

Internet Adoption in Gulf Cooperation Council's Tourism Industry

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the use of internet applications and their effects in the tourism industry of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). As a platform for e-commerce, the internet remains a reliable tool for use in the tourism industry, a conception that continues to win increased acceptance among major players in the industry. Despite evidence of slow rates of internet adoption in the tourism sectors of some nations, the future of tourism seems heavily dependent on this technology. This exploration is conducted based on available theoretical models which have been used on the subject in other countries, with the findings forming the basis in asserting the future of the tourism industry in the GCC. Conservativeness was found to be a major setback to the sustained competitive exploitation of internet value in GCC's tourism industry.

Key Words: e-commerce, internet, GCC, tourism

1. Introduction

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has been one of the world's major tourism destinations. On the other hand, revolutionary developments in the ICT world, more specifically the internet, over past decades have had far-reaching impact on the tourism industry, the world over. The internet has affected the tourism industry not only through its use as a source and platform for improved information sharing, but also through the concept of e-commerce. The impact of ICT in this industry has been substantial enough to prompt the conception that the future of tourism is dependent on the adoption of advances in the ICT world (Balasubramanian, 2010). As a result, research on the internet and the effects it has brought on the tourism industry has been on common subject of interest by scholars across the globe over the past decades.

Nevertheless, most research on the adoption and effect of ICT and the internet on tourism have however emphasized on tourism in the western world, namely; Europe and America. There is little research to-date on the status of ICT and internet adoption and the impact it has brought on the GCC tourism industry (Al-Rawi, et al., 2008). Owing to common consensus on the rapid rate of incorporating e-commerce capabilities in tourism, research study on the effects of the internet on tourism in the GCC is imperative. This paper explores internet applications and the effects of such in the tourism industry in the GCC. This exploration is conducted based on available theoretical models which have been used on the subject in other countries such as Europe, with the findings forming the basis in asserting the future of the tourism industry in the GCC.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Effects of the Internet in the Tourism Industry*

2.1.1 Introduction

The internet remains one of the most revolutionary inventions in the history of mankind; a technological development whose capability has found significance in almost all spheres of life of the modern society. From information processing and sharing and social networking to online commerce, nothing seems impossible with the internet. E-commerce as a competitive attribute of the internet is increasingly finding value for application in numerous industries and the tourism industry has not been an exemption. Tourism as an industry has continued to enjoy rapid growth, positioning it as one of the most promising economic resources among societies across the globe (Longhi, 2011). This is not only true for traditionally known tourism destinations but also for emerging world tourism destinations such as Middle East countries. As an emphasis, the number of international tourist arrivals in the Middle East and more specifically in Saudi Arabia and other member countries of the GCC have continued witnessing impressive success over the past decade. In 2007 for example, the number of international

tourist arrivals in the Middle East region were estimated at 47 million (Mustafa, 2010). This was despite evidence of continued conflicts and tension in the region. In addition, there has been an increase in the level of investment in the tourism industry by governments and the private sector in the GCC. Evidence of this is the vast level of investments in infrastructure and housing projects by member countries in the GCC as a tool for strengthening their competitive positioning in the global tourism business (Longhi, 2011).

2.1.2 Internet and Access to Tourism Information

The rapid growth on the economic and activity scopes of the tourism industry has been closely attributed to the consulted exploitation of ICT technology capabilities in enhancing the management of operations in the industry. There are numerous advantages associated the use of internet-based platforms in the tourism industry. On the one hand, the internet is a competitive platform for information gathering, processing, and sharing among individuals irrespective of their cultural, racial, nationality, or geographical location orientations. Information accessibility and reliability is instrumental factor in shaping informed decisions among humans; a notion that remains at the heart of the internet technology (Mustafa, 2010).

In the modern society, people are not only using the internet for searching information on their planned destinations but more for facilitating the planning process. This can be established from available statistics claiming that an estimated over 75 million travelers across the globe are successfully engaging the internet in the process of planning their tourist activities (Hvidt, 2011). Some of the most sought information on tourism over the internet includes the search for details on planned destinations such as climate, security, travel and accommodation, and core tourist attraction features among others (Hvidt, 2011). Therefore, through the presence of information on a variety of tourism products and services, the internet has become a major platform for use in comparative tourism decision making in our society.

