

Effects of the use of social media on brand equity:
An empirical study of Bahrain as a tourist destination.

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Student	: Hala Ahmed Sulaiman
Class Name	: McManus
Registration ID Number	: 201990499
Supervisor	: Dr. Konstantinos Tomazos
Date	: 28th March 2023

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I declare that this dissertation is entirely my own original work.

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Dated 28th March 2023

Hala Ahmed Sulaiman

Abstract

Background: The aim of this research is to set the stage with an extensive literature review to position the concept of BE and its various dimensions with a focus on peer-reviewed publications covering the influence of social media platforms, BE creation, and consumer behaviour with a secondary emphasis on participants' willingness to recommend nation brands in e-Word of Mouth communications.

Methodology: The study uses quantitative analysis through 53 questions over eight questionnaire sections. The development of the questionnaire started with the Literature Review. Once the model was identified, measures for the variables were adapted from international research where they were repeatedly found, used, and found to be reliable. The questions use seven Likert scales ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. The data was collected This study used purposeful sampling, also known as convenience sampling. Data collection began on 3rd March 2022, and was completed on 5th July of 2022. The collected sample of 243 was compiled and processed using Qualtrics Survey.

Main Findings: 11 hypotheses were derived and tested. Hypotheses one, two, three, and eight were found to have sufficient statistical support in this study, whereas hypotheses five, seven, nine, and eleven did not report any statistically significant evidence. The intensity of social media was found to have positive influence on brand equity (H1). Brand equity on social media platforms was found to have a positive influence on users' intention to develop WoM communications (H2). Brand equity has a positive influence on the intention to develop e-WoM communications (H3). Perceived quality on social media had a positive influence on the intention to develop WoM communications (H8).

Implications: Theoretically, the findings offer a sturdy starting point in the quest to develop a theory that explains the dynamics or nature of BE-based interactions between social media users and - their – WoM communications. Practical implications include revising existing policies, planning, programmes, and previously developed campaigns in light of these findings. Another practical implication may see the development of new policies, plans, programmes or campaigns that address this research's findings to further strengthen Bahrain as an increasingly popular - and positively considered - destination among travel segments worldwide.

Main Recommendations: Policy makers should be informed by the univariate, bivariate, and multivariate results of this study and should consider the findings of bivariate analysis to establish new approaches to campaigns and programmes, if not to modify existing content/strategies. Moreover, policy makers should be guided by the structural relations that were found to be statistically significant and aim to maintain these high value relations. On the other hand, policy makers should intervene where the structural relations that were hypothesised are not found to be

statistically significant - and thus ensure this has a strong chance at positive growth in the future. Future research should consider testing moderator variables, such as respondents' profile, nationality, and the economy scale of each country.

Keywords: Use of Social Media, Brand Equity, WoM and e-WoM

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

For two decades, the addictive phenomenon now enshrined as ‘social media’ has continued to inspire an ever-broadening range of human-centred revolutions; moreover, solutions, many of which have - if not may soon come to - changed everyday life for the masses in developed parts of the world that hoist digitisation and hyper-connectivity as principal agendas. Social connectivity continues to grow exponentially because of digital innovation's role in consumers' decision-making, including the value social network users offer each other and that which brands create. Subsequently, the nature of brand-centric and online communications has become a key focus in many modern businesses' sales and marketing strategies.

The advantages and challenges of our new hyperconnected global population take hold and carve new and sometimes unpredictable – outcomes in business, society, politics, and religious arenas. In this environment, marketing communication features prominently as a critical area of study that outlines the linkage of social communications used to deliver and create emotional responses and therein value in a multitude of contexts (i.e. not just brands like Starbucks with highly tangible product offerings, but also destination brands, such as the Kingdom of Bahrain). Peer-to-peer engagement has high relevance for brands because social network users rely on the advice they receive from other users, and this communication ultimately influences decision-making processes. Organisations are, as such, increasingly aware of the need to understand the effects of social media on brand perception to drive sustainable growth and realise a competitive advantage in almost any and every brand-consumer context.

Peer-Reviewed Studies

As the Literature Review in this dissertation will demonstrate, peer-reviewed studies have thus far nurtured little more than a shallow understanding of the various types of communication found across social media platforms. It is important to note that range and mode of communication continue to diversify exponentially, with more immersive experiences and creative expressions available alongside innovative technologies. This void in research is chiefly demonstrable by the absence of analysis on consumer-brand engagement and the influence of multiple social media access points on brand equity (BE) development. Despite the endless potential applications - and thus assured value - of research on BE in an era of digitisation, practical findings are yet to align with a strong and growing base for theoretical knowledge or, therefore, empirical investigation into the role of social media and destination brand formation. This study analyses the intensity of

communications found across social media networks and how they bear on destination BE in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

Research Aims

Following this introduction, the study sets the stage with an extensive literature review to position the concept of BE and its various dimensions with a focus on peer-reviewed publications covering the influence of social media platforms, BE creation, and consumer behaviour with a secondary emphasis on participants' willingness to recommend nation brands in e-Word of Mouth (e-WoM) communications. A methodological review explores the theory and chosen approach with a rationale for application and testing before the study in detail with an analysis and discussion of the results. Finally, key conclusions highlight academic/industrial implications, limitations, and the relevance/value of this research in the academic arena.

Research Questions

The questions explored using this study's tailored investigative framework were each inspired by the context mentioned above and thus address the importance/potential of social media as a fast-evolving facility that grows with support linked directly to exponential innovation in the technology sector:

- What is the effect of social media on BE?
- What is the effect of social media on user-based BE (brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand association) and consumer intentions with a focus on WoM communications?
- What is the effect of the dimensions of BE (brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand association) on the intention of WoM communications?

This research consists mainly of 7 chapters; starting with an introduction, the literature reviewed, research methodology, findings, followed by a discussion of the findings, theoretical and practical implications, and was ended with the author's reflection on this research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 INTRODUCTION

A literature review is vital for constructing robust frameworks that inform the research design process while consolidating what is already known - with a presentation of data - to establish the wider context that recognises, explores, and explains that knowledge gaps and their consequences are critical, as are case studies with notes on how researchers could improve if not extend works already conceived/implemented (Winchester and Salji, 2016).

This literature review examines the evolution of branding, BE, consumer intention, travel, and online communications over the last 30 years. It focuses on destination BE and consumer behaviour in light of the exponential change in the social media marketing industry. The review outlines the most relevant findings from peer-reviewed publications that were retrieved globally using various methods. An extensive review was deemed appropriate for the purpose, partly to overcome the severe limitations found through the absence of literature in this area.

Before any definitive or analytical elaboration, the researcher notes a longstanding global consensus among academics and professionals across the marketing industry that notes: “there is a dearth of literature, contrary to the long-recognised need for greater BE in every economic context, no-less the value of many works published over the last few decades”. Unfortunately, researchers in the field operate with what business leaders’ term: *silo mentality*. The models and data developed are often not re-applied, re-tested, or adopted by other teams for review in different contexts, be it academic or professional. This critique and the overwhelming need for correlational data, particularly in the destination and consumer domains, is a well-recognised issue throughout the literature.

Following the systematic methods used to assess reviews, articles, manuscripts, textbooks, and other critical sources, the researcher searched for relevant literature in online databases, offline publications, and the reference lists of core articles. Keywords were selected based on the scope of the research and included keywords such as destination branding, nation branding, nation brand, country brand, country image, country reputation/identity/image, destination marketing, e-WoM, Social Media Communication (SMC).

2.2 SCHEMA THEORY

Psychology plays a significant role in consumer-focused research, particularly in investigating the intention to purchase goods and similar acts in consumer contexts. As such, the researcher briefly outlines what literature states on the commonly applied model of Schema Theory, as it underpins the evaluative framework of this paper.

Schematic processes begin when cognitive categorisation processes end. Categorisation involves identifying and labelling stimuli that engage in an external environment. In contrast, schematisation is concerned with using prior knowledge to make inferences and understand more about what has been categorised (Hoyer and MacInnis, 2008). Schema Theory offers a comprehensive framework to conceptualise brand knowledge and informs relevant approaches (Brannon and Brock, 2006; Hoyer and MacInnis 2008; Sjödin and Törn, 2006). To echo many others since the theory's conception, Hoyer and MacInnis's pioneering publication (2008) argued that brand schemata offer an inclusive concept with parts that can accurately represent relevant concepts.

2.3 BRAND EQUITY

BE has become one of the most crucial topics in marketing management over the last 30 years (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Keller, 1993; Kim and Kim, 2005; Srivastava and Shocker, 1991; Yoo and Donthu, 2001) as an essential factor in the creation of value and competitive advantage; moreover, strategies that succeeded in the goal of differentiation (Bailey and Ball, 2006; Boo, Busser, and Baloglu, 2009; Chang and Liu, 2009; Ha, Swinder, and Siva, 2010). A range of scholars identified various dimensions of BE and its implications in the travel and destination context (Camarero, Garrido, and Vicente, 2010; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007; Williams, Gill, and Chura, 2004; Woodside et al., 2007). Aaker's (1991) work offers a convenient framework to begin this review, featuring definitions of BE, its relationship to consumers and purchase decisions. Most importantly, Aaker outlines what could *affect* customer intention/sentiment from a brand perspective and how this can be applied beyond the current achievements of researchers in the field.

By the standard definition in this context, a brand represents the association of a company's core assets to create a single enduring perception that can be reshaped over time in line with strategic goals. Moreover, a brand can be used to generate a valuable *quality* called BE. In an efficient and informed marketing space, Aaker notes this delivers "primary competitive advantage and a catalyst

for future earnings” (1991). Keller agrees with Aaker’s pioneering voice. His paper persuasively argues we can best understand, measure, and manage brands by learning what consumers know of them (1993). Over the last few decades, the concept of BE has developed, as is detailed in this literature review. To follow is a clarification of the nature of BE.

