Adoption of Social Media Marketing- An Overview of UAE Service Firms

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Abstract **- Advancement in information technology has impacted almost all the businesses and management functions and operations. In the contemporary times, businesses are integrating internet based services in their business model and offerings made to customers. Service firms have been pampering customers with facilities readily available through social media websites. The trend points to the fact that firms are aware of the preferences that necessitate providing relevant information to their target market through social media websites with stylish looks and a lot of imageries. This not only gives the customers a pleasing experience but also entice them to purchase. This study explores various marketing efforts made through social media by the services sector. Selected service organizations from hospitality and airlines sector in United Arab Emirates (UAE) are taken into consideration to conduct the study. The study also brings forth opinions of respondents on issues related to social media in the service sector. The research findings provide useful insights for practitioners, brand managers to understand how social media is affecting consumer behavior, enabling them to customize their social media strategies. The study is also helpful for the academicians and students to further enhance their knowledge on this growing issue of topical interest.**

Index Terms **- Service Organizations, Social Media Marketing, Hospitality Sector, UAE**

I. INTRODUCTION

Internet and social media haveirrevocably changed the way marketers plan and operate. Social media marketing is a form of internet marketing that implements various social media networks in order to achieve marketing communication and branding goals. According to Hubspot, 92% of marketers in 2014 claimed that social media marketing proved critically important for their business, with 80% indicated to have seen increased traffic to their websites. A popular web portal, Social Media Examiner reports that although 97% of marketers are currently participating in social media, yet 85% of participants aren't sure what social media tools are the best to use which may lead to unwarranted burden on the budget earmarked for promotion. Social media also inspire such business models that challenge traditional business processes and operations [1]. The salient difference between new and traditional business models is that one-to-one customization has taken precedence in business transactions, replacing the one-to-many marketing promotion model. Nowadays, consumers are almost always online and participating in a variety of activities such as making friends, creating content and sharing information, experiences and opinions [2]. As consumers spend more time on social media, purchase decisions have become highly influenced by interactions through these networks. Thus, businesses are placing more emphasis on marketing strategies using two-way communication platforms to reach online consumers and take advantage of word-of-mouth [3, 4].

Social media marketing has taken up a special role in service sector including banks, insurance, hospitality, airlines and so on. Looking closely at the consumer behavior in the service sector, it was observed that the now, customers not only want truthful information, but they also want to enjoy the search process [5]. The entire experience needs to be informative and pleasurable. Major players in hospitality services sector acknowledge this fact and follow the trend of pampering the tourists with options readily available through such web sites that provide online bookings and reservations. Therefore, creating web sites with stylish looks and a lot of imageries is crucial to brand preference.Presence of social mediaand Internet presence can become part of a brand, yet engagement is a critical aspect of brand management [6].

The present exploratory study answers varied questions concerning the role of social media in services firms. For the purpose of study select hospitality and tourism sector firms in UAE were considered. The relevant facts that were uncovered pertain to how social media can be of a major boon in the tourism industry in UAE. Furthermore, the nature of practices observed in the tourism industry in the UAE is highlighted here. Also in order to reach out to their consumers with pertinent information the extent of usage of social media by the marketer is studied to the effect of increasing the interaction between marketer and tourists. Subsequently the strength of social media to impact potential tourists and the salient benefits from customers' perspectives are explored. The study points to issues that may be dealt with in order to make social media usage an effective marketing tool contributing to the tourism and hospitality industry.

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II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Though social media usage is witnessed in the Arab world, yet there is no comprehensive and accurate accounting of the same in the UAE. However some estimates are available that point to one such source ranking UAE users as fifth among Middle East countries in usage, after Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Syria [7].The growing power of social media influencers and bloggers has also been revealed by a research from Dubai-based PR agency BPG Cohn and Wolfe and YouGov [8] showing that 71% of UAE residents aged 18-40 are happy to take advice online before purchasing. An in-depth social media study by the market research firm Grafdom [9] gauged the UAE's top 100 most influential corporate brands, individuals and events through measuring their presence on three top new media sites: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Broadly, social media can be divided into different types of platforms that all have distinguishable features. According to Universal McCann [10] the key social platforms are photo sharing, blogging, micro-blogging, RSS, widgets, social networking, chat-rooms, message boards, podcasting and video-sharing.

