ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS IMPACT ON POTENTIAL TRAVELLERS' TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY CHOICES

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ABSTRACT: Online social networks and virtual social environments have changed the way hospitality and tourism products are purchased, consumed, and experienced. It was once a risky task for travellers to choose a destination and/or a hotel property with a great deal of uncertainty. Virtual experience and comments from online peers could diminish customers' uncertainty, and consequently increase their level of participation in hospitality and tourism activities. This study aims to explore the phenomena of online social networks and its impact on the destination and hotel purchase decision making process. A survey was used to determine views of tourists checking-in in a randomly selected sample of five star hotels in Muscat. The questionnaire consisted of three sections; the first section dealt with respondents' demographics, in the second section respondents were asked to show their agreement levels with regard to social networks effect on destination and hotel choices and on their interest to travel. In the last section, respondents were asked to add their comments regarding the subject under investigation. Through participation in online social networks, hotels and tourism properties can strengthen their market image, establish relationships with their customers and contribute to customer loyalty. Hospitality and tourism marketers are encouraged to effectively review online social networks in order to anticipate the shifts in customers' demands and new emerging trends. There is a great need to conquer the new communication world in order to attract and satisfy the modern i-customer, and to survive in an ever changing competitive business environment. **Keywords:** online social networks, virtual worlds, blogging, second life, avatar, hospitality, tourism.

RESUMEN: Las redes sociales online y los ambientes virtuales vienen cambiando el modo como los productos turísticos son ordenados, consumidos y experimentados. Antes había el riesgo de que los viajantes pudieran escoger un destino o un hotel con elevado nivel de incertidumbre. La experiencia virtual y los comentarios que dejan online otros clientes ayudan a disminuir la incertidumbre de los consumidores y, por consecuencia, aumentan su nivel de participación en las actividades turísticas. El presente estudio tiene por objetivo explorar el fenómeno de las redes sociales online y el impacto en los procesos de tomada de decisión de compra en turismo y hostelería. En una muestra aleatoria de hoteles de cinco estrellas de Muscat, se realizó una investigación para medir el modo cómo los turistas efectuaron el *check-*

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in. La investigación incluía tres secciones: la primera era dedicada a la recoja de datos sociodemográficos de los encuestados; en la segunda, los encuestados eran invitados para indicar su grado de acuerdo/desacuerdo en relación a la influencia de las redes sociales en la escoja del destino y del hotel y en el interés en efectuar el viaje. En la última sección, los encuestados eran invitados para hacer comentarios sobre el tema en investigación. A través de la participación en redes sociales online, las empresas de turismo y hostelería pueden reforzar su imagen en el mercado, crear relaciones con sus clientes y aumentar su lealtad. Los responsables de marketing del sector turístico y hostelero son aconsejados a que revisen sus políticas de participación en las redes sociales de forma a que puedan anticiparse cambios que funcionan al nivel de la demanda y a las tendencias emergentes. Hay una necesidad imperiosa de conquistar el nuevo mundo de la comunicación, de forma a atraer y satisfacer el moderno i-consumidor, para que con esto sobreviva en un ambiente de negocios competitivo y siempre mutante. **Palabras-clave**: redes sociales online; mundos virtuales, *blogging, second lif*e, avatar, hostelería, turismo.

