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A Critique of Museum's Web Presence in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: A Study of Selected Museums

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Abstract

This paper explores useful and practical utilisation of the theoretical concept of web-presence to increase museum audience in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). A qualitative and quantitative research methodology is adopted relying on critical review of literature on web-presence to provide justifications for web-presence as innovative means of managing museums in KSA. Currently, KSA uses traditional methods for museum promotion, which can be problematic. However, by adopting internet technology, KSA is fast becoming an information-based society and there is a need for a paradigm shift to correct the misguided notion that museums are just for children or keeping worn-out artefacts. Effective use of web-presence provides certain benefits: wider dissemination of information on the museums to visitors, promotion of e-museums, promotion of Saudi's heritage, faith and culture online, and improved visitors' satisfaction. The paper concludes with further research plan to build a theoretical framework for web-presence design for Saudi museums.

Introduction

It is now commonly accepted that the days of organisations, such as museums, advertising to market themselves whilst solely using old methods of magazine and printed posters, are past. While this is true, the modern ways of advertising brought about various challenges for museums. For example, as well as traditional media channels which still exist, museums are now further expected to use new and modern web media tools. The reason is that this provides more effective ways using which museums can advertise themselves to the public. This kind of advertising experience in which the museums can put themselves in the public domain is very important in an environment where market competition is ever increasing. The centrality of this challenging concept lays in the fact that the nature of the public's expectations is changing and people are now more than ever informed and technologically experienced. What this means is that this awareness and experience can be used to shape the activities which museums provide to their customers. As a result, economic, cultural and social changes that take place affect the methods in which museums functions and also how they view themselves as well as their audience.

The reaction to this can be observed in the rise of marketing as crucial component in the ways museums are managed. Such emphasis on this type of marketing means museums are actively and constantly seeking to communicate with potential visitors and customers and hence increase their profit and popularity. In order to do this, considering the changes and the dynamics that take place in the museums' marketplace, it becomes necessary to exploit electronic media 'within integrated marketing communication strategies' (Lehman, 2008). Lehman maintained that despite increasing need to go digital, this method as a marketing strategy has received little attention within the academic world.

Background

Currently, as stated by Reachlocal [1], the majority of people around the world spend more time with interactive online content than traditional media. As a result, many cultural organisations like museums use their websites and social media to promote themselves [2]. However, social media, the essence of web 2.0, require a change from unidirectional information to two way communication and user participation [3]. Designing an organisational web-presence is now

shifting from reaching customers to engaging them. "Everyone can now reach customers online; the challenge is about how to engage them" [4]. According to Villaespesa [5] and Nosen [6] many museums currently have or are developing a social media profiles to foster their online community. For example, in the US, an increasing number of museums are beginning to adopt social media [7]. While in the UK, many museums already utilise various social media to enhance their popularity [8]. On the other hand, museums in Saudi Arabia are far away from using the internet to promote themselves as there are just five museums that have a webpage out of 138 museums in the country (Appendix A).

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Background)

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is the largest country in the Arabian Peninsula (Figure 1) [9]. It occupies an area of more than nine times the size of the UK. According to the 2013 census, Saudi Arabia's population reached over 29 million, including about 9 million foreign residents. The capital city of Saudi Arabia is Riyadh [10].

In the past, the Saudi people tended to live near wells and oases. Some were nomads who kept livestock and moved their animals to the limited pastures produced by infrequent rains. In addition, some Saudi people worked in trade which was limited primarily to the annual influx of pilgrims visiting the holy places in Makkah and Madinah [11].

Recently, Saudi Arabia was confronted with what many consider its greatest challenge: achieving modernity without surrendering its heritage, faith or culture. It is a nation marked by sophisticated political, legal, and financial systems, with a culture rich in history and deep in faith [10,11].

KSA is a religious country and the mother country of Islam.

Figure 1: The geographical location of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The country is based on a strong relationship between the religious institution and the Al Saud kingship. However, it is not easy to distinguish between the religious establishment and the Al Saud as the religious institution seemingly has more impact on the regional domain, the state along with social life and culture [12].