One of the key platforms is social networks that can be classified as websites or applications where people gather together and socialize. The social networking sites aim to bring people together and offer a place where conversation can take place between people with no space and time limitations [11]. Social networks are based on human interaction taking the conversation online. In social networks, people connect with their peers, transfer and obtain information and help each other. Facebook is the world's largest social network that connects you with the people you know and care about [12]. It is a social utility that helps you communicate with your friends, family and coworkers [13].Facebook combines the best of blogs, online forums and groups, photo sharing, and much more. The diversity of Facebook provides business various opportunities and the popularity of the service makes it one of the most important social media tools for marketing purposes and sharing of information through the digital mapping of people's real-world social connections.

III. MAJOR SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Twitter offers a new way to share ideas and information by allowing people to keep in touch with each other as well as follow businesses and organizations that you are interested in [14]. On Twitter you can choose who you want to "follow", meaning whose messages you want to see. A hash tag (#) is a term that is used in Twitter to help people categorize messages and can also be used by businesses as it connects them to customers in real-time. Marketers can use Twitter to quickly share information with people interested in their products and services, get real-time market intelligence and feedback, and build relationships with customers, partners and influential people.

According to O "Reilly and Milstein [15] people use Twitter to talk about what they're reading, watching, listening to and thinking about and they further describe Twitter as the world's real-time newspaper due to the information on Twitter being shared in a blink of an eye. For example tourism departments can see if their attractions are discussed on Twitter and see how people feel about their services. Hence, Twitter proves to be a key business channel where marketers are monitoring what people think of their products, responding to customer service requests, having conversations with stakeholders and making money through creative promotions of various kinds [15].

YouTube has approximately 81 million people visiting each month and more than 150,000 video clips are uploaded every day. YouTube is the number one website for online videos. YouTube is nowadays a very powerful marketing tool, mainly due to its popularity, and there are various paid advertising options offered for businesses to enhance their marketing efforts. Flickr is a photo (and video) sharing network that allows users to upload, share, tag and comment photographs. Subsequently, Flickr was bought by Yahoo! in 2005 which now reports the number of registered users to be 51 million. Thousands of photos are uploaded into the service every minute making the total number of uploads to be around 4.5 million per day.

TripAdvisoris the world's largest travel site and the company states its mission as enabling travelers to plan and have the perfect trip. It believes that social interaction ties play an important role in motivating users to post comments [16].

TripAdvisor offers advice from real travelers and a wide variety of travel choices and planning features (including Flights search, TripAdvisor Mobile and TripAdvisor Trip Friends) with links to booking tools. TripAdvisor-branded sites alone make up the 25 most popular and largest travel community in the world, with more than 50 million unique monthly visitors and 20 million members. It features more than 50 million travel reviews and opinions from real travelers around the world, over one million businesses, over 93,000 destinations, over 520,000 hotels, over 155,000 attractions, over 715,000 restaurants and more than 8,000,000 candid traveler photos. For more advanced business solutions, TripAdvisor offers tourism organizations a chance to upgrade into "a business listing" for a fee that allows creating of special offers, direct contacting and increasing of visibility on the TripAdvisor site.Millions of travelers have voted Shaikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi as the best landmark in the UAE, and the second worldwide, in TripAdvisor's 2016 Travellers' Choice Awards [17].

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used in the present research focuses on the collection of information on what the general public feel about social Media, benefits of social media and the concern of social media's possibilities for the growth of usage of social media in tourism sector in the near future and the impact it creates in the tourism sector. Both primary and secondary source

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was used to collect the information in this research study. Data was collected with a survey instrument which focused on the UAE tourism industry. Primary data was collected using the structured questionnaire related to the social media awareness, opinions, usage, usage measurements, recommendations or suggestions and behaviors. Secondly data was collected from the internet sources, from official tourism related websites that pertain to social and tourism relations, different social media pages of tourism players in UAE, different destinations or countries that have taken interest in the subject of social media, from official publications of tourism sector, newspapers articles for previously conducted researches on national and international tourism and social media.