RESUMO: As redes sociais online e os ambientes sociais virtuais estão a alterar o modo como os produtos turísticos são encomendados, consumidos e experienciados. Outrora havia o risco dos viajantes escolherem um destino ou um hotel com elevado nível de incerteza. A experiência virtual e os comentários deixados online por outros clientes ajudam a diminuir a incerteza dos consumidores e, consequentemente, aumentam o seu nível de participação nas atividades turísticas. O presente estudo pretende explorar o fenómeno das redes sociais online e o seu impacto nos processos de tomada de decisão de compra em turismo e hotelaria. Numa amostra aleatória de hotéis de cinco estrelas de Muscat, foi realizado um inquérito para aferir o modo como os turistas efectuaram o check-in. O questionário incluía três secções: a primeira era dedicada à recolha de dados sociodemográficos dos inquiridos; na segunda, os inquiridos eram convidados a indicar o seu grau de acordo/desacordo em relação à influência das redes sociais na escolha do destino e do hotel e no interesse em efectuar a viagem. Na última secção, os inquiridos eram convidados a fazer comentários sobre o assunto em investigação. Através da participação em redes sociais online, as empresas de turismo e hotelaria podem reforçar a sua imagem no mercado, criar relações com os seus clientes e aumentar a sua lealdade. Os responsáveis de marketing do sector turístico e hoteleiro são aconselhados a reverem as suas políticas de participação nas redes sociais de modo a poderem antecipar-se mudanças que se operam ao nível da procura e às tendências emergentes. Há uma necessidade imperiosa de conquistar o novo mundo da comunicação, de modo a atrair e a satisfazer o moderno i-consumidor, para assim se sobreviver num ambiente de negócios competitivo e sempre mutante. **Palavras chave**: redes sociais online; mundos virtuais, blogging, second life, avatar, hotelaria, turismo.

INTRODUCTION

Innovation is particularly important for the tourism industry. Technological progress and tourism have been going hand in hand for years. Tourism has been one of the main drivers of Internet usage and applications (Hjalager, 2002; Buhalis & Law, 2008).

The technological progress has affected the ways information is spread and exchanged among people all over the world; new trends emerged leading to change in social networks' nature. The era of online social networks and virtual worlds is prevailing and is affecting hospitality and tourism products and services selection and consumption (Alford & Clarke, 2009).

Consumers seek to gain more bargaining power in the market both by screening product based information and by signaling it to others (Sidali et al., 2009). Online tourism marketers potentially face fierce competition from social media because the search process can lead millions of consumers to highly relevant social media content pages that

can influence attention, awareness, trial, and loyalty levels (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2006). As marketers strive to know how to provide attractive, persuasive, and technologically sustainable marketing programs online, they must also compete with consumer generated content in numerous social media websites.

This study aims to explore the phenomena of online social networks and its impact on the destination and hotel purchase decision making process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Internet was created way back in 1969, during the Cold War, by the United States military. It was meant to be a "nuke-proof" communications network. Today, the Internet spreads across the globe and consists of countless networks and computers, allowing millions of people to share information. Many people think the Internet and the World Wide Web are the same thing. They're not. The World Wide Web is what people are browsing. It is one of the many features of the Internet. E-mail and Instant Messaging are also features of the Internet (Tech Terms Computer Dictionary, 2011). Papacharissi & Rubin (2000) found five distinct motivations for using the Internet: (1) interpersonal utility; (2) pass time; (3); information seeking; (4) convenience; (5) entertainment.

Information and communications technology has transformed the tourism industry, enhancing the way in which it facilitates its business operations. The Internet in particular has advanced the way in which the tourism industry can gather and exchange information for tourist services such as booking rooms or transportation, ticket reservation and payment. It is not just the tourism industries which have embraced these technological developments; the contemporary consumer has also embraced these developments, providing them with the opportunity to review their experiences on dedicated websites, such as tripadvisor.com, and browse the reviews and opinions of thousands of others, in addition to many other activities including arranging and booking their own holidays (Dodd & Johnson, 2010).

Common sources of information are travel agents, institutional and commercial brochures, and the Internet. Marketers use these sources to build tourists' specific expectations with the goal of influencing future purchase decisions. Once, travel agents were described as the most important information source in the travel purchase decision making process, but the Internet has fundamentally reshaped the way tourism related information is distributed and the way people plan for and consume tourism and hospitality products. Online tourism communities or social networks, and other different websites, are populating the on-

line tourism domain and have gained substantial popularity in online travellers' use of the Internet. For many consumers of tourism or hospitality products, a review of what is being said in cyber space forms part of the information collection process when selecting a product (Murray, 1991; Middleton, 1994; Sen & Lerman, 2007; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Xiang et.al. 2008).

