# USING TRIPADVISOR© FOR EXPLORING CULTURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN BAHRAIN

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Social networks have brought new opportunities in tourism destinations management and marketing. Based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the study explores how users in tourism accept and use technology based on the perceived usefulness and perceived ease-of-use, in this case Trip Advisor. The findings suggest that travellers and visitors use TripAdvisor to collect information about a destination and share experiences with other community members, before and after visiting key cultural attractions. Furthermore, cultural tourism has a potential to grow in the region however, there should be more information available on the attractions websites. Cultural attractions should be more organized, offer more information and enhance the cultural experience. This paper recommends that social networks and TripAdvisor should be used by the local tourism authorities for the development and promotion of cultural tourism in Bahrain.

## 1. Introduction

Internet marketing has impacted on both marketers and consumers, influencing and changing consumer behaviour in tourism. 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 and Pavlov, 2002). Various studies suggest that technology adoption in developing countries is problematic and characterised by poor business and governance conditions and inappropriate infrastructure (Irura and Manjiry, 2013). These social networks have created new demands, which means that organisations have to start rethinking the ways they operate and they communicate with their

consumers. Social media 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 and Zach, 2011:526). 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 and Rossides, 2012). The research objective of this study is to identify the potential to develop further cultural tourism via the reviews on TripAdvisor on the various attractions and cultural sites in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

## 2. Tourism and Social networks in Bahrain

The Middle East offers a wide collection of centres of touristic appeal, and many rank these attractions among the most important places to visit (Knowles, Diamantis and El-Mourhabi, 2004). As the flow of oil income has been decreasing, countries in the region 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); it is estimated that the contribution of the Travel and Tourism sector in 2015 was 11.7% of the total employment (78,000 jobs) (WTTC, 2015).

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 and El-Mourhabi, 2004). Although, Bahrain offers various events such as the F1, the competition is high from its neighbours, 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, Greek, Roman and Ottoman sites. As recognition of its rich cultural heritage, Manama was awarded the title of the 2013 Capital of Arab Tourism, as part of UNESCO's programme to promote culture capitals across the world (http://culture.gov.bh). 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.

Knowles, Diamantis and El-Mourhabi (2004:304) claim that "*the country is increasingly encouraging investment in the tourism sector*". At the same time it has become attractive to business and leisure visitors. The estimation for 2015 in Bahrain's tourist arrivals was 11,459 million and the projection for 2020 is 12,198 million (Alpen Capital, 2011). However, Bahrain has been attracting visitors mainly from Saudi Arabia who are in search for entertainment, as well as business, and not culture (Arab News, 2013). 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.

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 and Adu-Gyamfi, 2013). 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. Hence, social networking has changed consumer behaviours as at the same time many tourism companies and providers operate online to support these types of consumers. 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 and Adu-Gyamfi, 2013; Buhalis and Law, 2008).

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 behaviour of travel consumers, and how their views and expressed shared opinions may provide an indication of further tourism enhancement and development (Zaugg, 2006 in Twumasi and Adu-Gyamfi, 2013:106).

*2.1 Technology Acceptance Model, Diffusion and Adoption*

Many researchers have used the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to examine consumers' attitudes and beliefs to technology (Swilley, 2010). Lekhanya (2013) states that diffusion is concerned with the spread of a new product from its source to the consuming public; adoption is a process that focuses on the stage through which an individual consumer passes, when deciding to accept or reject a new product. In diffusion the decision-making is centralised upon the owner, hence adoption/diffusion is determined in terms of technical compatibility, technical complexity (ease of use) and relative advantage (perceived need) (Wilkin, 2012). When considering the adoption of technology two main factors are significant, the radicalness of the innovation and its disruptiveness, hence to the extent to which the consumer values the innovation. The travel and tourism industry has witnessed a surge in terms of the adoption of information and communication technology such as TripAdvisor. In this case, it is important to explore the dynamics of the diffusion process, and analyse the factors of the adoption process and develop. When tourists are buying products go through various stages in which they search for information relevant to their trip about the destination, the transportation, the actual service encounter. Thus, the suppliers should be engaged with the tourists at all stages, which creates high complexity in the diffusion process of ICT among the tourism destination providers. This is explained by the variety of entities and providers in the supply chain that may not value in the same way the adoption of ICT in the selling process. Research suggests that the adoption of ICT in tourism is steadily improving, especially by new players.

The determinants of use diffusion are associated with the geographic location of the firm, the internal characteristics of the firm and the market condition. For example, a tourism company will find it easier to adopt and use

ICTs if it is located in a country with high levels of ICT developments. The market environment is linked to customer readiness, such as the willingness of customers to accept the use of ICT and competitor's level of adoption. Many studies have proven the competitive pressure as a driver for innovation (i.e. Crook and Kumar, 1998). Moreover, technology trust, interpersonal trust and planned change activities influence technology adoption behaviour and enhance the level of adoption (Moital et al., 2009). Very little research in tourism has used the TAM (Ban and Ramsaran-Fowdar, 2013). This research uses a qualitative approach to understand consumers' technology adoption behaviour (Chtourou and Souiden, 2010) and how their views on TripAdvisor may provide information on developing further cultural tourism in Bahrain. TripAdvisor has been chosen for this study as it provides online users with a better system design (ease of use) and more effective travel planning (usefulness) to communicate desired travel information (Ban and Ramsaran-Fowdar, 2013).