2.1.3 Enhanced Service Provision and Research in the Industry

Moreover, the internet has played a great role in promoting effective customer relations management in the tourism industry. The positioning of any business in the market depends significantly on its pool of consumer share relative to those of its core competitors. Conversely, the realization of a competitive consumer pool not only depends on the quality of services which are offered but more on the publicity enjoyed by business entities from their target or potential consumers. This dictates for consulted investment in business advertisements and marketing and the tourism sector has not been left behind. In particular, the internet continues to competitively serve this role owing to its cost effectiveness, efficiency and reliability in executing information dissemination to the people (Jones, 2008).

Furthermore, the evidence presence of and the ever growing numerous websites which are dedicated to providing tourism information on tourism activities in particular countries as well as the various services offered by the different parties in the industry has made the internet a source for insightful information on tourism destination choice making decisions among aspiring tourists (WTO, 2007; 2010). In addition, most tourists are nowadays using internet websites like social networking sites as a platform for expressing their views on the quality of services offered in given tourism industries they have engaged with in the past (Mustafa, 2010). This information has far-reaching impact on the reputation of the organizations in question given the accessibility of sentiments posted on such websites by members of the public and hence potential tourists across the globe just by the click of the button.

Enabling the conducting of business research by players in the tourism industry is another effect that tourism has brought to the operations of the tourism industry in the modern society. In an effort to pursue their competitive positioning in the marketplace, businesses involved in the tourism industry such as hotels, airlines, and even tourist site managements engage in constant reviewing comments from previous visitors as a source of information on the eminent strengths and weakness of their businesses (Jones, 2008). Indeed, most companies are not only integrating feedback provisions on their websites but are increasingly commanding their presence in popular social and blogging networks in the search for consumer information.

2.1.4 Internet and E-Commerce for Tourist Products and Services

E-commerce both in terms of electronic funds transfer and online marketing of products and services is no doubt the most significant development in the internet that continues to impact on the development and structuring of the tourism industry. Unlike is the case with traditional means of doing business, the emergence of internet-based financial transaction has positioned itself not only as a more secure but also an efficient and reliable tool for making payment for goods and services in the society. This has in turn reduced the cost of planning tourism-related activities both for business investments and tourists (Kalesar, 2010). Such have also served well in enhancing efficiency of access and/or providing services in the industry.

2.1.5 Internet's Web 2.0 and the Tourism Industry

Last but not least, the concept of Web 2.0 has emerged as a revolutionary innovation to the tourism industry. This development on the internet has brought with it numerous benefits, more so the capability of internet users to engage in the creating and sharing of user-generated contents. This has led to a continued decline in the traditional use of word of mouth as a core means for information sharing in the society. In the in the tourism industry, the capability of the Web 2.0 can be evident from the capabilities of sharing pictures and videos as well as travel blogs (Jones, 2008). The ultimate implication of this development has been the spreading of the information on the major world sites of tourism attractions and their unique attributes and hence enhancing the tourism industry.

2.2 Limitation in Literature

Nevertheless, the impacts of these competitive capabilities that the internet has brought to tourism have been mainly proved by findings from research activities in other countries across the globe, more specifically in Europe and America. Little is known on the actual effects that the internet has had on the development and structuring of the tourism industry in the GCC. Lack of literature confirming the significance of the internet as a driving force to the growth of tourism activities not only in the GCC but also in other societies across the globe limits the generalized acceptability of the benefits that other societies claim to be winning from this technology. This desire for proving the significance of the internet on the tourism industry as a whole remains the core interests of this paper.

3. Research Methodology

The main purpose of this research study was to establish the impact the adoption of the internet as a platform managing tourism as an economic activity has brought to the tourism Industry of the GCC. In addition, the paper sought to determine the extent to which core players in the GCC's tourism industry have embraced the internet as an integral part to their search for sustained competitive economic advantage in the market. The research study was therefore aimed at qualifying with the GCC tourism industry has found consulted commitment to the use the vast potential for business activities provided by the internet. Moreover, the strengths and weaknesses of internet capability integration into GCC's tourism industry were to be identified as the basis for asserting the future of this industry.