Since consumers perceive tourism products taking into consideration their service expectations, these expectations become a major influence on consumer choices (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Social media websites assist consumers in posting and sharing their travel related comments, opinions, and personal experiences, which then serve as information for others, helping more and more users in all three phases of the tourism goods consumption: 1. Pre-consumption, 2. Consumption and 3. Post-consumption, suggesting places to go, proposing hotel reviews and so on (Cantoni et al., 2009; Dodd & Johnson, 2010).

Consumer reviews, found on travel and hospitality online communities, provide customers with access to prior service experience on which they can base their belief or trust that a firm will deliver quality service. Potential consumers use online consumer reviews as one way to reduce risk and uncertainty in the purchase situation (Chen, 2008).

Today the World Wide Web is undergoing a subtle but profound shift to Web 2.0, to become more of a social web. The use of collaborative technologies such as blogs and social networking sites -"SNS"- allowed people to communicate rapidly and conveniently with each other (Fu et al., 2008).

Social Networks

Social networking is a group of people who exchange words and ideas through computer bulletin boards and other networks (Hitwise, 2007; Fox, 2008; Simons, 2008).

Social networking applications started in 1997 when SixDegrees. com was launched. Online social media is one of the fastest growing segments on the web, and it includes social sharing of opinions through blogs (i.e. Blogger and Twitter), social photo and video sharing (i.e. Flickr and YouTube), social sharing of knowledge (i.e. Wikipedia), social bookmarking (i.e. Delicious) and many other forms of user generated content. These social media tools allow users to search, organize, share, annotate and contribute to contents in a collaborative way (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Messinger et al., 2009; Sigala & Marinidis, 2009; Parra-Lopez et al., 2011).

Table 1. Selection of popular Online Social Networks by membership

Name	Description / Focus	Registered users
Facebook	General.	640,000,000
Qzone	General. In Simplified Chinese; caters for mainland China users	480,000,000
Habbo	General for teens.	200,000,000
Twitter	General. Micro-blogging, RSS, updates	175,000,000
Renren	Significant site in China.	160,000,000
Windows Live Spaces	Blogging (formerly MSN Spaces)	120,000,000
Bebo	General	117,000,000
Vkontakte	Social Network for Russian-speaking world. Biggest site in Russia	110,578,500
Tagged	General.	100,000,000
Orkut	General.	100,000,000
LinkedIn	Business and professional networking	100,000,000
Myspace	General	100,000,000
Friendster	General.	90,000,000
Badoo	General, Meet new people, Popular in Europe and Latin America	86,000,000
hi5	General.	80,000,000
Netlog	General.	70,000,000
Flixster	Movies	63,000,000
MyLife	Locating friends and family, keeping in touch	51,000,000
Classmates.com	School, college, work and the military	50,000,000
douban	Chinese Web 2.0 website providing user review and recommendation services for movies, books, and music.	46,850,000
Odnoklassniki	Connect with old classmates. Popular in Russia and former Soviet republics	45,000,000
Viadeo	Global Social Networking and Campus Networking available in English, French, German, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese	35,000,000
Flickr	Photo sharing, commenting, photography related networking, worldwide	32,000,000
WeeWorld	Teenagers	30,000,000
Last.fm	Music	30,000,000
MyHeritage	Family-oriented social network service	30,000,000
Xanga	Blogs	27,000,000
Mixi	Japan	24,323,160
Cyworld	General. Popular in South Korea.	24,000,000
Gaia Online	Anime and games.	23,523,663
Skyrock	Social Network in French-speaking world	22,000,000
Fotolog	Photoblogging.	20,000,000
BlackPlanet	African-Americans	20,000,000
myYearbook	General, Charity	20,000,000

Source: Adapted from Wikipedia on 11/07/2011 (http://en. wikipedia. org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites).

The popularity of social network sites has increased tremendously. For example, from 2007 to 2008, Facebook grew from 52 million to 132 million visitors (Comscore, 2008); Table 1 shows a selection of popular Online Social Networks by membership. Social network sites, like MySpace and Facebook, specifically aim at building and maintaining social networks. Participants may use the sites to keep in touch with existing friends or to meet new people (Tong et al., 2008).

