspects of a destination or experiences and activities for tourism” (Douglas, Douglas & Derrett, 2001, p.17). The participants in the study provided reviews on various cultural attractions and events in Bahrain (Table 4).

The attractions that mainly refer to sports tourism i.e. Bahrain International Circuit or entertainment i.e. Wahoo Waterpark were not included in the study as they do not form part of cultural tourism as per the definition provided above. The reviews of the above cultural and heritage attrac-

Table 4. Cultural, heritage, and leisure sites in TripAdvisor (Bahrain)

Type of Attraction/Event	No. of Reviews (Total= 1238)	No. of Reviews Chosen for the Study (N=50)
<b>Cultural and Heritage Sites</b>		
Al-Fatih Mosque	191	12
Qalat Al Bahrain	167	5
Ahmed Al Fateh Islamic Center	4	1
Ad Diraz Temple	2	1
Bahrain National Museum	215	11
Beit Al Qur'an	20	2
Bab al Bahrain Souk	120	8
Mohammed Bin Faris House of Sout Music	1	1
Tree of Life	121	6
Oil Museum and First Oil Well	4	1
Museum of Pearl Diving	2	1
Bait Shaikh Salman Historic Palace	1	1
<b>Leisure Attractions</b>		
Wahoo Water Park	65	0
Al Dar Islands Bahrain	57	0
Adhari Park	29	0
Bahrain International Circuit	126	0
Lost Paradise of Dilmun Water Park	93	0
Viva Karting Bahrain	19	0
Wahoo Waterpark	1	0

Source: TripAdvisor (2014).

tions in Bahrain provide adequate data on the sites and on visitors' views on the availability, opening hours, customer service, available information and overall experience, as well as whether they recommend the attraction.

Most of the participants in the study commented on the availability of tourism attractions in Bahrain. They claimed that there are few to very little available attractions, and even less cultural attractions. This indicates that there should be more sightseeing developed in the country. In addition, they suggested that there are limited food and beverage facilities, and where available they do not have adequate service. They positively however, commented on the quality of the food. In reference to the facility itself, the comments varied. For some attractions like the Al-Fatih Mosque, the Bahrain National Museum and the Ahmed Al Fateh Islamic Center, the comments were encouraging as they commented very well on the building and the exhibits. For other the comments were very negative for example Bab Al Bahrain souq were people were not happy and satisfied with the planning, buildings and atmosphere. They found the place too crowded and busy. One reviewer stated that “the Bab el Bahrain really isn't a proper souk. All the shops are housed in a modern shopping arcade”. Another also added that “the narrow alleys of the souk behind the Gateway to Bahrain is overcrowded”.

Moreover, all the participants commented negatively to the available printed material on the sites. There is limited information on some sites, and in other cases there is no information, hence the tourists had to wander around and asked local people about the location of the attraction or to find some relevant information, although it was mentioned on the Ministry of culture website. More specifically, one of the reviewers said:

*This venue is situated in Muharraq; the best way to locate it is to ask around -- but bear in mind that you may have to approach several people before you find it, as many locals didn't know it*

*when we enquired, although it's in the middle of the neighbourhood. It seems to be an old building in which a new performance space has been built.*

Research shows that negative reviews have a stronger effect on consumers (East, Hammond & Lomax, 2008).

Nevertheless, the majority of the reviewers commented positively on the customer service and the friendliness of staff, as well as on the opportunity to learn a lot about the culture, the history of Bahrain and the attraction itself. For example one of the reviewers stated about Al-Fatih Mosque:

*They were very welcoming and our tour guide was wonderful. We were helped to learn about Islam in a very non-threatening way and got to learn about their beliefs and faith!*

Another added:

*I've been on several mosque tours and while this mosque may not be the most beautiful or the biggest, it certainly had the nicest people running the tours.*

Whereas one more stated:

*Exceptional tour with the best staff. Very friendly and amazing experience.*

Finally, most of the reviewers claimed that the majority of the attractions were a good experience for the whole family. All were happy that they were allowed to take videos and pictures. White (2010) suggests that photos taken by tourists and posted on social networks such as Facebook generate interest to viewers and can easily become part of the viewer's travel plans. Many have challenged the credibility of such sources, however research shows that they can be reliable tools for evaluation (Mack, Blose & Pan, 2008). Table 5 exhibits the reviewers' overall evaluation of the attractions used for the purpose of this study.

It is evident from the above that the reviewers rated the overall experience as excellent, very good and in some cases average. The attractions that were not well evaluated were Ad Diraz temple, the Museum of Pearl Diving and the Oil Museum, however the comments were very limited to provide a significant view.

*Table 5. Evaluation of sites*

N	Site	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Poor	Terrible
191	Al-Fatih Mosque	106	65	16	3	1
215	Bahrain National Museum	99	94	15	5	2
167	Qalat Al Bahrain	71	72	20	4	0
20	Beit Al Qur'an	10	8	2	0	0
120	Bab al Bahrain Souk	32	46	29	9	4
4	Ahmed Al Fateh Islamic Center	2	1	1	0	0
1	Mohammed Bin Faris House of Sout Music	0	0	0	0	0
121	Tree of Life	9	24	50	25	13
4	Oil Museum and First Oil Well	1	2	0	1	0
2	Museum of Pearl Diving	0	0	2	0	0
2	Ad Diraz Temple	0	0	1	0	1
1	Bait Shaikh Salman Historic Palace	0	0	0	0	0

Source: TripAdvisor (2014).