In order to meet its objective, the research employed a qualitative approach as the core research methodology. Data on the level, strengths, and limitations to the exploitation of internet capabilities in the industry was collected by reviewing numerous research literatures and reports from authoritative entities informing the degree of internet use in the GCC' tourism sectors. To get a better insight into the effects of tourism on the tourism sector of the GCC, emphasis was given to a case by case reviewing of secondary data on the performance of the tourism sectors of individual member states of the GCC community. The research data was mainly collected from tourism organizations within The Arabian Gulf Countries.

The evident presence little research on the subject of the internet and its impact on the tourism industry of the GCC, analysis and hence conclusions of the research was executed by using a comparative approach. The findings of this research was analyzed on comparative basis based on theoretical frameworks which have been used on the subject in other countries such as Europe and America which have enjoyed considerable success in asserting the significance or effects of the internet on tourism. A qualitative approach to this research was qualified by the competitive value this approach has in establishing the underlying linkages or interrelationships among variables concerning human values and behaviors. This is usually achieved through the use of deductive reasoning in asserting research conclusions.

4. Results

Being exploratory in nature, the research did not engage much in measuring the extent to which the internet has changed impacted on the tourism industry of the member countries of the GCC community. Rather, the main goal of the research study was to establish the various and eminent dynamic contributory factors behind changes in the industry. As a result, highlights on the status of tourism activities in each of the member states of the GCC as they relate to the use of the internet in the industry remained a strong basis for meeting objectives of this research. The findings conservative nature of many states of the GCC community and more particularly the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was identified as the main obstacle to the competitive exploitation of the internet in the development of GCC's tourism industry.

4.1 The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The adoption and impact of the internet on the development of the tourism sector in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been significantly slow relative to other economies in the region. This situation is however rapidly changing with more with evidence of increased involvement of the citizens of Saudi Arabia in e-commerce and

increased engage of the internet by international visitors seeking entry into the nation. For example, the Arabian Travel Market recorded a 118% in the number of online registrations by international visitors into the kingdom of Saudi Arabia; a sign of the continued e-tourism concepts in the nation (Smith, 2011).

In addition, increase of investment to the nation's infrastructure by the government has been substantially influenced by its increased use of the internet. Intensified marketing of Hajj as a major religious tourism attraction, the nation enjoyed an increase of about 9.3% in the number of visas issued for attendees to this religious pilgrimage in 2010 compared to those issued in 2009 (Smith, 2011). Furthermore, the country has witnessed an increase of about 8.6% increase in the number of visitors seeking the purchase of tourism products and services from the nation online over the same time period (Hvidt, 2011). The financial flow through online transactions has also increased subsequently as the number of visitors using online transactions increased.

On the contrary however, the level of trust on e-commerce among members of the Saudi Arabia society remains low. Much of the documentation and registering of tourists still involves the traditional physical processes. Such include processes such as the processing of visa for visitors. In terms of advertising, the Saudi Arabian community still remains slow in adopting the use of the internet in marketing its core tourist attractions (Hvidt, 2011). Indeed, the few marketing initiatives in the nation are engaged through conferences and exhibitions.

4.2 The United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates has invested considerably in using the internet in enhancing niche market in the tourism industry. The ministry of tourism and commerce marketing for Dubai has engaged the capabilities of the internet in enhancing its sales for tourism products and services. This is realized through the presence of e-services option in the official website of the ministry. Of the various e-services offered by this website include reservations for hotel rooms, the online sale of images, and options for interested persons or business entities to register as agents for conducting promotions on the tourism products and services of Dubai (Kalesar, 2010). As a source for acquiring feedbacks on the quality of services offered, the website provides for clients to post suggestions as well as complaints on its website.

The impact of creating a one stop source of information for potential tourists is another competitive use of the internet the UAE has embraced. The dubai.com website for example incorporates varied tour information ranging from flights, hotels, and other tour-related services offered by various actors in the country's tourism industry. Ranked as among prominent tourist destinations, most tourist organizations in Dubai are involved in the online marketing of tourism products and services and the sales through e-commerce (Kalesar, 2010). In addition, the UAE nation is in the process of establishing electronic ID cards.

