

Investigating the Role of Social Media in Tourism Promotion: A Case Study from Egypt (2019–2021)

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Received on: 08 March 2023

Accepted on: 29 March 2023

Published on: 20 April 2023

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the role of social media in promoting tourism in Egypt by examining the topic from the perspective of international and domestic tourists (the demand side) and from the perspective of Egyptian tourism providers (the supply side). The study applies a mixed-methods approach to answer the research questions and reach the study objectives. A questionnaire was sent to 213 international tourists and 200 Egyptian tourists. This aims to identify the views of international and Egyptians tourists about the benefits of using the social media and their opinions about Egyptian social media platforms related to tourism. SPSS package was used to statistically analyse quantitative data. Furthermore, in-depth interviews were done with fifteen of the largest travel companies in Egypt, representing private suppliers and with the head of international campaigns and general manager of planning in Egyptian Tourism Authority representing public suppliers. Qualitative data obtained from tourism providers were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings show that travel companies in Egypt did not make use of the benefits of social media. The main obstacle was the fake companies that take their market share and ruin the reputation of Egypt. In consequences, they want the government to have a supervisory role over them. Concerning Egyptian Tourism Authority, they did not have an online strategy in 2019. The situation improved in 2020 and in 2021 their online branding strategy was in effect. From the perspective of tourists (domestic and international), tourism promotion, both domestic and international tourists recommend stopping fake products, transparency and making price lists of services and attractions to promote Egypt in innovative ways such as promoting culture and local food and sharing real people experiences.

Keywords: Social media, tourism promotion, Web 2.0, user generated contents (UGC)

1. INTRODUCTION

The continuous growth of the numbers of users of social media platforms attracts the attention of marketers for marketing tourism and to increase tourism sales (Samanta & Mukunda, 2017). With the introduction of the web 2 consumers became authors, they can create and share their own experiences and promote their favourite brands (Mangold and Faulds,

2009; Vivek et al., 2012). The close match between the nature of a given tourist product being informative and the features of social media offering global reach and interaction shows that social media is an essential means for promoting tourism.

In Egypt, Tourism is considered as the main source of national income as it helps to combat unemployment and relieve poverty (El Nagar & Derbali, 2020). The total travel and tourism contribution to GDP in 2019

was 8.8% and 9.2% to total employment (WTTC, 2021). Egypt is distinguished by the diversity of its tourism types, considered as a must-see destination and one of the strongest brands in the middle east (Avraham, 2016), a destination that suits all budgets, making cultural tourism becoming the 22nd globally and ranking 38th in terms of world heritage cultural sites and the third in price competitiveness (TCR, 2019). After 2011 revolution, the travel industry suffered with periods of ups and downs in international tourists' arrivals.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The statement of the problem can be set as follows: What is the role of social media in promoting tourism in Egypt?

To answer this question, the researcher conducted exploratory research.

This kind of research is concerned with discovering new phenomenon, which was not examined before. In this type of research, the researcher relies on questions rather than hypotheses (Tayie, 2017). Depending on the usefulness of exploratory studies for social research, and aiming to investigate the problem under study, exploration can uncover troubles or difficulties Egypt should avoid and propose recommendations to consider.

1.2 Research Objectives

The main objective of this research is to examine the role of social media tourism in promoting Egypt and in determining the effectiveness of social media as a communication mechanism in the tourism industry. The research objectives are as follows:

1. To investigate the role of social media in promoting tourism in Egypt from suppliers, both private and public sectors.
2. To determine challenges that face the private and public sectors when adopting social media.

3. To investigate the role of social media in promoting Egypt (from the demander's side) by identifying the views of international and Egyptian travellers regarding the benefits of using social media in their travel and also by identifying their opinions about Egyptian social media platforms related to tourism.

1.3 Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

1. How do owners and managers of Egyptian travel agencies promote Egypt as a travel destination?
2. How do managers in Egyptian Tourism Authority (ETA) promote Egypt through social media?
3. What are the challenges that travel companies face when adopting social media?
4. What are the recommendations and strategies to improve travel agencies' usage of social media?
5. How do tourists visiting Egypt refer to social media when searching for information or making decisions? And how do they perceive Egyptian social platforms specialized in promoting tourism?
6. What are the recommendations of international and domestic tourists for effective tourism promotion via social media?