The problem and motivation

Many museums in developed counties have or are developing a social media profiles to foster their online community. By contrast, museums in Saudi Arabia have a very limited web-presence. In any society, the internet and social media cause social changes and reflect social systems [13]. However, the National Museum of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Raouf Kalil's museum, is one of the major national museums in Saudi Arabia, and is the most visited museum in the country; still, the museum does not have a profile on any social media platforms. Moreover, Abdul Raouf Kalil's museum does not even have a webpage yet.

Aggad [14], Kaufman [15] and Solni [16] point out the importance of utilising social media by organisations to attract the public's attention. For instance, these authors explain that since the current economic downturn has affected many organisations, museums are one type of organisations that would particularly benefit from utilising cost-effective interactive elements of social media to increase engagement with the public, who are their main sources of income. Although a number of organisations have started utilising social media as part of their communication strategies, there is, as of yet, little research that investigates key questions regarding the effective implementation of communication strategies in social media [17]. This is because as museums are increasingly feeling the pressure to respond to new opportunities offered by social media for connecting with active audiences, it becomes crucial that more is understood about the impact of social media on organisations and how they should practically go about incorporating social media into museum programmes [18].

For this reason, this research addresses the possible barriers and opportunities to web2.0 technologies in museums. However, the research focuses on Saudi Arabia and explores innovative and culturally sensitive ways that can enhance museums' web-presence and improve their online marketing strategies.

Research aim and objectives

Research aim: The focus of this study is adapting the usage of web-presence for museums in Saudi Arabia in connecting with their online marketing strategy. The main aim is to develop a theoretical framework for the design of the web-presence and associated online marketing for museums in Saudi Arabia in order to develop their web usage to effectively promote themselves and to enhance their engagement with their target audience.

Research objectives: The objectives set to address this aim are:

- To examine the existing web-presence of museums in Saudi Arabia;

- To examine the perceptions of visitors on the existing web-presence of museums in Saudi Arabia;

- To develop a multimedia-based framework for web-presence and associated online marketing for museums in Saudi Arabia; and

- To assess the effectiveness of the designed multimedia-based framework for web presence and associated online marketing strategy for museums in Saudi Arabia.

Research methodology: According to the research aim, the study involved multidisciplinary area and needed the researcher to develop a multi-stage research methodology to fulfill the aim of this study.

The researcher produced a graphical representation of the proposed research methodology adapted in this study. Figure 2 gives a general overview of the methodology. The graph presents the methodology concatenation that was developed to curry out this research in an organised and orderly way in its different stages.

The research methodology for this study includes the following:

• An extensive and critical literature review conducted on using social media in museums, with the main focus on the nature of Saudi culture in a museum context, museum communication and promotion, interactive and social media technologies, traditional and online museum visitor behaviour and engagement and online marketing.

• Questionnaire collected from people who visit museums in Saudi Arabia. This is to determine how often they go to museums, how they get museum information, whether they engage with a museums' online presence and their use of museums' social media platforms.

• Semi-structured interviews carried out with key stakeholders (people who run museums in both the UK and Saudi Arabia). This is to gauge their views and understanding of their online marketing goals, what they want to achieve, how they reach their audience and engage with them and how they plan, manage and use their web-presence.

The findings from items 2 and 3 will be collected and critically analysed to enable the design of a conceptual web-presence framework and model for an online marketing strategy to be developed for museums in Saudi Arabia. A prototype based on the conceptual framework will be built to test and evaluate both the framework and strategy with experts and users.