### 3. Methodological Approach

Secondary data 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 and Adu-Gyamfi, 2013). TripAdvisor facilitates the reviewing of tourism products and services around the world and brings together individuals in discussion forums, as well as 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 and Law, 2008).

On Sunday 6 April 2015, a review of the website showed 563 topics under the Bahrain Travel Forum section. At the same time there were 1,507 forum posts from members who are knowledgeable about the destination. From Sunday 6 until Sunday 13 April 2015, under the section '*Things to do in Manama*', there were 19 attractions identified and in total 1,238 reviews (see Table 2). Fifty cases were purposively selected and analysed for the study. According to Twumasi and Adu-Gyamfi (2013:106) "*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 behaviour 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 of social media or travel is used by other studies such as Wenger (2008) who

analysed the content of blog postings and Xiang and Gretzel (2010) who studied social media and its role as an information travel search.

## 4. Results and Discussion

*4.1. 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 (Um and Crompton, 1997). 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 they posted their reviews (the most recent, from November 2014 until April 2015). 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 1.

**Table 1: The characteristics of Bahrain forum sample members**

| Variables used | N=50 | % |
|---|---|---|
| *Gender* | | |
| Male | 38 | 76% |
| Female | 12 | 24% |
| | | |
| *Age* | | |
| 20-25 | 33 | 66% |
| 26-35 | 11 | 22% |
| 36-50 | 3 | 6% |
| 50+ | 3 | 6% |
| | | |
| *Location* | | |
| UK | 12 | 24% |
| USA | 13 | 26% |
| Saudi Arabia | 13 | 26% |
| UAE | 9 | 18% |
| Other | 3 | 6% |
| | | |
| *Time of posting* | | |
| March 2015 | 24 | 48% |
| April 2015 | 26 | 52% |

Most of the participants were male (76%) and 24% were female, between the age of 20-25 (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.

*4.2. The impact of social networking site reviews on TripAdvisor on cultural tourism in Bahrain*

The participants in the study provided reviews on various cultural attractions and events in Bahrain (Table 2). The reviews of the cultural attractions 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 "*The Bab el Bahrain really isn't a proper souk. All the shops are housed in a modern shopping arcade*". Another added "*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".

**Table 2: Attractions and events in TripAdvisor (Bahrain)**

| Type of attraction - event | No of reviews Total= 1238 | No of reviews chosen for the study (N=50) |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Al-Fatih Mosque | 191 | 12 |
| 2. Bahrain National Museum | 215 | 11 |
| 3. Qalat Al Bahrain | 167 | 5 |
| 4. Bahrain International Circuit | 126 | 0 |
| 5. Lost Paradise of Dilmun Water Park | 93 | 0 |
| 6. Viva Karting Bahrain | 19 | 0 |
| 7. Beit Al Qur'an | 20 | 2 |
| 8. Wahoo Water Park | 65 | 0 |
| 9. Bab al Bahrain Souk | 120 | 8 |
| 10. Al Dar Islands Bahrain | 57 | 0 |
| 11. Ahmed Al Fateh Islamic Center | 4 | 1 |
| 12. Mohammed Bin Faris House of Sout Music | 1 | 1 |
| 13. Tree of Life | 121 | 6 |
| 14. Oil Museum and First Oil Well | 4 | 1 |
| 15. Adhari Park | 29 | 0 |
| 16. Museum of Pearl Diving | 2 | 1 |
| 17. Ad Diraz Temple | 2 | 1 |
| 18. Bait Shaikh Salman Historic Palace | 1 | 1 |
| 19. Wahoo Waterpark | 1 | 0 |

Source: TripAdvisor (2015)

Note: the places highlighted in green are labelled as "*cultural attractions*" by TripAdvisor

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 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 and Pan, 2008). Table 3 exhibits the reviewers' overall evaluation of the attractions used for the purpose of this study:

**Table 3**: **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 (2015)

It is evident from the above that the majority of reviewers rated the overall experience both as excellent and 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.

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 and Foresight, 2007:3), 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 and Ashworth, 2010:2). As Dowling (2008) 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 social media could add to the dissemination of information on cultural and other tourism attractions and products. Chua and Banerjee (2013) similarly support this view and claim that "*TripAdvisor is recognized as an important information source among users for travel planning*".


## 5. Conclusion

This study contributes to the current literature on the use of social media (TripAdvisor) on cultural tourism planning and development. Communication via social media can be effective for tourism destinations and cultural tourism. 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 attractions and the potential for further development. Advantages and challenges are usually discussed 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 destination management organisations may adopt the use of ICT in developing and further expanding cultural tourism in Bahrain as the technology acceptance model shows in this study.

It is important to realise the potential of cultural tourism in Bahrain and the need for collaboration among tourism agencies and authorities, as it offers a sound strategy to attract a steady flow of international leisure tourists in the

coming years. 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. The local authorities should have the sufficient capacity to develop the physical and the human capital required to develop effective adoption strategies.

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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