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Social Media and the Shift in Brand Promotion

A new golden era of branding has prospered because of social networks. This represents a challenge for companies because it requires creativity to position themselves and empower their brand in the market. There is a main shift in branding because of the emergence of web 2 as the balance of power has been changing (Arnhold, 2010). Web 2 technology allows independent consumer generated contents to be created such as texts and audio-visual materials.

Many consumer brands turn to consumer-to-consumer marketing methods in recent years because of their continuous growth and popularity of social media. One such method, user generated branding (UGB), is defined as the strategic and operative management of brands related to user generated contents to achieve brand goals (Arnhold, 2010).

Being an indicator for the rising importance of a brand related user generated contents is the evolution of social media. Social media marketing performs a remarkable role in changing the buying behaviour of the consumer and can be a great tool for brand promotion if employed regularly (Tudua & Jashi, 2015).

2.2 Theories Related to Social Media in the Field of Promotion

There are several theories that can be referenced in promoting products.

2.2.1 Uses and Gratification Theory

Uses and gratifications theory (UGT) proposes that spectators' members have power when using media as they have an active role in incorporating media in their own lives. UGT emerged in 1940's by the psychologist Hertzog (1944). Hertzog uses the term "gratifications" to describe precise needs or requirements reported by audiences when listening to radio programs. Afterward, many researchers became concerned by the reasons behind engaging audiences in different types of media.

Gratification theory supposes that users are interested in engaging with media through their desires for entertainment, information, rewards and making relationships. This theory may help to understand the role of social media content in engaging consumers or travellers and making them loyal as they can promote their own brands. In social media, a brand achieves its goal by delivering gratification or value to engage customers and build relationships with them (Malthouse et al., 2013).

2.2.2 Psychological Ownership Theory

As people's attitudes and behaviour change when they feel connected or have a strong relationship, researchers realized the importance of this theory in many fields such as organization commitment and employee's behaviour. By fulfilling the feeling of ownership, organizations can gain loyal customers who can generate content by sharing images and posts when using the organizations services.

Kumar and Nayak (2019) explored the role of psychological ownership towards the destinations in tourism by sending survey questionnaires to tourists in India and found a positive relationship between the sense of psychological ownership and the intention to revisit and recommend the destinations.

Zhang (2020) explored the psychological ownership phenomenon in an online brand community by applying a mixed approach. It was found that consumers' psychological ownership toward the online brand community can positively impact their relationship and commitment to the community and improve their brand attachment.

2.3 Social Media and Tourism in Egypt

Egypt is considered one of the most populated countries in the Middle East and its population is equivalent to 1.31% of the total world population. According to Data Reportal (2022), the population of Egypt was approximately 105.2 million in January 2022.

Egypt's media landscape has seen many challenges since 2011 revolution. Although TV is still the most known media in every Egyptian house, digital media has seen a great growth and many organizations started to change their traditional models by using digital services to gain high reach. Citizens in several Arab countries, including Egypt, started to use social media at the time of Arab spring to express their rights and freedom. They communicated their real time images and up to date information across social media sites.

Usage of social media in Egypt continues to grow. According to Digital (2022), the number of social media users in Egypt reached 51.45 million in January 2022. In 2020, Statista conducted a global consumer survey in Egypt and the result was that 83% of Egyptians use Facebook, 80% use WhatsApp, 61% use Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, while 33% use twitter and 10% use TripAdvisor.

Egyptian Tourism Authority (ETA) began to use social media campaigns since December 2015 after the terrorist attack in Sinai, resulting in the death of 224 tourists. Since then, the number of tourists fell drastically, and Egypt needed to restore its image and revive the tourism sector. This campaign was launched for 4 years through the ETA and the J Walter Thompson (JWT) international advertising agency to revive tourism in Egypt.

The campaign uses the hashtag "This is Egypt" #This is Egypt. Egyptians use the hashtag to represent their own country to the world, demonstrating their personal experiences and showing what they value on social media platforms. The campaign won golden and silver awards and JWT won the Effie award. These were given to companies that operate in the Middle East with the most effective communicative ideas and advertising efforts.

In 2019, another partnership with major branding and media companies took place. This included: Beautiful Destinations, Isobar Expedia, and CNN. The aim was to launch a global tourism campaign through TV, digital and social media campaigns. This diversification of media platforms is the key pillar of Egypt tourism reform program.