4.3 The Kingdom of Bahrain

The Kingdom of Bahrain is deemed as the most advanced state in the Gulf region in terms of internet and ICT technology use among its members. The government of Bahrain has heavily invested in e-government and e-commerce infrastructures, and hence the much benefits that the nation's tourism sector is enjoying from the use of the internet (Kalesar, 2011). This has made the Kingdom one of the most modern countries in the GCC. This progressive attitude continues to win it much appreciation from the international community, a strength that remains strong in influencing the influx of international visitors in the nation. In fact, capitalization on e-practices gives hope for a quick recovery of the nation's tourism sector.

4.4 The Sultanate of Oman

Tourism in Oman is heavily marketed through the use of the internet. The government is particularly engaged in this process through its ministry of tourism in its official website. The website provides visitors with vast and up-to-date information about the country and its tourist attractions. It also provides for comparative information on issues such as how to get to Oman, accommodation, tour guide services, and options for getting around the country as well as maps to the various attraction sites. Of significance is the website's depiction of Oman as an "outdoor geological museum" (Ministry of Tourism of Oman, 2012). This is in addition to providing updated information on major tourist attraction festivals and events taking place in the nation at various times of the year. In addition, Oman tourism related ads are a common phenomenon on the internet.

4.5 The State of Qatar

Tourism in Qatar is a major investment by the government. The Qatar government operates an official website through the Qatar Tourism Authority. This website is dedicated for up-to-date information on tourism in the nation. Among its various features include a vast pool of resources on the nature of Qatar, its culture, tourist attractions, political structure, and the economy (www.qatartourism.gov.qa, 2012). Also present in this website is comparative information on issues such as how to get to Qatar, accommodation, tour guides, options for getting

around the country, and providing maps to the various attraction sites. It also provides links to the various agencies offering tourism products and services in the nation.

4.6 The State of Kuwait

Tourism is a major economic activity in Kuwait. The Kuwait government has heavily invested in the marketing of its tourism industry online. The country has committed substantial about of resources in maintaining the Kuwait government online website which provides vast information resources on the nation's tourism industry (Kuwait Government Online, 2012). This information ranges from tourist attractions to the various organizations engaged in providing services to tourist seeking to visit the country. The sector has also exploited the advantage of major travel information websites like the TripAdvisor among numerous others to enhance its scope of reach for potential tourists.

5. Discussion of results

The findings of this research provided a strong insight on the slow rate at which most states in the GCC have embraced the use of internet as a potential promoter to the competitive positioning of their tourism sectors. Nevertheless, the results have established indication on the significant value that the tourism industry of the GCC is enjoying from the changes brought to the industry by ICT and the internet technologies. In addition, there are eminent differences in the level of engaging e-tourism among individual member states in the GCC community. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia remains the least in the presence of information related to its tourism sector. On the other hand, despite its claimed superiority in terms of ICT and internet technology, the use of internet in the tourism sector of Bahrain state remains low. However, other states such as Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE have substantially invested on the e-tourism. The main forms areas of internet use in the GCC tourism industry is in the marketing of tourism products and services as well as online reservation of services.

6. Importance of the changes to the tourism industry in the GCC

The various effects that the internet has brought to the tourism industry in the GCC have had their far-reaching significance in enhancing the social, economic, and cultural wellbeing of the GCC countries. Among these benefits include the fact that the continued growth in tourism in among members of the GCC remains a major cause for the continued safeguard of peace in the region. Assured peace and security is an instrumental factor in determining the success rate of the tourism industry in any nation (Kalesar, 2011). This is particularly true given the fact that unlike other forms of economic which find economic benefits for all the involved parties, tourism has the visitors or the tourists as spenders seeking benefits such as leisure.

The human society is highly prone to generalized categorization of others. Therefore, the fact that the Middle East has remained a potential threat to the security of the world from the generalized perceptions or worldviews of the global community, the fact that some nations and especially those in the GCC enjoy growth in their tourism sectors implies their unique identity in the society (Law, 2004). All this has been achieved through the continued opening up of the nations to accommodate the diverse cultures and views of other nations, an element that has much to claim from the continued embracement of technological advancements such as the internet. The UAE and the Kingdom of Bahrain are good example in explaining the impact that the internet and ICT technology has brought to the tourism industry of GCC countries.