The questionnaire was published online in Google docs' website to various respondents as well as emailed to several delegates. After the successful collection of primary and secondary data, the same was thoroughly complied statistically and analytical. To consolidate the findings, various statistical tools such as percentage and mean scores were calculated and represented in the various tables followed by analysis and interpretation. The findings from the overall results were compiled and suggestions on the basis of the same were put forward.

V. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In the first part of analysis, an effort has been made to look at the social media activities done by major tourism players of UAE. In the second part an analysis is done on the basis of primary data collected from 240 respondents on their opinions on the topic. Emirates Airlines, the leading airlines from Dubai emirate, uses both Facebook and Twitter. In Twitter, Emirates updates its new launches and the new destinations that they fly to. They also update their achievements and other related information from time to time. They also tweet of their new offers and make announcements about their success. Emirates uses Twitter as a platform to keep their customers updated with the latest news and offers to the various 120 destinations that Emirates fly to. On Facebook, Emirates interacts more with its customers and fans. It updates from time to time their new services and the new destinations that they fly to.

Emirates use Facebook to interact with its customers by posting pictures and posing questions to its customers, and receiving feedback from its customers through comments and likes. Through Facebook, Emirates brings forth awareness among its customers about the varied facilities and world events that it supports or is a partner of. It states its international brand image through publication of its stories in its Facebook page.

Emirates also promotes the various destinations it flies to by postinginformation and enticing pictures of the destinations covered. Among some other contents shared, Emirates also makes timely announcements of its financial results that portray of the economic stance in the airline business. Emirates also announces the number of fleets it has presently, which shows a good standing of the airlines. Air Arabia, Sharjah based low cost carrier is present both on Facebook and Twitter. On Twitter Air Arabia tweets about its offers on low budget travels through Air Arabia. It also hosts small competitions for spreading information to its customers about Air Arabia. Since Air Arabia is new on Twitter and has recently started using Twitter, not much information is available. On Facebook however, Air Arabia announces its mobile apps availability for flight bookings and for checking flight schedules. It also announces its new low budget fares to several destinations, giving a chance to its customers of the information in a cost effective way. Most importantly it also announces the new destinations covered and the price offers. This increases its sales performance in a cost effective way. Air Arabia follows anattractivepromotion strategy through Facebook. Air Arabia timely holds contests for its customers to participate in and win a chance for sponsored travel through Air Arabia. Air Arabia also uses Facebook to interact with its customers and aware them of its various facilities like the feeder buses from Dubai and other facilities like the on board food menu and the visa assistance. One of the leading hotel chains, Rotana hotels is present on both Facebook and Twitter.

On Twitter it tweets about its various facilities and contact details. They also tweet about their achievements and the new offers or prices that they offer for guests. Rotana hosts competitions on Twitter to enable its customers to have a feel of Rotana and generates awareness. They also tweet about new events or happenings in Rotana regularly. Rotana Hotels follow similar practice in Facebook as it does in Twitter, with the difference of promoting by posting various pictures of its products or services. This enables its customers to assess to an extent what the expected service product would deliver. It tries to cover the intangibility factor of the service through this promotionstrategy. Rotana also posts contents and other sales promotion related offers through social media. It promotes its various branches in UAE and around GCC by posting pictures with captions. One of the prestigious hotels in the world, Atlantis the Palm is present both on Twitter and Facebook.

On twitter they promote sales offers and competitions. They are using Twitter mostly as a communication platform to engage with its customers. Their customers also tend to leave feedback or reviews of their experiences in the Atlantis The Palm. A strategic move by Atlantis The Palm uses Facebook not only for posting information about its facilities including the restaurants and other leisure activities, offers and price discounts but also to promote their luxurious infrastructure and picturesque natural view offered to visitors from the hotel premises. They also promote Golf courses and the fact that celebrities frequent Atlantis The Palm. They promote their restaurants that are available in the hotel in many ways, apart from just posting pictures. Atlantis The Palm also promotes high profile events and concerts through their Facebook page. Like every other tourism player they also promote their success and awards that

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they win through pictures and by giving out detailed information on their page in Facebook.