Concerning previous studies about social media and tourism in Egypt, there is a lack of articles concerning this subject. However, Bakr et al. (2013) conducted a study to investigate the role of social sites in promoting Egypt as an international destination by distributing questionnaires to tourists visiting Egypt. They wanted to know their opinions about the role of social media when purchasing Egyptian products.

The study concludes that social media, especially Facebook, has a remarkable role in promoting tourism. The researchers suggest that the Egyptian minister of tourism should be a member of an international site specialized in planning trips. This way tourists can visit Egypt. Furthermore, the researchers recommend that support from all specialized ministries and tourism associations must promote Egypt more effectively through social media using videos and photos. Finally, this study sheds light on the need of trained skilful humans' resources that can deal effectively using social media.

Marzouk (2016) investigates the usage of social media marketing from the organizations' perspective in Egypt. A quantitative method was used by sending questionnaires through emails to 541 different manufacturing firms across Egypt which use social media and at least has one brand or product on social media platforms. The study concludes that respondents in this chosen sample used social media the most for communication and promotion. Although they are aware of the importance of social media, especially in brand awareness and sales performance, the study recommends marketing managers in Egypt to develop a social media strategy for better communication, deeper relationship and interaction with their customers. Moreover, they should include social media as a part of their training programs.

Amara (2017) investigates cultural events in Egypt and how they contribute to destination branding. The study conducts in depth interviews with key stockholders working on public Egyptian tourism and cultural authorities. He found that respondents' opinions agreed that events play the role of an advertising strategy that can generate and preserve awareness of the destination. The study recommends developing a high-quality program of public cultural events to promote the profile and image of Egypt as a tourist destination.

Azzaz and Elabban (2018) examine the promotion of heritages sites in Egypt, by sending an online survey to fans or followers of El Muizz Street Facebook

pages. El Muizz Street is the oldest street in Cairo that contains many architectural treasures and Islamic mosques. Tourists who visit El Muizz Street shed light on the importance of social media, the comments and engagement on Facebook pages increase number of visitors to El Muizz Street as it allows them to experience and trust the place. On the other hand, the researchers conclude that the role of social media in promoting heritages sites in Egypt should receive more attention from scholars, tourism authorities responsible for promoting Egypt, and the Ministry of tourism. This research highlights the role of social media in promoting domestic tourism, especially during crisis as most of El Muizz Street visitors are locals.

Abdelmonsef et al. (2019) studied the ETA's social media content management using key performance indicators (KPI's) to compare between the contents of the ETAs on social media platforms and those of Egyptian tourism authorities' competitors. To add, they sent questionnaires to ETA's officials and found that ETA did not have an online strategy and, have a lack of awareness about how to manage social media contents.

El Emam and Kamel (2021) drew attention to the role that the Egyptian cuisine plays in destination promotion by sending questionnaires to tourists who ate Egyptian food in Cairo's five-star hotels. They found that tourists enjoyed the Egyptian cuisine. Moreover, they found a strong positive relation between the acceptance of Egyptian local cuisine and destination promotion. They recommended that Egyptian tourism officials' marketing plans should include local dishes as essential touristic products. Moreover, Egyptian tourism companies' programs should include local meals when organising their trip programs to international tourists.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Model and Sample of Analysis

Based on the nature of the research a mixed approach was adopted as the exploratory strategy that best suits the present research. Answering the research questions, can provide a good understanding of the

role of social media in promoting tourism and how they can be used as an effective marketing tool. The exploratory research is applied as there is not enough knowledge or information to clearly define a problem or a phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2007).

Regarding qualitative method, this research conducted 15 in depth interviews with the largest Egyptian companies representing private sector. The interviews conducted were with seniors in three significant positions: General manager, tourism manager and owner of the company. These positions are the most important in companies as they are from the first staff of decision making.

Concerning the public sector, which is represented by the Egyptian Tourism Authority (ETA), which is the main entity responsible of promoting Egypt, the researcher conducted the interview with Mrs. Suzan Mostafa, the head of international campaign and the general manager for planning in the ETA. She is considered the main responsible official for promoting the country and this position is deemed a high position that entails a great authority and is responsible for making decisions.

The interviews were conducted from October 2020 to April 2020. The researcher spent about one hour with each interviewee and made sure that respondents answer all questions. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated.

The method of data analysis was conducted manually using thematic analysis technique.

As the present study is concerned to explore the role of social media in promoting tourism using Egypt as a case study, a questionnaire was used to collect demand side data while in depth interviews were conducted with the supply side.