2.3.1 WHAT IS BRAND EQUITY?

In the early 1990’s, Aaker suggested that the nature of BE is rooted in the ‘value of brands’ and thus the consumer’s mind. Today, however, some prefer that BE is the real value generated by one product over competitor products, particularly generic alternatives that fail to leverage a brand - with the same success, if any. In any case, the common theme in any BE scenario is capital/value generation.

While each of the key pillars outlined by Aaker (1991) deserves to be examined, specifically brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand associations, and perceived quality, *loyalty* stands out as a core component of BE. It remains central to the concept for marketers and academics today, despite a range of developments in the field including brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand associations, and perceived quality.

Since Aaker and Keller paved the way for academic and professional progress over 30 years ago, BE has been defined from a range of perspectives since, including the ‘*objective brand*’ which focuses on personality characteristics, image, subjectivity, and attitudes (Blackston, 1995), brand value and [in]tangible brand value (Kamakura and Russell, 1993). The realisation of different BE dimensions effectively enables us to measure performance in new and interesting ways, including focal areas like social image, commitment, value, and trustworthiness (Lassar, Mittal, and Sharma, 1995). These definitions imply that effective marketing programmes in BE have incremental value in the consumer market, that is to say, in the mind of customer segments worldwide. This is what makes BE an important factor for brands and businesses worldwide in the pursuit of capital gain(s).

While it can be examined from a range of perspectives, the majority of researchers investigate BE from a consumer perspective simply because target demographics are the foremost arbiters of BE and thus key drivers of financial performance (Arnold, 1992).

2.3.2 MANAGING BRAND EQUITY

In what is recognised as a seminal piece of work, Aaker (1991) presents case studies to offer context for critical discussion. The researcher interjects to provide a forward insight into the

literature overall, because of Aaker's best practice delivery of useful and pioneering publications (e.g. industry guides or frameworks). The researcher notes this for the reader because this tendency to deliver applicable findings and other insightful content quickly disappeared in the research in many spaces. The author speculates this is logically due to the vast rate of change we can observe in our everyday lives regardless of where we come from on Earth, provided it is in a part of the world that has begun to modernise its approaches to economic development, digital adoption, and enabling [online] human communication.

Aaker outlines the existing interest in BE and clearly shows that this concept was beyond academia years ago. Today, organisations worldwide demonstrate an awareness of what Aaker was first to cover (1991): “The high-value potential of brands can be observed by purchasing existing brands instead of developing costly new ones”. Google and Microsoft deliver good examples of this in the current technology sector.

Consumer purchase decision-making is central to this paper and thus comprises a key topic under review due to the development of it as an area of focus. For example, Abubakar and Ilkan (2016) explore the consumer’s intention to travel for medical tourism, with empirical results which suggest online WoM positively influences destination trust and consumers' intention, while destination trust positively influences the intention to travel with a reciprocal effect in positive social communications.

Aaker’s work successfully shares essential foundational knowledge as we approach the turn of the tide with internet-based social communications. As the first on topic, the book suffers from a lack of research with equity-building findings with a guide to implementation. It is also missing a comparison of brand-association measurement methods for BE managers - which remains true in many studies today.

The outlined seminal work on branding and equity management inspired organisations to foster great confidence in consumers’ decision-making process. As a result of this new industry focus a considerable number of subsequent studies followed on measurement and customer-based brand equity (CBBE) over the next 20 years.

2.3.3 MEASURING BRAND EQUITY

In response to his previous shortcoming on measurement, Aaker (1996) follows up on previous work publishing *Measuring Brand Equity Across Products and Markets*. Unfortunately, aside from several leading researchers who have mostly contributed heavily since the nineteen nineties, most

scholars do not reflect this practice of directly following up studies or applying them in different contexts to develop applicable models and greater ecological validity, as is noted by many scholars (John, 2016; Swaminathan, 2016).

Aaker notes that the measures used should reflect the construct with a focus on BE: “the conceptualisation and structure of BE should guide the development of the measure set. One objective should be to tap into the full scope of BE, including awareness, perceived quality, loyalty, and associations,” (1996). The significance of his work is summarised as follows:

- 1) Aaker indicates that BE adds value to a product or service and increases customer satisfaction, which, in turn, provides a number of benefits to the firm, as was inferred previously (1996).
- 2) The two-directional workings between measurement model and brand is unique and thus must be tailored according to each individual context. Marketers and researchers cannot expect to implement a *one-size-fits-all* model delivered by either establishment and must collaborate more to fill gaps in implementation and researched-focussed partnership (1996).
- 3) Aaker was among the first to suggest measuring BE through Awareness, Quality (perceived), and Loyalty, however, various other notable studies went on to test and conclude the same if not similar factors (Keller, 1993, 2001; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007; Yoo and Donthu, 2001).

These are sustained as key pillars in BE measurement for professionals based on recent studies drawing on the effects of ‘social media on BE’ (covered later in this review). Aligned with this, Yoo et al. (2000) concluded that BE could not be grown or spoiled in the short-term, only created over a period of time through tailored marketing strategies. Yoo et al. (2000) outline the importance of multiple marketing methods to realise sturdy footings for BE. For example, destination Marketing Organisations (DMO) surely relate[d] such basic findings when they build their brand through strategies focused on sustainable ROI in the travel sector. Yoo et al. (2000) further note that brand managers must invest in advertising as an integral part of management plans.

Aligned with the researcher’s notes thus far, Swaminathan highlights the state of everyday life in developed nations and how lifestyle interferes with what might be called sustainable progress. Swaminathan suggests future research will do well to develop our understanding of how advertising models promote CBBE building blocks (2016). Based on the data and opinions

presented throughout this review, the researcher suggests this [new] focus will likely offer fresh findings with complementary thinking as we - potentially - move forward and finally challenge conclusions held from outdated BE studies - most of which remain on consumer products. Swaminathan (2016) provides a critique of Keller's CBBE framework (1993), as they identify new directions to extend the established theory moreover build on some suggestions made in Keller's later works (including 2016). CBBE is an important concept that has formed the basis of many studies on branding (covered later in this review). How brands are created and managed requires development if marketing research incorporates new challenges and realities (Swaminathan, 2016).

Destination marketing campaigns propel continued growth for nation brands and travel sectors alike by creating and sustaining strategies that centre on BE across the travel and tourism sector(s). Many campaigns leverage user-generated content (UGC) and other such nuanced marketing methods to influence consumers' intention worldwide. The researcher unpacks the findings from the literature on UGC in the Social Media section.

2.4 CONSUMER TRAVEL INTENTION

Destinations compete through image, specifically tourists' image of them before visiting is a determining factor in their purchase decision (Buhalis, 2000). Regardless of existing sentiment, a country image is subject to *change* based on consumer experience, such as holidays, in which case the customer's brand loyalty to the destination only strengthens (Bigne and Sanchez, 2001; as well as Sanchez, 2001). It makes sense that professionals would aim to ensure this is a positive change, given the potential simplicity of this as a major mode of limitless value creation thanks to the ability of communication and media sharing in context. People do not typically fall in love with holiday stories they hear, even when from a trusted source, but they are willingly seduced by photography and lap up a good recommendation.

Research has been undertaken based on traveller's intentions based on the perceptions held from previous travel experiences. Many studies, however, miss 'new visitors' in the noted methodological considerations. Jang and Namkung (2009) said, "travel motivation is an effective predictor of tourist behaviour because a travellers' mindset(s) significantly influences their future travel". This outlines why the perceptions of tourists matter when consumers identify different dimensions of destination BE that influence travel intentions (Boo et al., 2009; Stokburger-Sauer, 2011). As culinary tourism grows, hospitality becomes more valuable in differentiating/promoting destinations because tourists visit culinary regions (Horng and Tsai, 2010).

Travel and tourism in Asia Pacific is growing fast and now a significant economic resource surpassing major industry player like the USA in 2001 (Lee and Chien, 2008). When compared to other intentions typically linked with tourist destinations, culinary tourism offers effective promotional and marketing tools to encourage travellers to visit a destination to enjoy the exciting and unique food there (Harrington and Ottenbacher, 2010; Smith and Costello, 2008). Culinary tourism has become one of the most popular types to attract foreigners to Taiwan (Horng and Hu, 2009; Horng and Tsai, 2010; Horng et al., 2012). In this context, obtaining data from a branded range of samples is essential to develop an understanding of BE critical factors that generate the desire to participate in culinary tourism. These factors create positive impressions of culinary features and transform brand image to travel intention(s) in the culinary tourism segment when using creative and strategic communication(s).

This is supported by a range of studies in both the same context, such as Horng et al. (2012), who found the same and neatly demonstrated the link between BE and consumer experience in hospitality and how this can impact travellers' intentions. This is furthered by studies in different contexts, like Chen and Phou (2013) and Artigas et al. (2017). They found that if tourists perceive attributes positively, their inclination to trust the destination's brand *offering* will see positive outcomes. This echoes Aaker's BE pillars, notably brand loyalty. We see consistency and correlation in the literature until this point on the topic.

Low and Lamb (2000) noted that consumers perceive brands as 'high quality' when they add value to purchase decisions, thereby brand loyalty. Murphy, Pritchard, and Smith (2000) show that perceived 'trip quality' positively affected 'perceived trip value' and travel intentions. Deslandes (2003) notes that the perceived quality of a tourist's travel intention positively relates to the perceived value of the destination. In line with Aaker, Boo et al. (2009) identified brand quality as one of the key dimensions of BE in the destination context. As a result, the perceived quality of Taiwanese culinary culture is a factor in travel intentions.