Web users spend longer on social networking sites than they do elsewhere. This is especially true for users of the leading social networking sites - for example, Facebook keeps its users for an average of 21 minutes and 15 seconds. This compares with an average of just 12 minutes across all Internet sites (Hitwise, 2007; Fox, 2008; Simons, 2008).

The most important advantages of social networks are the richness and credibility of information. Most social networking sites are not viewed as commercial websites, and it is likely that travellers could have greater confidence about things they read on social networking sites. Research has shown that users tend to trust peer reviews more than advertising and other content created by marketing departments and advertising agencies (Kardon, 2007). A potential explanation for this phenomenon could be related to the perception that sellers' product presentations tend to disguise negative aspects, whereas customers honestly evaluate strengths and weaknesses of the product (Park et al., 2007).

Blogging

Blog, which is short for "weblog", has gained its ground among the online community as a new mechanism for communication in recent years. It is often a personal journal maintained on the web, which is easily and frequently updated by the blogger (Cohen & Krishnamurthy, 2006).

Weblogs (blogs) are frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence (Herring et al., 2004). Arnold et al. (2007) used a dictionary definition (from Merriam–Webster Online), describing a blog as a website that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments and often hyperlinks provided by the writer. In the same vein, authoring a blog, maintaining a blog or adding an article to an existing blog is called "blogging". Individual articles on a blog are called "blog posts," "posts" or "entries". A person who posts these entries is called a "blogger" (Wikipedia, 2011).

Blogs use a conversational style of documentation. Often blogs focus on a particular area of interest; there are blogs on virtually any topic, from photography to spirituality, from recipes to personal diaries or to hobbies. Some blogs discuss personal experiences. Normally, weblogs combine text, images and links to other weblogs and/or websites. These electronic diaries have virtually no limits with regard

to their content. They are used both in a tourism context as personal travel journals and journalist publications just as they are for internal and external business communications or as a tool for knowledge management or project management (Villoria et al., 2006).

Blogs usually have a few features that are useful to know about. *Archives:* In addition to the main page of this blog, there are many other pages or posts below the surface that have been written over the past few months. When a post is written it goes to the top of the front page. As it gets older and as more posts are added, it begins its journey down the page until it disappears from it. Any post can be retrieved from the archive. *Comments:* Not all blogs use comments, but most do. A blog is not a monologue but a conversation. One can give feedback on almost everything written simply by clicking the 'comments' link at the bottom of each one of the posts (Rowse, 2005).

Virtual Tour

In order to understand the upcoming definitions of virtual tours and virtual worlds, it is wise to comprehend the term "virtual reality" or simply "VR". The term "VR" is best described as a computer generated 3D environment in which users inhabit and interact as they would in reality. These illusionary 3D worlds are created through a combination of visual, audio and kinetic effects where VR participants are able to see, hear and touch real life images which make them believe they are actually experiencing the real thing (Walser, 1991; Iovine, 1994).

The Internet provided a means to make it possible to distribute VR models to tourists in their homes, in other words leading to the spread of virtual tours. A virtual tour can be expressed as a direct travel experience without actually travelling to the destination that employs usage of a sequence of hyperlinked video images or image based models of the real destination and multimedia support elements (e.g. sound, narration, and text). In addition, virtual tours may also include panoramic images, interactive photos, and animation, a concept which is used in virtual museums (Wan et al., 2007; Styliani et al., 2009). Given that the majority of travel constraints are time and money, virtual tours can play a vital role in saving these valuable resources by helping travellers make better decisions before they purchase by providing them with vivid images of destinations (Lee et al., 2009).

Virtual Worlds

Virtual Worlds "VWs" are computer simulated environments set in 3D environments. A virtual environment is a synthetic representation

of a natural or imagined environment. Virtual worlds are not limited to games, but involve other applications such as chat, conferencing, entertainment and e-commerce (Blascovich et al., 2002).