This study adopted a self-completion questionnaire as a tool to explore and identify the perceptions of domestic and international tourists who visited Egypt about the role of social media before, during and after

their trip. It ends with an open-ended question to identify tourists' recommendations for an effective tourism promotion through social media. In this study, the target population for the quantitative work is domestic and international tourists who visited Egypt. When performing research, it is essential to choose respondents who truly represent the population (Wilmot, 2005; Hinton, 2014).

For this research, non-probability sampling technique was chosen, which means that a purposive sample of international and domestic tourists who visited Egypt was selected. The questionnaire was sent to domestic and international tourists. During Covid-19 pandemic, domestic tourism spending in Egypt has grown to 62% while international tourism spending became 38%, in comparison 41% domestic tourism spending and 59% international tourism spending in 2019 (WTTC, 2022).

3.2 Response Rate for the Questionnaire

It was very difficult to contact international tourists during Covid-19 pandemic in hotels or airports due to safety measures. As such, the researcher contacted the travel companies selected from the qualitative sample in September 2021 to send them the questionnaires which in their turn send them to tourists through WhatsApp.

Unfortunately, only 60 questionnaires were received, from which 7 questionnaires were excluded due to missing data and 40 questionnaires were considered as a pilot study to ensure reliability and validity. Hence, the researcher decided to send the questionnaires through a well-known platform in scientific research called Poll fish.

In October 2021, 100 valid questionnaires were collected and in February 2022, 100 valid questionnaires were received. Regarding domestic tourism, 200 valid questionnaires were received in February 2022 through WhatsApp and Facebook. The researcher conducted a pilot study on 40 international tourists and 40 domestic tourists to ensure reliability and validity.

3.3 Reliability for Survey Measurements

To reach a high level of reliability, the research utilised a mixed method approach (qualitative and quantitative) in data collection. Moreover, the study used Cronbach's alpha to ensure reliability for survey measurements.

The following tables summarize the outcomes of internal reliability of the scales using Cronbach alpha, where the values are 0.802 for domestic tourists and 0.853 for international tourists. This is above 0.7, meaning that the results and the items in the scale are reliable. Tables (1) and (2) represent the reliability statistics for Egyptians tourists and reliability statistics for international tourists.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics for Egyptians Tourists

Role of social media in promoting tourism in Egypt	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
Exploring the attitude of tourists towards Egyptian social media accounts	0.736	3
Exploring behavior of travelers on social media before their trip	0.852	6
Exploring behavior of tourists towards social media during their trip	0.812	4
Exploring behavior of tourists towards social media after their trip	0.849	3
Total	0.802	16

Table 2: Reliability Statistics for International Tourists

Role of social media in promoting tourism in Egypt	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
Exploring the attitude of tourists towards Egyptian social media accounts	0.761	3
Exploring behavior of travelers on social media before their trip	0.781	6
Exploring behavior of tourists towards social media during their trip	0.883	4
Exploring behavior of tourists towards social media after their trip	0.839	3
Total	0.853	16

3.4 Statistical Methods Used in Quantitative Data Analysis

As previously stated, the questionnaires were addressed to domestic and international tourists who visited Egypt. Statistical packages for social sciences (SPSS) version 23 were employed to analyse the quantitative data.

The research used descriptive statistics to define demographics and categorical characteristics of the study population, in terms of frequencies and percentages. Table (3) presents the statistical methods applied in the quantitative study.

Table 3: Statistical Methods Applied

Statistical test name	Use for
Descriptive statistics	To illustrate the data in form of frequencies and percentages
T test	To compare mean scores of studied groups (domestic and international tourists)
Chi square test	To identify difference between studied groups
Pearson correlation	To detect the strength of correlation between variables

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Concerning Egyptian travel companies, all interviewees mentioned that the most used platforms are Facebook. Although Facebook is the most used platform in the world and in Egypt, focusing only one main platform such as Facebook can reduce the possibility of reaching new audiences. Failure to create content into different platforms such as Instagram and TikTok means missing out delivering marketing message to others who may use these platforms.

Regarding the behaviour of consumer after Covid-19 pandemic, all interviewees mentioned that there is a new kind of consumer that avoids face to face meetings and prefers to contact the companies online.

Due to the pandemic, people stayed long time at home and did everything, online. Therefore, this change in consumer behaviour makes reliance on social media more than before the pandemic. During the pandemic, some companies stopped their activities on social media as they think it is useless, while others continued by sharing advice, information and even greetings during occasions. This is the case because they think it is very important to maintain their relationships with their customers.