Destinations must compete fiercely to inspire loyalty, and the literature explores loyalty generation, dynamics, and value from a range of angles relevant to this study. This highlights the challenges of a competitive market and provides usable hypotheses and models for professionals to apply in macro and micro contexts.

2.5 BRAND LOYALTY

Loyalty refers to consumers' attitude towards a brand and the intention[s] to repurchase (Oliver, 1999); if not a willingness to pay a premium price for products or services (Zeithaml, Berry, and

Parasuraman, 1996). Loyalty is widely considered in marketing literature and strategies to measure repeat purchases and consumer recommendations (Flavian, Martinez, and Polo, 2001). Brand loyalty benefits a travel destination, and tourists may revisit or recommend travel destinations to others, even friends and relatives (Yoon and Uysal, 2005). Baloglu (2001) studied consumer behaviour and tourism, demonstrating a positive correlation between loyalty and travel intentions. Yoon and Uysal (2005) hypothesised that tourists might feel commitment toward a particular brand or destination and express their intention to repurchase a product or revisit a place. Nusair et al. (2013) found the critical role of *affective commitment* in developing and maintaining relationships: “plays an important determinant of loyalty behaviour”. Loyalty has its roots firstly in the mind, and thus secondly in human behaviour. This produces various opportunities for customer/value retention, repeat patronage, intention to repurchase, and willingness to recommend through positive WoM, thereby enabling one dimension of competitive advantage.

Other studies have shown the positive relationship between perceived value and attitudinal loyalty (Cretu and Brodie, 2007) and between perceived value and WoM (Oh, 1999; Olaru et al., 2008), which will be explored in detail later. Extending the precedent to the field of destination marketing, customer value is typically expected to have a positive influence on the intention to recommend a destination.

Kim and Kim (2005) argued that brand awareness is a critical antecedent of customer value and contributes to the performance of service firms. Similarly, customer value also translates into a positive relation between the tourist’s perceived value of a destination brand and future behavioural intentions (i.e. travel) (Boo et al., 2009; Bigne et al., 2009). Destination familiarity has a high potential of moderating between BE and travel intentions. Studies show that familiarity has an important impact on the destination search behaviour of tourists (Baloglu, 2001). Tourists use their memories to make decisions about a destination, creating schemas, pockets of knowledge that are trusted as a matter of known perspective. These experiences and memories empower people to make informed decisions, such as if a tourist holds positive hospitality linked to Thailand in mind.

Baloglu’s study on consumer behaviour in tourism (2001) found a positive correlation between loyalty and travel intentions. Yoon and Uysal (2005) hypothesised that tourists may feel loyalty toward a particular brand or destination and may express an intention to repurchase a brand product or revisit particular places. The latter study argued that loyalty measures the strength of tourists’ affection towards a brand or service, and, furthermore, clarifies an additional portion of the unexplained variance in consumer travel intentions.

These examples demonstrate the widely acknowledged and positive high potential relationship between BE and consumer intentions. Furthermore, it outlines that the attributes associated with

BE serve as a cue for tourists as we identify a foundation upon which they make decisions. The schemas and influences involved are brought into focus by literature surrounding customer-based brand equity (CBBE).

2.6 CUSTOMER-BASED BRAND EQUITY

Keller has contributions in several areas that date back alongside Aaker's work in the 1990s. The researcher will review several of his studies in detail at different points. Keller defined CBBE as, "the differential effects of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of [a] brand" (1993). He presents a conceptual model of BE from the individual consumer's perspective that remains widely employed.

A brand is thought to have positive/negative CBBE when consumers react more or less favourably to an element of the marketing mix for a brand in comparison to the same when it is attributed to a fictitious/unnamed version of the same product or service (Keller, 1993). He elaborates, noting that brand knowledge is conceptualised according to an associative network memory model in terms of two components: Brand Awareness and Brand Image (i.e. brand association), which is consistent with Aaker, in addition to this research paper and other studies throughout this review (Anholt, 2005; Pike, 2012; Fang, 2021, Bruhn et al. 2012).

Brand awareness signifies a brand's presence in a consumer's memory and therefore indicates how well a consumer will recall or recognise that brand (Rossiter and Percy, 1987). Brand image signifies the consumer's associations linked to a brand (Keller, 1993), which can relate to a nation/destination, as will be discussed later.

CBBE is created when consumers are familiar with a brand and favour strong/original associations. Keller's early work aimed to conceptualise BE from this perspective, which pragmatically enables greater value generation through marketing strategies. Keller (1993) complements this by offering advised tactics for his audience and highlighting areas where research can assist leaders' decision-making processes.

Two important points emerge from Keller's conceptualisation. Marketers should take a broad view of their activity for a brand and recognise the various effects it has on brand knowledge and how changes in that affect more traditional outcomes like sales (Keller, 1993). Marketers must understand how strategies affect consumer learning and recall of brand information to ensure an optimal return on investment (ROI). Schema Theory provides an example of how this can be implemented.

Keller's theoretical foundation is based on past research in consumer behaviour that helps address some of the emerging challenges for brand managers at the time (e.g. the success of brand extensions and the rise of media/promotional alternatives). To include another leading voice, Keller's definition of CBBE, as that which holds a differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the brand's marketing, hoisted three concepts above all else: "Differential Effect, Brand Knowledge, and consumer response to marketing" (1993). The sustainability of this idea is perhaps best highlighted by noting that it continues to be found in modern marketing, covering the dynamics and *intensity* of online brand-consumer engagements (e.g. Barreda, 2014; Barreda et al., 2015).

Brand knowledge is key to the differential effect between consumer responses to marketing activities and responses to artificial brand experiences. It is defined by brand awareness and image, and is defined by perceptions, preferences, and behaviour. Favourable consumer response and positive CBBE lead to enhanced revenue, lower costs, and greater financial profit. Brand association's favourability, strength, and uniqueness play a critical role in determining [a] differential response (Keller 1993).

In his commentary, John (2016) discusses the progress made in research on several areas of consumer-focused branding, including measuring consumer brand knowledge and leveraging brands through extensions. He identifies challenges for future research in both areas, including needed developments in measuring association networks, researching global differences in consumer response to various brand extensions, and understanding how contextual factors - like competitive environments - affect the success of extension groups. Overall, current techniques are considered successful as they identify the most frequently held brand associations, detailing how favourable and unique they are and how much they correlate with measurements on preference/purchase decision/type (John, 2016).

Many important questions on brands are approached by adopting one of various consumer perspectives, with a great number of studies able to marry theoretical points of view from cognitive and social psychology to marketing-based enquiries. Following said adoption and a broader realisation among researchers, no less as presented in wider industry discussions, we can observe an ongoing and positive shift in the literature to focus on *Customer Journey*. This is because, as John (2016) notes: "brands are not just names, logos, and points on a multi-dimensional scaling map", they are perceptual entities that live in the consumer's mind. To understand how to manage brands, studies need to look [more] at how we can better understand how consumers think in specific contexts and in line with works covered within this review, as they are admirable starting points - just a few and far between. Moreover, greater clarity on how related findings impact consumer response(s) to brand strategies that professionals use to develop, leverage, and drive

positive growth and ROI. John (2016), however, found it challenging to measure individual brand associations without getting data that relates to a broader network of associations resulting in unforeseen issues and questions on the data produced. In essence, and while useful, some findings are not ecologically valid for such reasons and must be engaged with limitations.

The customer-based approach to branding has enabled the evolution of our thinking about how to leverage brands, but issues remain due to the exponential rate of technology-centred change.

2.7 MODELS

Keller (2001) notes the four pillars of Young and Rubicam's Brand Asset Valuator model, which directly relate to aspects of the CBBE model: (1) Differentiation (Superiority), (2) Relevance (Consideration), (3) Esteem (Credibility), and (4) Knowledge (Resonance). Similarly, the five sequenced stages of Millward Brown's Brand Dynamics model include: Presence, Relevance, Performance, Advantage, and Bonding. International's more comprehensive BE model, Equity Engine, has two key factors: Affinity and Performance. Affinity is comprised of three dimensions (each of which is comprised of three subdimensions): (1) Authority (heritage, trust, and innovativeness), (2) Identification (bonding, caring, and nostalgia), and (3) Approval (prestige, acceptability, and endorsement). Keller (2001) notes that these dimensions and subdimensions can also be directly related to components of the CBBE model.

CBBE frameworks subsume concepts and measures from leading industry models to deliver a greater range of insights. Several key aspects of the CBBE model include: (1) Emphasis on brand salience, as well as the breadth and depth of brand awareness as a foundation of brand building; (2) Recognition of the dual nature of brands and the significance of both rational and emotional considerations in brand building; (3) The importance it places on brand resonance as the culmination of brand building and a more meaningful way to view loyalty (Keller, 2001). Keller notes that although the model provides a detailed blueprint for brand building, specific applications should refine, edit, and embellish the model to suit users' evolving needs (2001).

The CBBE model demonstrates no shortcut in brand building, particularly when there are digital/online considerations. Brilliant brands are built by carefully accomplishing a series of steps with a group of consumers, which are recognised and defined as concrete goals.

The CBBE model is an important tool for brand managers to assess progress and provide quantitative measures of brand-building success. It recognises that marketing activities can enhance consumers' awareness of a brand and its favourability based on strength, uniqueness,

and/or types of association. This framework is expected to enable significant and positive industry growth. As Keller notes in more recent works, however, scholars are disappointed, as the field/industry has not maintained pace with the transformation rate of organisations based on a growing range of tools.