Virtual Communities can be used by businesses, including tourist firms, to create new types of services, enhance existing products and create new divisions and capabilities, strengthen their positive image, establish relationships with their customers and contribute to customer loyalty and sales. A number of organizations have already employed the use of virtual worlds to enhance their tourism opportunities such as TUI AG Group and Costa Cruises. Numerous tourism destinations have invested substantially to claim virtual real estate in this three dimensional online world. People who experience virtual destinations such as the St. Louis Arch, Galveston in Texas, Chichen Itza in Mexico, London, or Paris, for example, may become interested in visiting those destinations in person (Dodd & Johnson, 2010; Huang et al., 2010).

Virtual worlds are the next generation social networking service; therefore, establishing a presence in the virtual world is a logical technological progression within tourism. The tourism industry needs to investigate strategies to make it lifelong and comprehensible as traditional tourism structures where vacations are booked through travel agents using brochures are no longer sufficient to compete in a world of fast and continuous development of information technology (Gaudin, 2010).

Clearly, virtual experience does more for the tourism industry than just publishing information; it actually gives consumers the chance to experience their travel destinations on the Internet. Using Taiwan as an example, most of the leisure farms (outdoor nature-oriented recreation areas) have used Internet marketing in promoting business (Fang & Lie, 2006).

Second Life

Second Life - "SL-" an Internet-based 3D virtual world (http://secondlife.com) created by Linden Labs, was launched on June 23, 2003 (Linden Lab, 2007). In Second Life, users take on a new persona other than their real life. They may then create a new product or service (e.g. events, game, and facilities), visit other lands and attractions, meet and interact with each other through motional avatars (Lee et al., 2009).

An avatar is the graphic representation of the self in a given physical medium that other users can see or interact with in a virtual environment. The word "avatar" comes from Sanskrit, meaning the embodiment of a deity or spirit in an earthly form. In the context of cyberspace, avatars are electronic representations of human beings that one may use in communicating with others. In most chat forums, partici-

pants can select from a variety of forms, including male, female, neutral, animals, cartoons, or some hybrid form (Kopp et al., 2005; Galanxhi & Nah, 2007).

Second Life might be described as one type of virtual tours, but it differs from virtual tours in that Second Life does not try to show the exact same features of the destination. In addition, all networks in Second Life are implemented in real time (Lee et al., 2009).

Second Life not only focuses on social interaction but also offers a variety of different forms of entertainment, including socializing, playing, and shopping. The total number of residents in Second Life has reached 16 million people in 2009 and 19 million in 2010. With the exponentially increasing population in the virtual world, businesses are participating in these environments because they see significant potential and opportunities (Bellotti et al., 2009; Linden Lab, 2009; Dodd & Johnson, 2010).

Second Life has no point system, winners or losers, bosses or strategies as most video games do. Instead, Second Life Residents live in Second Life; they can explore the virtual cities and landscapes, meet and socialize with other residents, join in individual and group activities, and create, buy and sell products and services to one another (Cook, 2007).

In the SL economic ecosystem, there are numerous business applications and opportunities. Business applications utilize SL in multiple ways: as (a) a laboratory for market research, (b) a test market, (c) a large market for advertising, (d) a retailing centre, and, (e) a way to generate traffic to e-commerce sites on the Internet (Messinger et al., 2009).

Tourism-related industries, especially hotels and resorts (e.g. Hyatt), use Second Life for consulting architects and their guests on how to improve their hotel design and architecture. Starwood Hotels became the first company in history to open a new hotel brand inside of a virtual world, prior to opening to the public in 2008. In fact, Second Life users created and designed the first Aloft hotel which is a Starwood hotels and resorts brand (Aloft in Second Life, 2007; Sigala, 2007; Kohler et al., 2009).

There is a growing awareness in the corporate world of the importance of virtual consumption. Large corporations such as Sony BMG (Bertelsmann Music Group) Music Entertainment, Sun Microsystems, Adidas, Reebok, Toyota, and Starwood Hotels rapidly entered the virtual worlds through advertising and promotion (Siklos, 2006). eBay, for instance, used online tracking technologies to identify customers who browsed or shopped for products in the clothing, shoes and accessories section of its site. It then turned to New York-based start-up 33Across, which analyzed data from social-networking sites to map out the connections between the customers eBay had identified and other Web surfers, in order to serve up ads at the right time and place (Steel, 2010).