Undoubtedly, interesting findings were revealed through the study. For instance when the respondents were asked what type of social media do they use 100% responded Facebook, 47% of twitter, 58% of YouTube, 5% on Flickr and 0% on TripAdvisor. When the respondents were asked about the advertisements' media catching their attention or affecting their purchasing behavior, huge difference was found in the traditional media and social media. Traditional advertising media such as newspaper, magazines, TV and billboards dwarfed against huge 94.73% response for social Media. Social media emerges as a medium that has proved to be more effective in terms of reaching out to a wide range of population and in a moreengaging way than its traditional counterparts. The respondents were asked to rate the relative importance different tourism and hospitality playerssuch as airliners, hoteliers, tourists and tourist agencies place on social media. The responses recorded the airliners at the top with 58%, hoteliers second with 37%, tourists third with 42% and tourist agencies fourth with 32%. Considering the cultural factors that may affect the willingness of people of UAE to post their tour pictures on social media, the responseswere interestingly, quite in favor. One reason behind this response was also the privacy options many social media platforms offer to their users.

Respondents were also found to be using social media to access information about airline operators and hotels more than other players in hospitality and tourism sector. The respondents were asked about the factors motivating choices and were given the options to choose from friends' recommendation, reviews on social networking sites, travel guides from travel marketers, advertising of destination, and promotional package for a destination. The results showed that friends recommendation stand out at 73.68% which is then followed by reviews on social networking sites with a 52.63%, promotion of package destination with a 31.57%, advertising of destination with a 26.31% and travel guides from travel marketers with a 10.52%. This shows that reviews on social networking sites contribute to a large extent in giving impetus for travel as well as impacting decisions of customers in the hospitality and tourism sector.