Keller's later contributions review notable works (including studies referenced herein, including 1993 and 2001) following many researchers and professionals that engage proposals made on BE and the application of CBBE models in context.

In 2003, the purpose of Keller's research was to determine the level of relationality between aspects of CBBE. A total of 248 questionnaires were obtained using a convenience sample approach. It was determined that brand awareness directly and significantly affects perceived quality, brand loyalty, and overall brand equity, an indirect and significant effect on brand loyalty and overall BE (Keller, 2003). It was determined that the perceived quality has no direct impact on overall BE, but directly affects brand loyalty and indirectly affects overall BE. The most influential factor on BE is brand loyalty. His follow-up study is one of few of direct relevance with a series of investigations that serve well to help the researcher, industry professionals, and other academics refine their conclusions. A key factor in this study was its location because it is carried out in Azerbaijan, a country where brand perception is a very new phenomenon. The findings are thought to be beneficial in both a theoretical and a practical context, having delivered said conclusion in an unbiased environment.

Moving forward, another study by Keller discusses a Brand Resonance Model, which correlates with the emerging realisation of academic researchers and professionals that relationship management must now be comprehensive, including communication-based brand strategies that tactically nurture relations through social media (Keller, 2016). Said model makes important additions to the contemplations published in his seminal CBBE article. The concept of brand salience, as is defined by breadth and depth of brand awareness, is introduced as a new base for the model.

Building on the original CBBE theory, the Resonance Model highlights two distinctions concerning brand duality of brands - in terms of [in]tangible associations related to performance and imagery - at the image level; as well as in terms of rational and emotional responses that any type of information might evoke as brand responses. The brand value chain model was designed to help marketers trace the value creation process and better understand the role/impact of marketing investments that create loyal customers of strong brands (Keller and Lehmann, 2003). The model was built on fundamental premises introduced in the CBBE as mentioned in the above article on how the value of a brand resides with consumers, notably in how they act and what they

experience, in addition to the importance of measuring BE sources and interrelated outcomes.

With reference to consumer behaviour theory at its simplest, the brand positioning, brand resonance, and brand value chain models deliver a well-rounded set of tools to help professionals create diverse strategies with tactics that maximise ROI with particular reference to long-term BE - with the means to measure success.

A number of questions arise from the field's development, but notably, as a result of Keller's various noted works, including the challenges marketing professionals face, despite being given the insights and the frameworks. This is a small sample of issues faced:

How can marketers understand what components of a brand, such as its image, need to be 'fixed'?

What aspects should we manage with short, mid, or long-term goals, and how to make this assessment in the future?

What components can and/or need to be changed?

How can we optimise acquisition/retention and better understand this facet as we build sustainable brands that grow consumer loyalty?

This review examines the literature for national equity, which has not changed in over 20 years. Professionals and researchers continue to ask the same questions but struggle to arrive at solid ground to move forward with, based on influences and forces in social and consumer behaviour, technology, and the marketing industry. Nation Branding is used to deliver strategic country-level advantages that weigh somewhat on consumers' decision-making. Social media users who travel do not create perspectives and post on places they have been, without being influenced beyond what destination marketers and local user-generated content might offer.

2.8 NATION BRAND EQUITY

In a synthesis of research on nation branding over the last 20 years, Hao (2019) provides directions for future research while noting: "Despite the growing interest by scholars, practitioners and public policymakers, there are still divergent and fragmented conceptualisations of nation branding as the field is still developing".

The successful branding of a nation can be seen through various lenses, and nation brands are highly relevant, advantageous, opportune, and influential on BE in the travel sector. This review

of literature on nation branding sets the required macro context for tourism leaders and destination marketers worldwide. It is required to deliver the total weight of multiple studies on the Australian travel segment, including the researcher's analysis at various points.

He et al. (2021) provide an analytic overview of nation brands and the branding process with notes on the importance of this area in international marketing research. The study attempts to bridge the gap between nation branding and nation equity research, with synthetic reviews, analysis, and various research ideas. The latter includes embedding nation equity into commercial brands. He et al. (2021) performed an integrative review with analysis and development that identifies concepts and measurements of a national brand as in two subcategories: *identity* and *image*. Alongside three theoretical perspectives to investigate brands, the paper delivers an integrative understanding of nation branding and highlights some original research opportunities to build on the already growing collaboration between professionals and academics in the public and private sector through nation equity.

Steenkamp (2020) proposes a nation branding model that builds upon Aaker's brand identity system, cultural branding, and established BE theory. The paper draws on the extant literatures on brand identity systems, cultural branding and brand equity to develop a conceptual model for nation branding with associated tasks for the nation brand marketer. Steenkamp notes the absence of attention by international marketing scholars (2020) before arguing that nation branding is a key emerging form of management that we need to pursue with the goal of enriching the existing literature as we deepen our understanding of it. The study proposes a model for nation branding, which consists of six stages, in addition to identifying five critical everyday problems in a practical section for professionals.

2.9 COUNTRY IMAGE

A country needs to strategically manage its image and reputation to achieve an appealing brand (Anholt, 2002). People often judge multiple facets of a country through images of a country. Kang and Yang (2010) describe country reputation as perceptions of a nation on the basis of personal experience and the information received on topic. Articles by Hakala et al. (2013), Heslop et al. (2010), Kang and Yang (2010) and Wang et al. (2012) are examples of research on country image and reputation.

There are several main reasons why nations should manage their image: first, to promote the country in general and help create a positive image; second, to appeal to tourists; third, to add value to the products produced in the country; fourth, to attract foreign investment, and finally to attract

talented residents (Hakala et al., 2013; Stock, 2009). Consumers' thoughts about countries exist on two levels: associations and beliefs about the nation at a macro level, with associations with its products at micro-level (Pappu and Quester, 2010).

Beliefs in a country and its people represent the cognitive component in research on country image. The belief that dimensions have been found to involve people, character, country character, people competencies, and country competencies (Heslop et al., 2010). Hakala et al. (2013) discuss the relationship between nation branding and country image and identify the sources of country image perceptions. Their results show that a country's image(s) are based on stereotypical views. Therefore, depending on their nature, these should be directly targeted to capitalise by altering or reinforcing. In a nation branding context, stereotype refers to placing nations and their people in categories. A nation's stereotype can be positive, negative, or neutral, but more recent studies encourage a multidimensional approach to measure country image (Elliot and Papadopoulos, 2016; Wang et al., 2012).

Wang et al. (2012) define cognitive country image as consumers' beliefs of a country in terms of its economic development, living standards, industrialisation, technological advancement, etc. Affective country image refers to the positive and negative feelings toward a country (Wang et al., 2012). This theme has gained more attention in the nation branding domain. Despite a growing number of studies, more research is required to explore the multidimensional nature of country image and its impact on nation branding.

2.9.1 COGNITIVE & AFFECTIVE IMAGE

Cognitive and affective factors play into consumer choices (Zajonc, 1980; Zajonc and Markus, 1982) and general country image (e.g. Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2003; Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009; Wang et al., 2012). The cognitive dimension of a country image refers to consumers' beliefs about a country, its levels of economic development, living standards, industrialisation, and technological progress, while the affective dimension of a country image is comprised of consumers' emotional response to governments, their policies, and different peoples' social behaviours and culture (Li et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2012).

It is theoretically and managerially critical to distinguish between a country's cognitive and affective-image - aspects. Consumers may have incongruent cognitive/affective responses to the same nation. For example, Chinese consumers may prefer Japanese products, but still have negative sentiments towards the same country based on historical tensions. Such a negative effect could shape attitudes towards Japanese products (Klein et al., 1998). Nation branding campaigns could target cognitive and affective aspects of a country's image (Iwabuchi, 2015).

In line with Schema Theory and a range of other studies that use the same with convenience samples and online questionnaires featuring prominently, the consumer process begins as we recognise that a tourist destination exists, from which an association is created/stored in mind to represent a destination *image*. Various studies support this analysis in the context of social networks (Llodrà-Riera et al., 2015), because the content delivered by other users represents stimuli that influence the formation of national brands' country image as a strategic asset in destination marketing (Keller, 1993). This process can occur consciously or unconsciously.

Based on research, a country's *image* has cognitive and affective dimensions (Hyun and O'Keefe, 2012). The affective image is related to the emotional responses that destinations evokes. The cognitive image is defined as the perception of functional and psychological attributes at the destination. The functional component is based on tangible attributes, such as attractions or facilities - abstract attributes, such as the client's perception of quality and value (Bigné et al., 2009). Scholars agree that a positive link between consumer-generated content and brand image is a viable strategy in tourism. For example, Barreda (2014) empirically confirms the relationship between SM interaction on travel and brand awareness, noting that awareness positively influences image. Other research confirms that brand awareness influences brand quality (Keller and Lehmann, 2003; Pike et al., 2010). Some authors conclude that there is an empirically verifiable positive relationship between brand awareness and perceived value (Webster, 2000; Oh, 2000; Kwun and Oh, 2004). Others leverage these results in the context of tourist destinations and explore the influence of SM on value formation (Schau et al., 2009; Tasci, 2016).

In previous studies, scholars empirically demonstrate that cognitive image positively influences affective image (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Hyun and O'Keefe, 2012). In the review of literature on BE and tourism in the destination context, several studies find evidence of a positive relationship between affective brand image and consumers' intention to recommend (Pike et al., 2010; Bianchi and Pike, 2011; Bianchi et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2015). Various studies show that the perception of destination brand quality influences attitudinal loyalty (Pike et al., 2010; Bianchi and Pike, 2011; Bianchi et al., 2014). When we consider that use of SM heavily contributes to a higher valuation of quality attributes from the consumer perspective, it is expected that empirical study in destinations will see higher levels of perceived brand quality, with a rise in attitudinal loyalty and the intention to recommend the destination, typically through WoM.