EMPIRICAL STUDY

Background – Tourism in the Sultanate of Oman

In 1995, the Government of Oman published a policy document entitled "Vision 2020" which aims, among other things, at increasing the tourism sector's contribution to the economy. As part of its Vision 2020, the Omani government has the intention to achieve an annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of 7.4%. The general policy was (The Omani Ministry of Tourism, 2005): "*Promotion of a market climate leading to the maximization of the contribution of the tourism sector to the country's GDP and its socio-economic development*".

In June 2004, by the Sultan's decree, the Omani Ministry of Tourism was established. Previously, financial allocations and assets relating to tourism were the responsibility of the Directorate General of Tourism operating within the Ministries of Commerce and Industry. The Ministry of Tourism has been charged with four key objectives:

• To increase the tourism sector contribution to the GDP.
• To increase the level of employment of Omani nationals in the sector.
• To increase average annual growth rate for the income from tourism.
• To be responsible for the promotion and marketing of Oman as a tourist destination.

The vision statement for tourism development in the Sultanate is: "Tourism will be developed as an important and sustainable socio-economic sector of The Sultanate of Oman in a manner that reflects The Sultanate's historic, cultural and environmental heritage and sense of traditional hospitality". The mission statement for tourism development in the Sultanate is: "Tourism will help facilitate economic diversification, preservation of cultural integrity and environmental protection of The Sultanate of Oman".

Travel and tourism's contribution to GDP

The direct contribution of Travel and Tourism to GDP is expected to be OMR743.3mn in 2011 (3.0% of GDP). This primarily reflects the economic activity generated by industries such as hotels, travel agents, airlines and other passenger transportation services (excluding commuter services). But it also includes, for example, the activities of the restaurant and leisure industries directly supported by tourists. The direct contribution of Travel and Tourism to GDP is expected to grow by 5.4% per annum (pa) to OMR1,252.9mn (3.3% of GDP) by 2021 (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2011).

Classification of Hotels

Oman offers a variety of accommodations from 5-star luxury suites down to modest rooms, studios and apartment suites. Existing accommodation units are classified into: the standard 1 to 5 star hotel ratings, budget hotel (under 1 star), resorts, and short-term rental apartments for tourists. According to the Omani Ministry of Tourism & Deloitte (2008); the figures for hotels in the Sultanate of Oman, in 2008, reached 184 hotels, see Table 2.

Table 2. Hotels in the Sultanate of Oman

Class (Star)	Frequency	Percentage
5	12	7
4	17	9
3	22	12
2	32	17
1 star or unclassified	101	55
Total	184	100

Five star hotels, though low in number (12) account for 26% of rooms in the Sultanate. Almost 55% of hotels are either 1 star or unclassified; they account for 25% of the hotel rooms.

Muscat is home to almost 79% of 5 star hotel rooms in Oman, the next highest is Dhofar followed by Al Batina and Musundam (The Omani Ministry of Tourism & Deloitte, 2008), see Table 3.

Table 3. Percentage of 5 star hotel rooms in Oman by region

Region	Percentage of 5 star hotel rooms in Oman
Muscat	79
Dhofar	13
Al Batina	5
Musandam	3

METHODOLOGY

Data collection

A questionnaire was used to gather data and measure respondents' perceptions of the subject under investigation.

Development of questionnaire

Survey questions were developed from the literature reviewed which provided the framework for the questionnaire. Based on the review by Dodd & Johnson (2010) and Sidali et al. (2009) several items in the questionnaire were redrafted to improve the presentation, arrangement, and length of both questions and questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of three sections; the first section dealt with respondents' demographics, in the second section respondents were asked to show their agreement levels with regard to some points on a five-point Lik-

ert scale where 5 is "strongly agree" and 1 is "strongly disagree". In the last section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to add their comments regarding the subject under investigation.