On the other hand, the changes of the internet to the tourism industry stand to be hailed for its significance in promoting tourism as a competitive economic resource for GCC nations. The level of tourism activities among member countries of the GCC community has been on the increase over the past few decades. This is evident from the increases in the number of international tourist arrivals in the GCC and also from the increased use of the internet by tourist to purchase tourism products and services from these countries. Evidence here is the trends in the tourism industry of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in terms of increased online tourism activities (Hvidt, 2011).

Furthermore, internet-based electronic funds transfer transactions have been on the raise in the GCC community. An emphasis here is the fact that most of the member countries of the GCC community have engaged the services of tour travel guides or agents who are in turn promoting this tourism sector through online reservations. Just to note, the capabilities of the internet go beyond the mere planning or processing of necessary requirements by tourists to reach their destinations. The internet and particularly through the use of the Web 2.0 provides for other detailed services such as booking tour guides and identifying and hence planning the main tourist sites to be visited (WTTC, 2010); a source for cost saving enhanced efficiency in service delivery.

The importance of the changes that the internet has brought to the tourism industry in the GCC can be explained by the continued embracement of technological advances in the society. The Islamic world has historically

remained a very conservative community, an element that has continued to limit the penetration of otherwise made in the west products and services in their communities. This is however continuously changing given the current trend of involvement of even the most conservative states such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in promoting tourism activities through the use of technology (Smith, 2011). The increasing openness to accepting foreign cultures has indeed witnessed rapid increase in the use of ICT products and services among members of Saudi Arabia; making it as major market for such products.

7. The future of GCC's tourism industry

The future of the tourism industry in the GCC seems quite bright due to two reasons. On the one hand, although currently enjoying a competitive edge thanks to the continued integration of ICT and internet technological capabilities, the industry is yet to exploit the full potential of these technologies in the tourism sector. For example, despite increased recognition of ICT and its positive role in shaping tourism in Saudi Arabia, the Saudi government is still restrictive to the free flow and/or sharing of information. Given current trends on increase in the number of internet user in the nation, it is not doubt an indicator of a future society that will be strongly oriented to the use of technology (Smith, 2011).

Simply put, the future of the tourism industry in the GCC is dependent on the consulted acknowledgement to the significance of incorporating technology in the running of the industry. In addition, it is no doubt that the continued embracement of ICT technology among the member countries of the GCC community will at the best leverage the community's tourism industry to the international competition platform. True to the letter, technological advancements in the modern are rapidly changing with the resulting technologies enjoying better capabilities. In fact, it has remained a common claim that the rate of technological advancement is so fast that the consumers of such advancements are lagging behind in terms of fully exploiting them; meaning that technology is here to stay.

The implication of these arguments is that the future of the GCC tourism industry stands to continue enjoying the benefits associated with technology advancements. In fact, the fact that member countries of GCC community are increasingly investing in developing infrastructures as well as continuing to adopt ICT technology at a much higher rate is an advantage to the future of the industry. This is true given trends in the gradual changing of some of the major restrictions on the use of technology in some states of the GCC (Losman, 2010). A good example here is the Saudi Arabia and its history of internet censoring, a provision that stand to be changed if much is to be realized towards its vision of becoming a global tourist hub.

On the other hand, infrastructure is one of the most fundamental elements in determining tourist activities in any society. In appreciating the importance of infrastructure in defining the nation's tourism sector, Saudi Arabia is currently embarked in executing a strategic plan for its tourism sector which is projected to increase the number of tourists visiting the country to 15.8 million by the year 2014 (Smith, 2011). The government has continued to invest substantially on housing and infrastructure as fundamental factors of concern to the nation's tourism outlook. The trend has been similar in most other member countries within the GCC community. This implies a future tourism industry in the GCC that will be grounded on strong infrastructure and hence its assured returns to the community.

8. Conclusions, research limitations, and recommendations for further research

The use of e-tourism in the GCC is relatively low compared to other societies across the globe such as Europe and America. This is can be attributed to slow adoption of the internet technology into the society, a problem that is best evident in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, with evidence of continued integration of the internet into the tourism sectors of member states and their consulted investment in tourism-related infrastructures, the future of the GCC's tourism industry remains a promising one.

As a research limitation, the conclusions of this research were not grounded on analysis of primary but rather secondary data. Future research on the subject should therefore engage in gathering and analyzing primary data to establish a more informed insight on the motivational as well as inhibiting factors to the use of internet in the tourism industry of the GCC.

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