Similarly, Im et al. (2012) confirm that cognitive image influences the intention to recommend a destination. Consequently, it is proposed that the greater the values of the two components of the destination image, the greater the correlation with positive intention to recommend destinations through traditional means and digital channels (e-WoM).

2.10 DESTINATION MARKETING

In the aftermath of a global pandemic which inspired an international travel crisis with tourism industries collapsing, destinations realised the imperative to develop market-facing brands that help to ensure - in the eyes of tourists - their locality is *reputed* as a safe and secure travel destination. Over the past few decades, an increasing number of tourism hubs, ranging in size and scale from cities and countries to multinational organisations at the helm of global leadership apply marketing and branding techniques to attract visitation and investment (Gertner, 2011). Destination branding is one of the main topics in tourism marketing to enhance differentiation and competitiveness. This urgent need for destination branding has led to more investigations on destination-based BE (Oliveira and Panyik, 2015), which is reliant on the aforementioned subject areas (cognitive and affective dimensions).

Destinations compete principally through *image*, given that a consumer's understanding or 'image of [the] place' determines tourists' purchase decisions (Buhalis, 2000). Critically, the initial *image* can be modified by [a] holiday experience, and loyalty to the destination will only be strengthened if tourists' image of it continues to be positive (Bigne et al., 2001). Consequently, the construction of a suitable image for a destination will determine its capacity to attract, entertain, and retain tourists (Ahmed, 1991).

The consumer tourism process starts when customers first recognise that a place, a new destination exists. An association is created/stored in mind to represent a destination *image*. Various studies support this analysis in the context of online social networks (Llodra-Riera et al., 2015). The content delivered by other users represents stimuli that influence the formation of nation brands' *image* as a strategic asset in destination marketing (Keller, 1993). Although the study is almost two decades old, Grosspietsch's point that, "despite the profusion of studies on the subject, there is no consensus on the definition of this image or its components," remains accurate with support (2006; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Beerli and Martin, 2004; Fakeye and Crompton, 1991).

Destination brands are very different from product brands. For example, Gartner (2014) states, "Destinations are places of life and change". Change is the measure of brand stability, one of the main elements of branded consumer products. Destinations are multidimensional and provide different experiences to different tourists (Ruzzier, 2010). Destination brands lack the brand stability that most product brands have. Several market segments consume it simultaneously; each consumer compiles their unique product from the services offered. Thus, destination marketers

have less control over the brand experience than marketers of concrete material products or services (Hankinson, 2009).

Cervova and Vavrova (2021) focused on evaluating CBBE in the destination of Croatia from the perspective of Czech citizens. Based on the CBBE model, they investigate different dimensions of CBBE for a tourism destination (CBBETD). The paper represents ongoing work, noting awareness, image, quality and loyalty as the dimensions of a destination as antecedents to CBBETD. Tourists from different backgrounds sense various dimensions of a destination distinctly, suggesting that academics and industry professionals need to deliver a model for developing subjective/tailored frameworks for application; otherwise, we shall remain in a state of flux.

Hadianfar (2021) investigates the impact of SM marketing on CBBE components in tourism destinations. The sample totaled 149 visitors from Isfahan. Online questionnaires and convenience sampling were used to collect data with hypotheses tested using smart PLS software, which prove to be common methods in this research context across the literature. Hadianfar's results show that "there is a statistically positive and significant impact of social media marketing on destinations, notably brand awareness, image, quality and loyalty". Thirty years on, Aaker's original framework maintains relevance, likely on the basis that it was pioneering, the researcher concludes, as it asks questions similar to those of other models.

Keller's BE Pyramid is utilised as a comparison framework to reveal similarities/overlaps, with any differences and gaps noted at the conceptual and measurement level of existing BE models focused on destination performance. Chekalina et al. (2016) propose a useful CBBE model for destinations, which consists of five dependent constructs, including awareness, loyalty, and three destination brand promise constructs constituting the inner core of the model: destination resources, value in use, and value for money (Chekalina et al., 2016).

Yang et al. (2015) offer an integrated approach to understanding how tourists' experiences contribute to CBBETD from a customer perspective. Most research concentrates on developing the dimensions of customer-based brand equity in tourism destinations (CBBETD), according to Bianchi and Pike (2011), as well as others (Boo, Busser, and Baloglu, 2009; Chen and Myagmarsuren, 2010; Im, Kim, Elliot, and Han, 2012). A few other studies have attempted to explore the antecedent factors of CBBETD from touristic perspectives (Evangelista and Dioko, 2011; Kim, Han, Holland, and Byon, 2009; Konecnik and Ruzzier, 2006). Despite its significance for every destination, scholars agree there is a lack of theory guiding the study of CBBETD and little agreement on what contributes to CBBETD. Yang et al. (2015) address two important topics in current tourism management: CBBETD and CE. This research studied the role of CE in

CBBETD for the first time and confirmed the proposed internal structure of CBBETD established in the literature. Findings saw satisfied travellers contribute to CBBETD directly with a higher tendency to spread positive WoM (Chen and Myagmarsuren, 2010; Im et al., 2012). A distinction is made in reviewing the study's limitations, specifically the lack of empirical support for the relationship between advertising and CBBETD. This is inconsistent with the existing literature on/the success of advertising on CBBE with everyday consumer products.

A recent review of destination branding publications from 1998 to 2007 identified at least nine major gaps in the literature relating to practical challenges faced by destination marketing organisations (DMOs) such as national/state tourism offices and regional tourism organisations (Pike, 2009). Scholars in the field agree there has been a severe absence of research that analyses the performance of destination campaigns.

Pike is a leading researcher and a noted pragmatist in research design, one reputed for his default goal to go beyond theoretical speculation and unsupported data to realise applicable benchmarks and frameworks that can be applied and monitored (2010). Pike's approach is reminiscent of Aaker and Keller, and is thus perhaps also demonstrative of growth in academic research quality across the respective fields. The purpose of Pike's study was to track the effectiveness of a brand in 2007 against benchmarks established in 2003 at the commencement of a new destination campaign (Pike 2010). The findings determined: "Australia is a well-known but not compelling destination brand for tourists in Chile, which reflects the lower priority South American markets by the national tourism office" (2010). The paper concludes: "Because of the common challenges faced by [the destination], it is suggested that the CBBE hierarchy provides marketers with a practical tool for evaluating brand performance over time," (2010). A hierarchy of BE is proposed for DMOs to measure the effectiveness of the investment. One limitation of the study is that two cross-sectional surveys were used in place of longitudinal design. However, the results clearly highlight the challenge facing the respective destination in a highly competitive global market.

The vast number of online marketing communications shared daily, no-less the continued exponential growth of MarComms as a service sector, all adequately attest to the aforementioned competitiveness hike and the requirement for ongoing research.

2.11 MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

Brands no longer *seek to engage* consumers and a means of enhancing brand communication on social media channels. They simply *must compete* if they hope to maintain a competitive advantage. Nevertheless, SM has changed the traditional model of MarComms. Internet users are

gradually shaping branded communications that marketers formerly controlled. The one-way model for data has now become a multi-dimensional, two-way, peer-to-peer social phenomenon (Berthon *et al.*, 2008).

Previous studies empirically justify the conclusion that MarComms reinforce brand awareness (Aaker, 1991; Yoo *et al.*, 2000), with more recent research indicating that SMCs can have the same effect, as is supported by the basics of Schema Theory (Bruhn *et al.*, 2012; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2015). Users of social networks are increasingly exposed to content on tourist destinations and share it with existing networks, which has significantly impacted brand awareness in some cases (Hutter *et al.*, 2013; Halkias, 2015).

Although the content generated by firms is typically positive and sensible, certainly when compared to other user-generated content types, some researchers suggest that having both types together increase brand awareness and help the consumer in purchase decisions (Bruhn *et al.*, 2012; Hutter *et al.*, 2013; Kumar *et al.*, 2016). Thus, the intensity of interaction with brands on SM positively influences consumers' awareness of a destination when making a travel decision. In terms of e-WoM communication, that directs brand agendas with one simple underlying goal: '*The More Wow! The Better*'.

2.12 e-WORD OF MOUTH COMMUNICATION

If there is an experience to be shared, Word of Mouth (WoM) communication is a popular source that now represents our expectations for personal/community data sharing (Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014). It is important to note that WoM is not a new mode of communication, it is an ancient social practice. All living organisms, in fact, share the organic inclination to transfer information to others within each respective species; and as such we have passed data to each with the same *purpose* since the dawn of human communication and social relations. Few things are as inherently trustworthy.

Since the beginning of enterprise, consumers have considered WoM referrals a key resource to evaluate services (Dawes *et al.*, 1991) and, more recently, brands behind great consumer experiences that develop [perceived] relations, market awareness, and consumers' decision/intention to commit, spend, and accrue financial debt. WoM remains a highly trusted data source that often ensures other channels become redundant in a short space of time. It is like comparing the use of Great Britain's national telephone directory *The Yellow Pages* with Google and the comparative number of online searches made each day. The dynamism of our technological developments remains a key factor.

One of the earliest definitions of WoM was produced by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1966), who describe it as an exchange of marketing related data between consumers in a way that is key to influencing their behaviour through the modification of social attitudes regarding a brand's products or service(s). Looking at it from an alternate perspective in the same era, Arndt suggests that WoM is in fact defined as an interpersonal communication tool, between a *communicator* and a *receiver*, who interprets data received about a brand, product, or service as “non-commercial” (1967). Similarly, WoM has also been defined as the communication between consumers about products, services, brands, and businesses in which the sources are considered independent of commercial influence (Litvin et al., 2008).