The sample

The target population for the study was tourists checking-in in a randomly selected sample of five star hotels in Muscat, the hotel sample comprised 6 hotels which correspond to 50% of total five star hotels in Oman. The reception staff in each hotel took the responsibility of questionnaire distribution to tourists upon check-in and collection on departure or check-out.

Administering the questionnaire

One hundred and eighty questionnaires were distributed, of which 150 usable were returned giving a response rate of 83%.

Analysis of results

Data were tested for normality of distribution by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Means and standard deviations were used to describe and rank the data collected.

DISCUSSION

This research is being conducted to explore the phenomena of online social networks and its impact on the destination and hotel purchase decision making process. Therefore the results will show to what extent social networks are affecting the choice of the Sultanate as a tourism destination and the choice of hospitality services and product as well. Accordingly, results will be categorized into different categories:

Gender and Age

Results show that 62% (93) of the respondents were male and 38% (57) were female. Four percent (6) of the respondents were under 20 years old, 36 % (54) were 20 years old and less than 40 years old, and 60% (90) were 40 years old and over, indicating that this latter category represents the majority of the respondents. It could be implied according to results that tourists who come to Oman are in the mature and seniors categories.

Nationality

Nationality analysis of the sample showed that 58% (87) were European, 18% (27) North American, 14% (21) Asian, and 10 % (15) of other nationalities. It could be said that Europeans and North Americans come to Oman in larger percentages than other nationalities because of cultural differences and the completely different experience they live through when interacting with Omani people and experiencing the Omani customs and traditions.

Sources of hospitality and tourism information

Fifty two percent of the sample indicated that their number one source of hospitality and tourism information is online social networks. Travel agents came in the second place. They have once been described as the most important information source in the travel purchase decision making process, but the Internet has reshaped the way tourism related information is distributed and the way people plan for and consume tourism and hospitality products, see Table 4.

Table 4. Sources of Hospitality and Tourism Information

Information sources	Frequency	%	Rank
Online social networks	78	52	1
Travel agents	42	28	2
Travel and Hotel guides	18	12	3
Advice from friends and relatives	12	8	4

Analysis of the 52% who depend on online social networks as a source of hospitality and tourism information showed that the majority were Europeans 60% (47), North American 26% (20), and Asians 14% (11), of which 37% (29) were female and 63% (49) were male. Although the results show that those who visit Oman are in mature and seniors categories, the users of Internet applications as a source of hospitality and tourism information are mostly in the 20 years old and less than 40 years old category (48), consequently it could be said that, depending on the research findings, there is an inverse relationship between age and Internet applications usage.

Impacts of online social networks on travellers

Respondents agreed that online social networks help them in the decision making process, and that they trust comments expressed by participants with travel experience, and to increase credibility they prefer comments approved by peers.

When discussing respondents' perceptions of peers' comments; respondents indicated that they prefer online social networks comments expressed in a civilized friendly style, and so eliminating the risk of trusting any biased comments.

Respondents indicated that they prefer online social networks comments expressed by people similar to them with regard to: age, gender, and nationality, as this makes others experiences a relatively good indicator of what to expect, see Table 5. All the previous are in accord with the literature reviewed (Hitwise, 2007; Fox, 2008; Simons, 2008) in that the most important advantages of social networks are the richness and credibility of information. Most social networking sites are not viewed as commercial websites, and it is likely that travellers could have greater confidence about things they read on social networking sites.

Table 5. Respondents Opinions Regarding Online Social Networks Effect

	Mean	Standard deviation
Online social networks help in the decision making process.	4.4	0.7
Online social networks comments expressed by participants with travel experience are trustworthy.	4.1	0.4
Online social networks comments approved by peers are preferable.	3.8	0.4
I prefer online social networks comments expressed in a civilized friendly style.	4.0	0.5
I prefer on online social networks comments expressed by people with similar age, gender, and nationality.	4.4	0.7

Note: 1=strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= undecided, 4=agree, 5= strongly agree

Respondents indicated that to make a destination or a hotel choice they review online social networks users' comments, and that even for popular destinations and branded hotels they still have to review peers' comments, see Tables 6. This is in agreement with researchers (Murray, 1991; Middleton, 1994; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Xiang et.al., 2008) who indicated that tourism online communities or social networks are populating the online tourism domain, and have gained substantial popularity in online travellers' use of the Internet.