A research framework defines the categories of outputs that research can produce. It also defines a set of different research activities. Moreover, it defines what kind of research can be used to produce specific outputs [19]. The research framework outlines all the developed five phases of the research process, as shown in Figure 2.
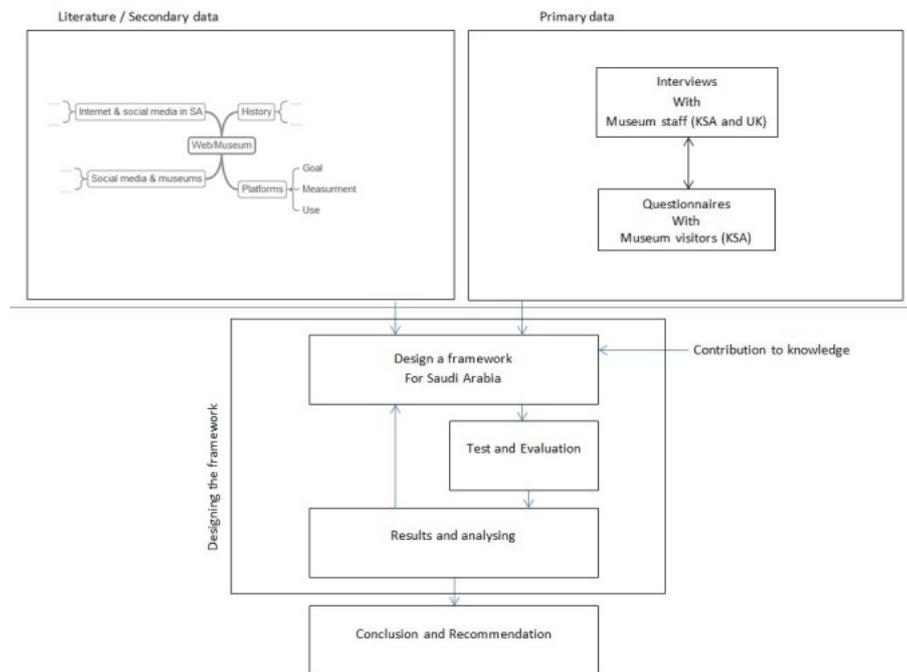
Figure 2: Methodology.

Research Findings

This research applied an initial survey to measure if the survey covers all aspects of the research questions or not. Also, this helps to test and measure data collected to ensure that the questions are measuring the research proposed as well as to test what the participants did not like and what they liked about the questions.

This initial survey was undertaken to ascertain the workability and reliability of the research instruments adopted for this research project. The initial survey was carried at Dar-Al-Madina Museum and Madina Media Museum from 13th to 24th April, 2014 at the Al-Madinah region in KSA.

A mixed method research strategy was selected as discussed in the methodology. Face-to-face interviews and a semi-structured questionnaire were the research instruments employed for the qualitative and quantitative methods respectively. Purposeful sampling technique was employed for the selection of all the survey participants. According to Walliman [20], purposeful sampling is a non-probability sampling that is most suitable for any specific research with target participants. The choice of this sampling technique would also enhance the overall authenticity of research findings.

The face-to-face interviews with people who run the museum

Number of interviewees: 2

Number of questions: 23

Type of questions: Semi-structured

Where: Al-Madinah, Saudi Arabia

When: May, 2014

Duration of each interview: about 20-30 minutes each

From this initial survey, the researcher found that:

Both interviewees agreed that the website and social media are important for the museum.

Both interviewees have websites and social media for their museums.

Both interviewees created or updated the webpage in 2014.

Both interviewees post pictures, links and museum's news on their social media.

Both interviewees have limited printed ad.

Neither of the interviewees have any particular target audience.

Both interviewees believe that these sites and tools reach their audiences.

Just one interviewee has an online marketing strategy, which is exchange advertising with other websites and having Friends of the Museum's society to use them as marketing advisors.

The questionnaire

Number of participants: 10

Number of questions: 20

Type of questions: closed-ended and open-ended.

Where: Al-Madinah, KSA

When: May, 2014

Duration of the survey: about 10 minutes each

The qualitative method employed the use of a questionnaire to collect quantitative data. This is because the questionnaire allows data to be collated from a large number of participants. The questionnaire was

intended to address research objective 2. A total of 20 questionnaires were distributed and a total of ten questionnaires were returned, suggesting a 50% response rate.

In this questionnaire (Table 1), questions are listed in a pre-arranged order and respondents are told about the purpose of collecting the information. So, this is a structured non-designed questionnaire. Most questions are closed-ended with some open-ended questions. Participants are randomly sampled. Table 1 shows participants answers.

Analysis and Discussion

As obvious from the interviews above, the museums' stuff are aware of the importance of the internet and social media and they already created website and social media profiles. Also, they are not depending mainly on printed advertisements reflected by having limited printed advertisement.