All of the above scenarios observe human exchanges that provide access to [new] data related to the consumption of products/services beyond formal advertising and marketing messages (Brown et al., 2007); which means WoM is perhaps arguably by default more impactful/intense than strategic messages delivered in line with our [new] social expectations across conventional online channels.

2.12.1 THE EVOLUTION OF e-WoM

WoM has become regarded as one of the most influential factors that can *affect* consumer behaviour, and thus the number of peer-reviewed publications has risen commensurately (Daugherty and Hoffman, 2014; Litvin et al., 2008; Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012). This is particularly important with intangible products that are difficult to evaluate prior to consumption, like tourism and other connected experiential industries like hospitality. As such, WoM remains critical as a pancultural and highly trusted - free - everyday data source that influences consumer buying choices and other human attitudes and behaviour.

Today's newest form of digital WoM is typically called electronic word-of-mouth or e-WoM (Yang, 2017). This form of communication has taken on special importance due to the emergence of online platforms, which continue to diversify and maintain *the spoken word* as one of the most influential data sources on the internet, and thus worldwide in most contexts (Abubakar and Ilkan, 2016), for instance, *tourism*, reported Sotiriadis and Van Zyl (2013). As a result of technological advances being an overarching theme throughout this review, said new means of online communication have led to notable changes in consumer behaviour (Cantalops and Salvi, 2014;

Gomez-Suarez et al., 2017), because of the influence social platforms enable consumers to exert upon each other amid a war of brands (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012).

One of the most comprehensive definitions of e-WoM was proposed by Litvin et al. (2008), who described it as ‘all informal communication via the Internet addressed to consumers to relate to the use or characteristics of goods/services, if not the brand/firm trades the respective goods. The advantage of this tool is that it is available to all consumers who use online platforms to share opinions and reviews with other users. Where consumers once trusted WoM from friends and family, today, they look for online comments (e-WoM) for information about a product or service (Nieto et al., 2014).

To note an example of e-WoM, *microblogging* is widely noted as a contemporary phenomenon that enables SM users to rapidly spread information among connected/networked individuals, as has been demonstrated in a plenitude of recent world affairs/events. Microblogging is a powerful trend in communication that refers to broadcasting brief messages to members of a social network through an internet-based service (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). Hennig et al. (2004) empirically test the ‘Twitter effect,’ which proposes that Microblogging Word of Mouth (MWoM) communicated through said platform affects consumer behaviour by disseminating post-purchase quality evaluations. After categorisation, the study supports a framework for cognition and brand idea development, representing an *intense* engagement for the consumer/user with positive brand outcomes.

2.13 BRAND EQUITY: THE IMPACT OF e-WoM

Consider the potential - positive/negative - impact of WoM on the tourism industry based on the vast number of engagements undertaken every second on social media platforms, which on their own connect billions of active users worldwide (free of charge). The WoM streams that relate to consumer experiences of all types, such as but not limited to travel operators, hotels, jet ski/car/camel rentals, food and beverage are everyday examples of where consumers will inevitably share information with friends and family, especially in the aftermath of a prominently good/bad experience.

How many meals get served to tourists in hospitality venues worldwide on average in a day?

The weight/scale of the question in itself substantiates the researcher’s point without a need for added citations to demonstrate how opportune - or indeed devastating - a single ‘day at the office’ can be when captured and shared on social media, especially if it *goes viral* (omnichannel context

for content that circulates rapidly from one user to another). e-WoM is logically the underpinning a concern for travel and tourism companies, even when closed/not engaging external stakeholders from the consumer market, because staff tend to deliver a tranche of inside perspectives about their employment experiences, and sometimes this can harm a business/brand's overall reputation based on growing poor perception on an issue (BrewDog in the UK, for example received an avalanche of criticism in said regard).

Based on the potential for value generation through strategic narrative management (BE), this mode/area of communication justifiably remains a topic of growing importance in professional practice and research. Tourism experiences and traveller satisfaction is very important because literature definitively suggests that consumer experiences will - logically - influence the behavioural intentions of those who travelled and those they communicate with during and after, which is prior to any contemplation of feedback, reviews, and so forth. WoM enables new value generation with branded products/services by encouraging more quality communications and consistently evolving integrated marketing experiences. In tourism, traveller satisfaction with a destination leads to the possibility of a revisit/recommendation (Sotiriadis and Van Zyl, 2013).

As a result of the value it delivers and the accessibility/potential reliability of the data shared (pan user default reality), e-WoM remains a principal focus area in research with particular importance emerging for organisations operating in service industries like travel and tourism. Despite e-WoM being noted as an area of critical importance before the rise of social media (Olaru et al., 2008), at a time when *referrals* dominated sales and marketing literature, e-WoM remains far from well-investigated with a continued absence of comparable studies.

Earlier studies on WoM communication look into the influenceability of consumers, finding that the significance of interpersonal engagement offers great potential value in building sustainable BE (Brown and Hayes, 2008). As time went on and social media demonstrated its value past the noted turn in research around 2010-2012, scholars began to take ever-greater focus on the field of social media communication, notably prominent topics like e-WoM based on a collective agreement concerning its importance (Jalilvand and Samiei 2012; Rezvani, Hoseini, and Samadzadeth 2012). Areas of focus explore WoM in the context of online reviews (Karakaya and Barnes 2010), virtual brand-centric communities (Carlson, Suter, and Brown 2008; Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009; Brodie et al. 2013), advertising (Bruhn, Schoenmueller, and Schafer 2012), and UGC, as presented earlier.

The last few years have shown a more significant number of evaluative studies exploring the impact of communication on nation branding, destination marketing, and advertising campaigns. WoM communication has become a useful framework for evaluating the effectiveness of

implementation activities, as was shown by Abdellatif, et al. (2019) in the team's analysis of the 'Incredible India' campaign. Contrary to said increase in empirical research, few legitimate or well-tested models offer an understanding of how interpersonal social media communications influence consumer perception and behaviour.

The continued growth of the Internet causes electronic WoM communications to become an opportunity for brands, consumers, and destinations alike. To maintain the stated example, the demand and supply aspects of the tourism industry are greatly affected by social media. There is a vast amount of data online, and each piece impacts at least one audience (Hinz et al. 2011). This sounds assumptive until we realise that one of the easiest ways to retrieve travel information today is by visiting SM platforms.

At the time of Hinz et al.'s (2011) study, there was little research offering an extensive empirical comparison of anything related to/based on social media, let alone the more advanced digital experiences we now focus on, such as seeding strategies, BE generation, content *intensity*, and the dynamics of WoM communications. It took ten years for the legitimate presence of social media-based research to seriously break ground. Still, the arena is now heavily invested with a broad range of studies building on prior research. This is the first and perhaps an exclusive statement in this review, and therein perhaps outlines the seriousness of the respective topic and its impact on the consumer market.

WoM has become an important marketing concern with no shortage of interest from brands to attract renewed interest following consumer experience and/or engagement (e.g. Godes and Mayzlin 2009; Iyengar et al., 2011). It is also worth noting the common-sense point that e-WoM is much cheaper than other tactical brand acquisition methods. A few studies find that customers acquired through WoM tend to churn less than those acquired through traditional channels; moreover, retained customers bring in additional customers through WoM (Sirakaya et al., 2001, Trusov et al., 2009; Villanueva et al., 2008). Villanueva et al. (2008) suggest that customers acquired through WoM generate more revenue for the firm than customers acquired through traditional marketing activities.

Brands that build high levels of CBBE are targets for negative WoM and undesirable content from Internet-using consumers. Negative content, which could be based on either fact or merely the consumer's malicious intent (Ward and Ostrom, 2006), is a potential threat that may weigh on consumers' perception of the same brand/business (Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011). Dissatisfied consumers can use social networking sites to review products and complain publicly (Sen and Lerman, 2007). However, negative data presented in such scenarios can be strategically managed/converted/realised as an opportunity for brand building (Noble et al., 2012). Managers

can use various methods to influence/shape undesired consumer discussions that are consistent with the company's brand, business, and related objectives (Mangold and Faulds, 2009).

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2015) investigate the way e-WoM across social media influences the formation of destination image through the development of trust and satisfaction for tourists. The research involved administering an 18-point questionnaire taking online reviews, tourist involvement, and e-WoM, with destination image components of trust and satisfaction as variables. Data was collected from 554 individuals forming a cross-section of social media users, with analysis employing multivariate techniques. Results show a positive and significant relationship between all except online review and destination trust/satisfaction. Other findings indicate that e-WoM fully mediates the relationality of destination satisfaction and involvement while partially mediating the relationship between destination trust and involvement (2015). In the case of online reviews, e-WoM acts as a full mediator between destination trust and destination satisfaction for the future traveller using social media. Overall, the study highlights its use for National Tourist Organisations (NTOs) and online travel brokers to enhance destination marketing strategies.

Various researchers, such as Kakirala and Singh (2020), conclude that tourism has become increasingly influenced by the ever-heightening degree of consumer interaction (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). e-WoM is justifiably seen as an essential information resource of destination image and also of immense value to travel intermediaries and NTOs (Murphy et al., 2007). Extant literature focuses on the functional, psychological, and social antecedents of tourist decision-making with the deliberate use of social media (Parra-Lopez et al., 2011), however research is scant on e-WoM and its role in building destination image.