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Bahrain has been promoted as a cultural venue in the Arabian Gulf, and there has been an increased investment in culture in the region (Alpen Capital, 2011). However, there are many challenges as they have been identified in the above. Although, “the region’s challenge now is to drive the next wave of innovation that emphasizes, celebrates and promotes Middle Eastern cultures, heritage and tradition” (GlobalFutures & Foresight, 2007, p.3), the authorities should consider the above comments not only for the promotion of Bahrain as a cultural destination, but also for the future development of tourism in the country.

Despite attempts to revitalize tourism growth in Bahrain, there are several challenges that may arise in the future. As Bahrain is trying to market itself as a luxury destination and diversify the pool of tourists it attracts, it is necessary to conduct a thorough branding analysis in order to assess the impact of initiatives undertaken in recent years. In addition, in the context of ever-growing competition, place marketing creates “uniqueness in order to improve the competitive position of the place marketed” (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2010, p.2). As Dowling (2001) proposes destinations should focus on developing their image and reputation. Consequently, destinations such as Bahrain that are able to attract tourism and foreign investments, should consider consumers’ views on the tourist product, and according to Milano, Baggio & Piattelli (2011) social media could add to the dissemination of information on cultural and other tourism attractions and products. Chua & Banerjee (2013) similarly support this view and claim that “TripAdvisor is recognized as an important information source among users for travel planning” (p.3).

## **CONCLUSION**

This chapter contributes to the current literature on the use of social media (TripAdvisor) on cultural tourism planning and development. This study

shows that communication via social media can be effective for tourism destinations and cultural tourism. Online communities have strong influence on consumer behavior, and consequently on the image of the attraction or the destination. Websites like TripAdvisor can be a valuable monitoring medium to explore the views of visitors to various attractions. If these reviews are monitored effectively they provide reliable information on the cultural attractions and the potential for further development of cultural tourism in Bahrain. Advantages and challenges are usually discussed within these reviews providing an overview of the performance of the attractions and potential comments and ideas may be provided to enhance the tourist product and services. Tourism companies and other organisations are faced with new consumers who can easily find information on the product or the destination, and they can share their views, make comments and provide suggestions in an informal collaborative way, increasing their influence to other consumers’ decision-making. All tourism businesses should identify the need to implement strategies and tools using UGC to incorporate new technologies to enrich their presence online and enhance their image and reputation. The information provided on the destinations or the attractions’ websites should have an extensive representation of photos and graphics in order to provide a tangible image or experience to potential visitors. This tangible experience may contribute to the image of the cultural sites and hence to further development of this form of tourism in the country.

The findings suggest that there are not many cultural attractions available in Bahrain. Those that exist should be further developed to enhance the tourist experience. Further information should be provided on the cultural attractions, more photos and videos, travel maps and other multimedia elements should be added to provide potential visitors with further information. A successful website should consider customer’s interest and preferences in order for this information to pro-

vide personalized communication, services and adaptation to the development of cultural tourism.

In addition, it is important to realize the potential of tourism and the need for collaboration among tourism agencies and authorities as well as for collaboration with other countries with mature tourism sectors. Bahrain is not the only country looking for a sound strategy to attract a steady flow of international leisure tourists in the coming years. The search for a right balance and a variety of activities is essential to keep up with the competition of Bahrain's neighbors. The branding or rebranding of tourism and cultural tourism in the country is a complex process, and depends on the country's unique political, economic and social conditions. As a result the local authorities, including the Ministry of Culture, and the travel community should consider the reviews available on TripAdvisor in reference to the development of cultural attractions. Social media and TripAdvisor are potential tools to shape behaviours, influence the travel decision and can be trusted for decision making especially in planning and developing tourism products. By using the Internet as a marketing tool, tourism organisations in Bahrain may gain a distinct advantage in customer retention, they can create themes and routes that interest this particular segment and increase the tourism demand in the country.

## LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

A few limitations were identified in this research. This study is of an exploratory nature and the results cannot be generalized without further studies on larger samples. The convenience sampling method used to select the participants may not be representative of the population. However, the chosen sample served the purpose of this paper. The secondary data is collected from TripAdvisor only for Bahrain and may be considered as not reliable and trustworthy. Further research

can extended to other travel websites and refer to other attractions for a more complete view. Finally, other factors may be considered such as location, language, city or country of origin to make further analysis on the reviews.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Blog:** A virtual log, commonly used for sharing ideas.

**Cultural Heritage Tourism:** Tourism that highlights the cultural heritage and artistic aspects of a destination.

**Social Media:** Web 2.0 web sites and applications.

**Tag:** A keyword that refers to a digital object.

**Trip Advisor:** Travel Web 2.0 website providing reviews of travel-related content.

**Web 2.0:** A conglomeration of folksonomies and syndication, wikis and mashups, social networks.

**Wiki:** A webpage or a set of web pages that can be edited by anyone.