Table 6. Respondents Opinions Regarding Online Social Networks Effect on Destination and Hotel Choice

	Mean	Standard deviation
To choose a destination I review online social networks users' comments.	4.4	0.7
For popular destinations I do not review online social networks users' comments.	2.1	0.2
To choose a hotel I review online social networks users' comments.	4.0	0.4
For branded hotels I do not review online social networks users' comments	3.3	0.5

Note: 1= strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3= undecided, 4=agree, 5= strongly agree

Respondents indicated that virtual experiences cannot replace either traditional tourism activities or traditional hospitality experiences, even after having a virtual tourism and hospitality experience; there is still an interest in visiting the place and living the experience (see Table 7). This is true and goes along with the fact that the majority of travel constraints are time and money. Virtual tours can play a vital role in saving time and money, and in diminishing customers' uncertainty, allowing travellers to make better decisions before purchase, consequently, helping more and more users in all three phases of the tourism goods consumption: pre-consumption, consumption, and post-consumption, suggesting destinations and proposing hotels (Cantoni et al., 2009; Dodd & Johnson, 2010).

Table 7. Virtual experience effect on interest to travel

	Mean	Standard deviation
A virtual tourism experience replaces traditional tourism activities.	1.7	0.9
After a virtual tourism experience, I gained an interest in visiting the place in reality.	3.8	0.4
After a virtual tourism experience, I satisfied my interest in visiting the place.	1.7	0.9
A virtual hospitality experience replaces traditional hospitality activities.	1.1	0.3
After a virtual hospitality experience, I gained an interest in living the experience in reality.	4.4	0.7
After a virtual hospitality experience, I satisfied my interest in living the experience.	2.0	0.2

Note: 1= strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3= undecided, 4=agree, 5= strongly agree

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Participation in online social networks is accelerating; members consult and trust each other regarding future courses of action. Dependence on traditional hospitality and tourism information sources like brochures, booklets, and catalogues is diminishing and is being replaced by online social networks, which could now be accessed through desktops, laptops, iPads, and mobile phones. Consequently, there is a great need to conquer the new communication world in order to attract and satisfy the modern i-customer, and to survive in an ever changing competitive business environment.

CONCLUSIONS

- Potential customers participate in online social networks so as to plan their tourism consumption process better, in such a way as to reduce the level of perceived risk.
- The most important advantages of online social networks as regarded by its users are the richness and credibility of information.

Most social networking sites are not viewed as commercial websites, and it is likely that travellers could have greater confidence about things they read on social networking sites.

• Given that the majority of travel constraints are time and money, virtual tours can play a vital role in saving these valuable resources by helping travellers make better decisions before they purchase by virtually experiencing a destinations.

• Travel specific sites are becoming increasingly popular particularly: blog sites, and online virtual communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of this study, it is possible to make some recommendations to help pinpoint the real situation of using social networks. It might also help to improve the use of social networks in the tourism and hospitality industry.

• Hotels and resorts can use concepts such as Second Life for consulting their guests on how to improve their hotel design and architecture; it even could replace the traditional soft opening stage.

• Hotels and tourism properties can use concepts such as virtual worlds to sell products and services, and new destinations.

• Through participation in online social networks, hotels and tourism properties can strengthen their market image, establish relationships with their customers and contribute to customer loyalty.

• Hospitality and tourism marketers are encouraged to effectively review online social networks in order to anticipate the shifts in customers' demands and new emerging trends.

• Consumers are no longer silent receptors of advertising bulletins, they want to join in a conversation or start a relationship, not be spectators on the sidelines; consequently a review of traditional marketing strategies and tools is a necessity.

• Always update online social networks participation, content, and features that will keep users interested and coming back over and over again.

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