2.14 SOCIAL MEDIA

For this study, social media platforms will be defined as: 'networking websites and applications that enable users to create and share different types of content or participate in public and private social engagements (with individual/collective communication as options). The type and nature of platform differs considerably, despite sharing the same formats of content on almost all of them - in a variety of different communication structures; including but not limited to social networking sites (like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn), social review sites, image sharing sites, video hosting sites, community and micro blogs, discussion boards, networking sites, and everyday messaging applications like WhatsApp.

Social media users are defined by people in almost every locality on Earth with language and monitoring features are used to separate age groups/content types. New forms of digital

governance, e-safeguarding policies, privacy laws, and a breadth of legislation help maintain an increasingly safe - yet ironically harmful - online environment geared towards 'ethical human communication and community building' (concept).

2.14.1 ONLINE MARKETING & NETWORKING

Online social networks have forever changed interpersonal communication, notably how we share data and our opinions about consumer experiences. They have inspired new interactions between consumers and businesses/brands, with said evolution delivering great potential advantage(s) to marketers with a complimentary call/cause to revise existing strategies (Armstrong and Kotler, 2012). Strategic communications often inspire brand engagement on a website, social network, or some other market-facing network that enjoys the hyper-connectivity of a global population. e-WoM is thus now a core focus in the drive for business performance.

For an example that focuses on said digital evolution, studies have taken a stronger focus on the role that IT plays in the travel and tourism market (e.g. Xiang et al. 2015). These include a review of engagement strategies that leverage media, trends, politics, visual and text-based modes of communication, and other creative brand messages that provoke human emotion(s) through social networking sites, blogs, forums, chat rooms, and other social spaces, largely encompassed by 'online [social] networks - the same types lay people can build for themselves on demand, similar to WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter.

Literature reviewing OSN websites and digital travel communities largely focuses on where tourists are encouraged to exchange content/opinions/experiences on topics of common or personal interest (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). This was true since literature alongside Aaker and Keller's first publications on BE. Numerous online communities exist specifically for travel purposes. Strong websites like TripAdvisor serve as an open travel forum where visitors can post questions/reviews/answers and beyond in advanced digital spaces (Keates, 2007).

Many tourism and hospitality companies adopt Facebook pages with applications that enable guests to reserve, comment, and/or meet with others (Sinha, 2011). As tourism products are hard to evaluate before purchase (McIntosh, 1972), visitors hunt for information to explore or reduce the risk of unfamiliar product experimentation (Dodd et al. 1996; Hyun et al., 2007; Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006; Susskind et al., 2003). Information searching - or information acquisition - is one of the first steps in consumers' holiday decision-making process (Chen and Gursoy, 2000). The researcher suggests this is a likely outcome considering that the supposed thought of consumers is to check online. Park, Kee, and Valenzuela (2009) surveyed students to examine OSN user activities and found that 'information seeking' was a key need for young university

people. After Web 2.0, individuals started building relationships with people from various destination brands and companies. Sinha (2011) supports the researcher in the ongoing comments regarding the broader context with major facilitators and influencing factors conceived through [wo]man made technologies.

Anderl et al. (2015) offer one of many studies demonstrating this shift in market research and marketing practice by *Helping Firms Reduce Complexity in Multichannel Online Data*. Despite noting at the very beginning: “retailers can choose from a plethora of online marketing channels to reach consumers on the Internet, and potential customers often use a vast range of channels during their customer journey,” the team failed to mention the relevance of SM as a key consideration that had existed for over a decade. That is despite many studies demonstrating its absolute centrality within any *current* marketing mix, as will be explored later (Anderl et al., 2015).

Barreda’s (2014) study finds that brand image is positively related to BE. To nurture BE in travel-related groups online, tourism-based OSNs should stimulate *intense* consumer engagements that - create, if not - evoke memories that show the attributes and benefits associated with the brand being marketed. These attributes and characteristics make travel brands distinct, differentiating them from competitors in a way that provides differential benefits and other gains. This result is consistent with Torres and Bijmolt (2009), who stated that more favourable brand images result in OSN users’ desire to build/maintain image associations and engage valuable brands. When nurtured in the memory of website users, brand image associations impact travel-related perception of a brand’s value (Barreda, 2014). Barreda hazards that practitioners must consider focusing more on website-based engagement with travel consumers as a go-to e-marketing strategy, especially to share effective feedback tools, where travel related OSN users can interact with the brand and other travellers (2014).

Barreda’s (2014) findings are consistent with Madhavaram et al. (2005), which found that when travellers interact via OSNs (talk, listen, feedback) in relation to preferred brands, they are more likely to recall/recognise a brand and its attributes. In addition to the marketing communications’ stated relevance, interacting with OSN helps brands become recognisable and memorable to OSN users. Travel-related OSN users are more likely to recognise and remember more branded goods and services when they interact with other users and travel product/service suppliers. The study’s findings also imply a favorable relationship between website-based interaction and brand perception.

This result is consistent with Jones et al. (2009), which indicates that *interaction*, including online communications, virtual feedback, and website quality, now progressively form a foundation for creating a positive brand image in the consumer mind. If the interactivity factor between the user

and OSN is perceived as important and significant, travel-related OSN users are likely to have a positive image. This implies that when users interact at a fast pace with other users of the same type, they tend to form strong and positive perceptions of a brand. The described interactivity is positively associated with BE. This finding is consistent with various studies, like Kim and Ko (2012), which implies that when travel-related OSN users interact and communicate with their brand of preference via OSNs, they are likely to build high[er] levels of BE and are viewed as ‘value added’ to the product and/or service. This empirical result suggests that interaction emerges as one of the foremost influencers when compared with other factors used to build BE in the travel context when using OSNs.

These results are consistent with past research, indicating that ‘the level of awareness OSN users have’ has influenced the level of BE generation in the travel context via OSNs. For example, Macdonald and Sharp (2003) found a higher level of consumer awareness based on the strength of the link between each brand and the individual’s perception of positive personal attributes and other associations that deliver a pleasure-based - dopamine-driven - social experience. Consumer image differs by the level of awareness, which implies the significant and influential power of the level of awareness and brand image formation in OSN websites. When travel-related OSN users recall the brand under different circumstances and recognise a preferred brand without significant effort (e.g. looking for one hour to find it), they tend to form positively strong perceptions on a brand. This finding highlights the importance of brand recognition/recall in the aforementioned travel community.

Barreda’s (2014) study finds that brand image is positively related to BE. To nurture BE in travel-related groups online, tourism-based OSNs should stimulate *intense* consumer engagements that - create, if not - evoke memories that show the attributes and benefits associated with the brand being marketed. These attributes and characteristics make travel brands distinct, differentiating them from competitors in a way that provides differential benefits and other gains. This result is consistent with Torres and Bijmolt (2009), who stated that more favourable brand images result in OSN users’ desire to build/maintain image associations and relationships with valuable brands. When nurtured in the memory of website users, brand image associations impact travel-related perception of a brand’s value (Barreda, 2014).

To build BE in an e-commerce context is not an easy task. Online travel brands must distinguish themselves from direct/indirect competitors, influence interactivity to increase brand recall and recognition in OSN travel communities, and therein grow opportunities to grow a strong/positive brand image. Barreda (2014) hazards that practitioners must consider focusing more on website-based engagement with travel consumers as a go-to e-marketing strategy, especially to share effective feedback tools, where travel-related OSN users can interact with the brand and other

travellers.

Nusair et al. (2013) aimed to develop a theory-based model of relationship commitment in an online social network context for Generation Y travellers. A systematic random sample of 12,000 students from six US institutions was issued an online survey. The study included 513 respondents, and the findings indicate that and calculative commitment are positively correlated with perceived utility and trust. According to the relationship between perceived risk and commitment dimensions, customers are more likely to increase their commitment to a brand if there is less risk connected with OSNs. This study emphasises how important affective commitment is in developing loyalty and encouraging patronage of travel OSNs.

Online engagement is a multidimensional construct that requires examination in detail with an accompanying explanation. Different modes of interaction need to be studied independently to understand their distinctive outcomes. Scholars and travel experts will still discover significant voids when establishing the attributes that can influence a user group and the respective influences.

For instance, sample data analysis shows that most participants were American travellers. Future research must target a broader geographically to identify whether the suggested catalysts yield similar results on user-brand relations. Finally, the present research focuses on B2C transactions and does not consider other classes, limiting the extent to which research findings and implications can be applied. (Nusair et al. 2013) inspire the same critique in the US market with additional bias extending to gender, among other factors of the sample demographic. However, Nusair et al.'s study was earlier among prominent researchers to publish results found by adopting prior models developed by other research teams: "All research variables were measured using multiple-item scales adopted from previous research studies, making only minor changes of wording to tailor them to the target context," (2013).

The findings show significant linkage between four key constructs. BE is a complex construct. Future research must include the effect of psychological and social benefits received when using OSN websites. New projects should consider studying these two variables in contexts other than travel. The researcher also only examines two elements as drivers of BE. Future studies may consider other elements, such as those investigated since Aaker's early work, such as brand attitude, attachments/extensions, and loyalty.

Unlike most studies, Barreda et al. (2015) promptly followed up on prior research, which far outdoes many researchers in the field over a longer period of time without any justification for this oversight in publications reference topics acknowledged as critical.

Using what Barreda et al. note as, “exceptional, interactive, and communicative capabilities,” (2015) OSNs allow firms and destinations to heighten brand awareness. Many tourist destinations and hospitality brands are exploring the use of OSNs to form brand awareness and generate positive WoM. This research aims to propose and empirically test a theory-driven model of brand awareness of OSNs. The results indicate that building awareness using OSNs will increase WoM activity. To foster brand awareness, creating a virtually interactive environment that enables users to exchange reliable, exciting, and up-to-date information in a timely manner is important. The study directly supports the importance of SM within online marketing and brand management strategies. Virtual interactivity, system quality, content quality, and rewarding activities influence/generate brand awareness, which in return propels WoM.