Also, both interviewees agreed to all the interview statements except on the use of online marketing strategy, which was used by only one interviewee. Kotler et al. [21] mentioned that museum marketing strategy should look into the range of marketing tools and include the current data on branding, positioning and e-marketing. Kremer [22] added that the strategic plan should consider increasing the number of visitors, creating more engagement and driving the museum's loyalty.

All these strategies should be a part of the museum's practice [23]. According to Kotler et al. [21], "exchange advertising" with other web sites, having friends of the museum society to use them as "marketing advisors" are closer to being a marketing method than an online marketing strategy.

On the other hand, it is clear that most participants in the questionnaire use the internet and social media. However, only 10% of them heard about the museum online. At the same time, all participants believed that websites and social media are important for museums as they help museums to advertise and present more information.

By comparing the interviews and the questionnaires, it is clear that the museums' stuff think that their web-presence has a good response and results. However, 90% of visitors did not see any of the museums web-presence aspects and they came through friends or other people, which means that this research strongly recommends helping museums in Saudi Arabia to reach and engage with their audience online [24].

Anticipated Contribution to Knowledge

There are only few studies on museum marketing in KSA. Available studies are quite out-dated and not relevant to online marketing. This paper is an attempt to fill the gap in the design of museum's web-presence and associated online marketing in KSA.

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
20	Which advertisement about this museum you have ever seen?	-	-	-	-	-	Inside it	-	-	-	-
19	Have you ever seen any advertisement about this museum?	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N
18	What information would you expect from a museum's social media?	N	-	I	I	I, share	Contact, offers	-	I	-	-
17	If yes, were they useful?	-	-	-	Y	-	-	-	-	-	-
16	Have you seen any social media posts for this museum?	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N
15	How could it be improved?	-	-	Audio guide	More info	More languages, organising	I, content and contact	-	languages	-	-
14	Was it useful?	-	-	-	Y	-	-	-	-	-	-
13	If yes, what did you use it for?	-	-	-	I	-	Not fined it	-	-	-	-
12	Have you seen the website of this museum?	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N
11	Name some social media sites /tools that you think it may have no museum value?	-	N	0	0	t y L	L	-	0	y	L
10	Name some social media sites /tools that you think it may have strong museum value?	f,t,y	f,t	T	f,t,y,In	F	f,t,y	-	f,t,y	f,t,L	f,t,y
9	If so, Why?	Ad	spread	spread	spread	ad	Ad, communication	-	Benefit people	Ad, spread, share	info
8	Do you think social media is important for museums?	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	-	Y	Y	Y
7	If so, Why?	I	I, ad	I, ad	I, ad	ad	I, events	-	Help who can't visit	Ad, spread	Ad, spread
6	Do you think website is important for museums?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	-	Y	Y	Y
5	How did you hear about this museum?	Fr	Fr	Fr	Fr	Fr	Fr	-	Fr	Fr	Fr
4	Which social media tools/sites are you most comfortable with?	-	f t	t	-	f	f ,y	f	f, y	t	t
3	How long have you been using social media site?	-	5y	7y	-	2y	-	8y	4y	12y	9y
2	Do you have a personal social media account?	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
1	Do you have a personal Web site?	N		N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	-	N

Table Key

Symbol	Meaning	Symbol	Meaning	Symbol	Meaning
Y	Yes	f	Facebook	I	Information
N	No	t	Twitter	In	Instagram
Fr	Friends	y	YouTube	L	LinkedIn

Table 1: Questionnaire participants'answers.

The result of this research is a theoretical framework for the design of web-presence and associated marketing strategy for museums in KSA. This would offer museums in Saudi Arabia a chance to increase the number of visitors and to create more engagement with them and help increase the awareness of Saudi people about museums' culture.

Conclusion and Further Research

This paper reached an advanced stage of data collection and analysis. All secondary data required for analysis of the quantitative and qualitative research aspects of the research have been collected. The next stage is analysis of data. The findings of the mixed research methods will be followed by building a theoretical framework for the design of web-presence for museums in KSA.

Acknowledgements

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