The main challenges that were facing some companies was high competition since the market was saturated with travel companies that promoted their products with distinguished offers so other companies must present their products by adding value to this customer so that he/she can have many choices. On the other hand, companies also faced competition from famous sites like booking.com which presents many offers and deals to the customer. The main obstacle they faced was the existence of fake companies, and hence it was recommended that the government should have a supervisory role.

Regarding their social media structure, six companies had social media departments, four companies outsourced and five companies thought that every employee in the company should know how to deal with social media.

With the development of technology and the need to have a competitive advantage in this high demanding environment with many alternatives, this research agrees with Bakr et al. (2013) who recommend the need of trained skilful human resources that deal effectively with social media.

Concerning the Egyptian Tourism Authority (ETA), they focus on Facebook to target domestic and international tourists and they have Facebook pages in 14 languages. They also have a digital department, which consists of six employees, but to meet international standards they make partnerships with international agencies.

Egypt, as a developing country, need to cut off the extra expenses instead of outsourcing. They can train their employees to have a skilful staff that can deal effectively with social media and adapt to innovative environment. Their development should match the advancement of technology and tourism to be competitive.

About their strategy, this research aligns with the study of AbdelMonsef et al. (2018) that demonstrates that ETA does not have a clear online strategy in 2019 as they needed smart objectives to improve their social media usage. However, the situation changed in 2020. In 2021, they adopted a brand strategy.

Concerning the demand side, Facebook is the most used platform by international tourists (77.9%) followed by Instagram (17.4%). The same for Egyptians, as (77.5%) chose Facebook followed by Instagram (21.5%). Before their trip, both domestic and international tourists agree that advice shared on social media by other travellers helped them choose their destination. This emphasizes the importance of user generated contents.

Both domestic and international tourists trust the information about destinations when it is shared by one of its visitors than by managers or marketers. This clarifies the importance of user generated contents and reviews written by travellers. During their trip, domestic tourists use social media to stay connected to family and friends (the highest mean), while international tourists usually use social media to find holiday related information. After their trip, domestic tourists always share their experiences and photos with their friends. On the other hand, international tourists, the highest mean was awarded to posting reviews and evaluation. Therefore, Egyptians companies should encourage their international tourists to post reviews about their trips to Egypt through communities or groups tabs in their Facebook pages.

Although international tourists agree that they trust electronic word of mouth more than the traditional one, Egyptians tourists show a neutral level regarding

that. That may be due to the collectivism nature of Egyptian society, which makes reliance on the opinions of family is more important.

About their recommendations, for an effective tourism promotion via social media, both domestic and international tourists recommend price and offers transparency to stop fake product pricings and scams. Domestic tourists recommend relying more on the opinions of those who visited the places, more details about Egyptians museums and all places in Egypt. Furthermore, they want more offers and price reductions. International tourists recommend more advertisements on social media and promote these advertisements in their own language, showing attractive places and talking about culture and gastronomy.

When talking about gastronomy and its relation to tourism promotion, the Egyptian cuisine plays a significant role in destination promotion. Egyptian tourist officials and tourism companies in Egypt exert greater efforts to promote Egyptian local food.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study revealed that although the social media had an increase in activity after Covid-19 pandemic due to the change in consumer behaviour, Egyptian travel companies did not exploit the benefits of social media. They should promote their products in more innovative ways and train their staff effectively when dealing with social media to face the high competition in this challenging environment. Moreover, the government should take a supervisory role to stop fake companies on social media as these companies rob them of their market share and ruin the reputation of Egypt.

Regarding Egyptian Tourist Authority, they use traditional and social media promotions but reliance on social media increases, especially after Covid-19 pandemic. The situation improved in 2021 as they used brand strategy to highlight the beauty of the 27

governorates in Egypt.

On the other hand, Egyptian travel companies should train their employees to meet international standards so as to cut off the expenses of the partnerships made with international agencies to promote Egypt through social media.

Regarding tourists (domestic and international), they want honesty concerning price and offers.

Furthermore, they want Egyptian travel companies to rely more on the reviews made by travellers who have visited Egypt and shared their experiences and evaluations. They should also include local dishes when promoting Egypt through social media,

Finally, effective tourism promotion can be accomplished by active collaboration among all Egypt stakeholders to apply strategies and policies to prevent many challenges.

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