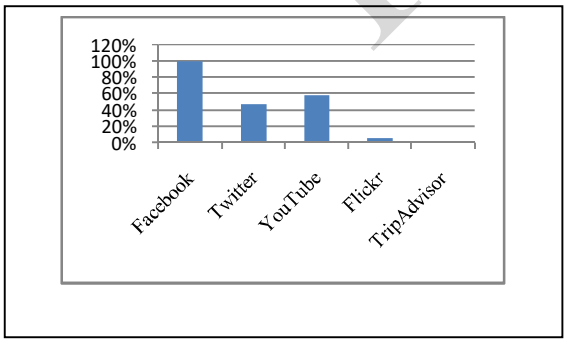

Fig. 2: Usage of social Media

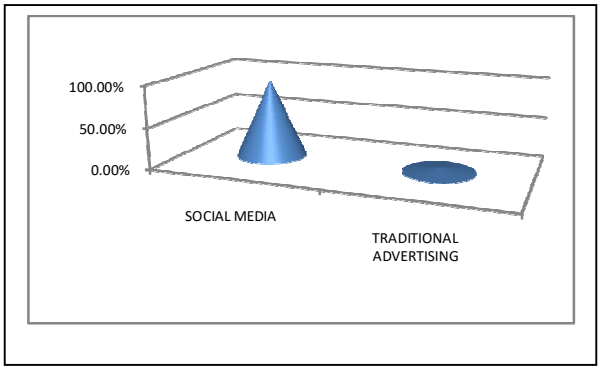

Fig. 3: Social media vs. traditional media

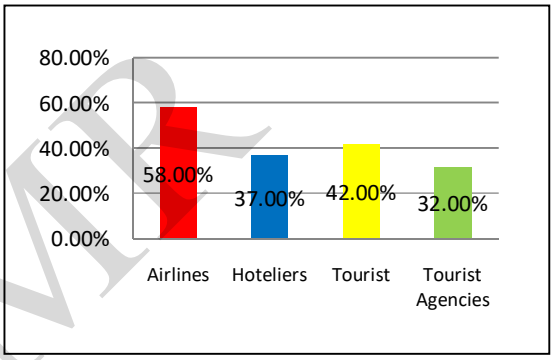

Fig. 4: Willingness to share photos on social media

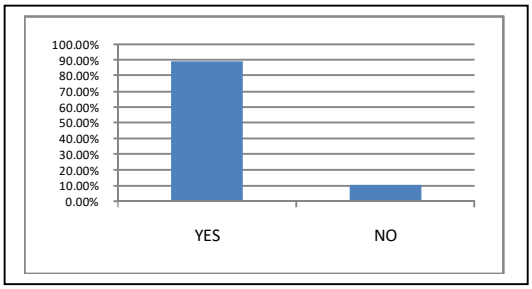

Fig. 1: Observations on social media activities

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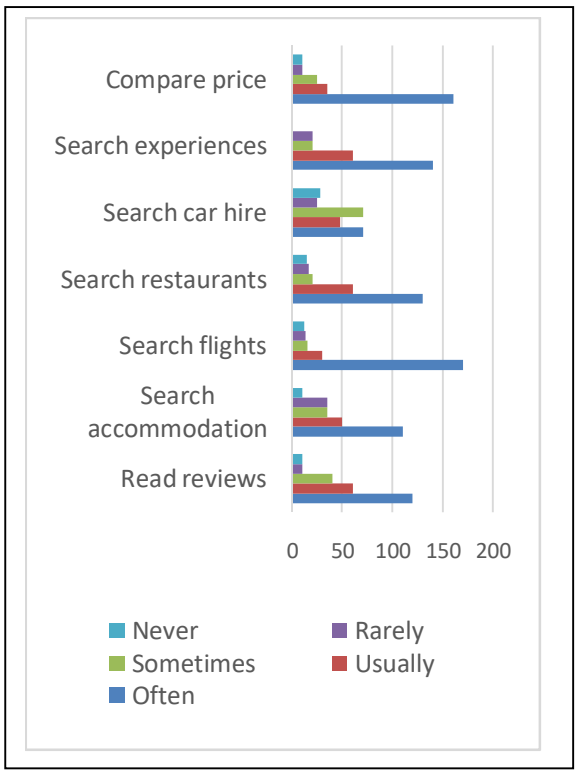

Fig. 5: Frequency of using social media

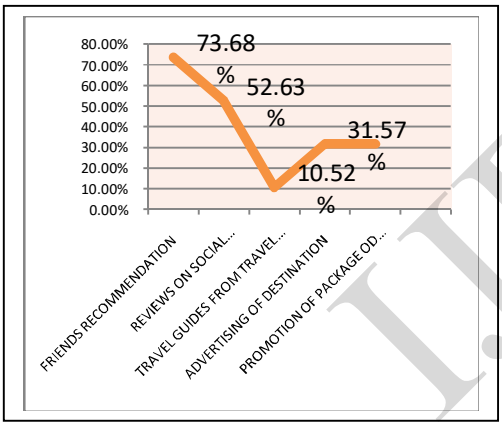

Fig. 6: Motivation to travel

VI. CONCLUSION

The present study was an attempt to look into various social media channels and how the leading hospitality and tourism enterprises in UAE are participating in it. The research indicates that although UAE hospitality and tourism industry has taken a leading interest in the social media techniques to generate business in UAE, however a more serious and official concern.

Every year different seminars and campaigns take place in UAE for different forms of tourism in UAE. Different tourism players of UAE tourism are taking necessary measures and creating awareness of social media in Tourism. Major stakeholders such as Tourist agencies, Airlines and Hoteliers are running different social media programs which undoubtedly play a vital role in promoting their offerings. However, the phenomenon seems to have just begun for the mid and small size tourism enterprises. It was also observed that though many small marketers are present on social media, yet they are less active as compared to their leading counterparts.

One should remember that social media is a powerful tool but generates result only if it is used effectively. For instance big marketers have either hired external expertise or have dedicated departments to care of their existence and promotion on social media. The smaller firms, however, due to financial constraints may at least hire dedicated content writers to take care of such promotions. At the same time, social media could act as a bigger platform for the public sector tourism to keep the private sector aligned and together and making it easier for the tourists to access travel related information, at one point of contact. Unfortunately this not the case with UAE at present! Furthermore, the marketers are yet to understand fully the advantages of social media over conventional style of advertising. Incidentally, with 78% smartphone penetration, UAE leads the world in smartphone usage, thus presenting a serious opportunity for promotion through social media to the marketers. The day is not far when the potential tourists will be using the social media at all their stages in the buying process from information gathering to review stage.The strategic and tactical responses of the tourism and hospitality marketers in preparation to manage the scenariothat would emerge calls for an interesting watch!

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