This thesis is distinguished from previous studies on brand awareness theory and concentrates on a sample frame in the travel context. Data analysis applied a three-stage approach. Initially, confirmatory factor analysis was undertaken to assess the capability of the measurement model before implementing reliability analysis. The quality of the model’s fit was estimated in the measurement/structural model level(s) (Barreda et al., 2015).

OSN pages, profiles, and websites are a natural extension of brand[ed] websites. They prove to be powerful tools for driving targeted traffic, engagement, conversion, and sales (Barreda et al., 2015). OSN websites are also very effective for boosting brand awareness. Building strong brand awareness is critical for marketers as it positively influences WoM communication. This will be covered in the penultimate section and thus precede the researcher’s conclusions. Successful destinations go beyond allowing users to interact, enabling them to receive rewards for online activities, such as reviews or peer/organisation profile updates (Barreda et al. 2015). The potential function of OSNs has progressed to the point where marketers and travel professionals can generate awareness that will drive WoM.

Through the use of travel-related OSNs, brand awareness might be a fundamental ambition of any travel/hospitality organisation that delivers strategic MarComms. In line with Schema Theory, it is generally concluded that other significant elements will struggle to form without the generation of brand awareness. Beyond this, brand awareness greatly influences the generation of WoM and the consumer’s intention to consider/test new brands.

Barreda et al. (2015) enable new strategies and tactics for professionals who deliver OSN campaigns. The study highlights the importance of quality, with organisations advised to prepare well-crafted marketing messages and post only high-quality content on OSN sites. Brands did understand and apply this finding, among countless other tests done under SM marketing

strategies, and often take an exclusivity approach to content to ensure a WoW factor that will capture each brand's target audience.

Several limitations exist. Firstly, other antecedents may significantly influence the generation of brand awareness, such as telepresence and enjoyment. Another limitation emerges from the participant demographics, as most respondents were female and thus the study holds a degree of gender bias, whether it is intentional or not. This makes ecological validity a problem while said shortage of comparative data remains so. Age representativeness presents another limitation, as a younger sample can logically be expected to yield more predictable results in context. Another limitation is that the study collected data using online surveys; because beyond the advantages of online surveys, it is believed that the response rate is generally lower than those sent by post (Granello and Wheaton, 2004).

After the internet became a consumer space and research took hold in countless directions, that is, before the dawn of social media, a range of other investigations offer relevant insights on consumer experiences with brands and thus BE management. A taxonomy-based approach is suggested by Anderl et al (2015)'s study to assist retailers in better understanding how channel usage across the customer journey enables deductions about the underlying purchase decision processes. A proportional hazard model with time-varying covariates was employed to examine this strategy using a sizable clickstream data set. Finding multiple significant interaction effects between contacts across channel types requires categorising online marketing channels along the characteristics of contact origin and brand usage. Retailers may better understand customers' decision-making processes in online multichannel contexts to maximise online investments because the proposed taxonomy considerably improves model fit and outperforms alternatives. The team's approach to the research drew upon old[er] and arguably outdated research (Muthukrishnan, 2009) that overlooked the importance of social media. The supporting paper also focuses on advertising, which was not available during this period on SM platforms, so the observed critique is limited and perhaps explanatory.

Anderl et al. (2015) deliver meaningful implications for retail managers in their use of online channels that we can lend from; in particular, how the proposed taxonomy demonstrates that we can effectively build sustainable tools for managers and thus structure industrial thinking on multi-channel strategies to produce a legitimate and growing understanding of customer purchase behaviour. The researcher points this out due to the widely noted and rather illogical absence of industry adopted CBBE models, as will be reiterated, especially in the destination (this is a major existing economic opportunity for governments worldwide).

The study calls for more online integration at a time when SM took greater focus following the launch of advertising features and other key platform developments (Anderl et al., 2015). This perhaps indirectly points to the use and importance of social networks without opening the topic for discussion yet. However, a range of comparative offline marketing studies, such as Moe and Schweidel (2014), remind us that integration is a two-way affair, with the success of social media being explained in many studies by the ‘place of listening’ alone, which continues to misdirect a significant human/monetary resource pool from the research community. Their study notes that there is no logic for subjectively/objectively leaning in either direction, as offline measures of brand sentiment with holistic considerations can prove to be more accurate in the BE measurement context than SM studies that do not take a comprehensive approach to marketing research).

In a world dominated by huge retail organisations, Webster (2000) investigates the development of interaction between brands, customers, and resellers. He contends that more manufacturer-retailer collaboration delivers value to consumers and that conventional ways of thinking about branding excluded resellers from the picture. This is potentially relevant in the nation branding context as marketing experts review tourism assets.

One critique by Webster (2000) outlines the extent to which marketing research is neglected, at least at the time of his publication, with particular reference to basics. He notes, “The definition and understanding of branding must move beyond the narrow focus on frequently purchased packaged goods, where the availability of large databases, especially scanner data, has created a bias and a tendency to let the data define the problems we try to investigate,”.

Tasci (2016) examines more than 100 conceptual and empirical studies on consumer value in order to pinpoint definition and measurement issues, describe how it relates to other constructs, and offer suggestions for future research topics including retail goods and destinations. The study demonstrates how consumer value measures and definitions permeate other constructs like quality, image, and brand value, providing solid ground for theory development. To accurately reflect consumer value's identity, role, and significance among relevant constructs, such as perceived quality, image, brand value, and loyalty by upholding the integrity of each component, a relatively well-defined nomological network, namely a CBBE framework, is required (similar conclusion and BE factors to work focused on consumer retail) (Yoo, 2000).

2.15 SOCIAL MEDIA & BRAND EQUITY

Social media's rising consumer and business appeal has created a vast new area of study for academics. Researchers have been examining pertinent subjects like electronic Word-of-Mouth

over the past few years to learn how social media affects consumers' perceptions of brands. (e-WoM; e.g. Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011), social media advertising (e.g. Bruhn *et al.*, 2012), online reviews (e.g. Karakaya and Barnes, 2010), brand communities and fan pages (e.g. Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005) and user-generated content (UGC; e.g. Muñiz and Schau, 2007). No studies appear to have fully reported the impact of social media brand communication on CBBE metrics, despite the increase in empirical research on SMC and brand management. A conceptual model was constructed to investigate the effects of firm- and user-generated social media brand communication on brand awareness/associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty in order to fill this research gap.

The approach taken by practitioners and the content created by consumers regarding industry-specific differences range in SM brand communications. Despite the fact that peer-reviewed literature has generally been well-reported on the subject of social media conversation in recent years (which began as early as the publication of Wang and Li, 2012; Winer, 2009).

This section examines the impact of communication on BE through SM platforms compared to traditional media. Bruhn *et al.* (2012) found that content shared on social networks influences brand awareness and brand image. This study aimed to investigate if both communication instruments impact CBBE, before comparing the effect size of said instruments and separating the effects of firm and user generated SM communication. A total of 393 data sets from the tourism, telecommunication, and pharmaceuticals sector were generated using a standardised online-survey. Structural equation modelling was used to investigate the interplay of social and traditional media instruments with a cross-industry review.

This study highlights the differences between firm-created and user-generated SM communications (SMCs) in terms of functional and hedonic brand image. It also highlights the need for subjective brand management and strategisation, with integration that does not abandon traditional channels. The paper is pioneering in juxtaposing SM's impact and traditional media on BE, a topic of growing interest. It offers valuable insights to marketing practitioners and academics.

2.15.1 USER GENERATED CONTENT

Despite the increase in empirical research on the topic of social media networks, there is still little understanding of how user-generated content (UGC) influences consumer POV on brands while firm-created content reflects the user's behaviour (Filieri, 2016). Various studies precede this analysis of literature on UGC (e.g. Muniz and Schau 2007; Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit 2011; Christodoulides and Jevons 2011; Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian 2012; as well as Hautz, 2014), despite the increase of empirical research across the topic of social media, there is only a low-level understanding of how firm-created and user-generated SMC influences consumer perceptions of brands and thus behaviour.

Schivinski and Dabrowski (2014) study UGC because it adopts the new paradigm of content creation as opposed to content dissemination, conceptualising it similarly to e-WoM researchers (Kozinets et al., 2010; Muniz and Schau, 2007). Despite their similarities, the two concepts of UGC and e-WoM differ in whether the content is generated by consumers or only conveyed by them (Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian 2012; Cheong and Morrison 2008). However, there is a literary consensus that SMC types, UGC and e-WoM, are related to consumers and brands with no commercially-oriented duty, control or allegiance by default (Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell, 2008; Brown et al. 2007).

Consumers contribute to the creation of content, according to prior studies on user-generated content, for reasons like self-promotion, intrinsic pleasure, and a desire to alter public views. (Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell 2008). Additionally, consumers are skilled at mimicking or appropriating marketing communication tropes, styles, reasoning, and grammar. (Muniz and Schau 2007). The latter is interesting and creates major opportunities for destination brands to create trends or deliver viral campaigns.

For marketers, UGC has significant real ramifications. When compared to conventional channels, UGC can help communication managers keep communication costs down by compiling and taking into consideration the ideas of engaged consumers. (Krishnamurthy and Dou, 2008). Additionally, study demonstrates that consumers who engage in user-generated content (UGC) are more likely to be brand advocates who speak to other consumers about brands and products. (Daugherty, Eastin, and Bright 2008). Consumers also view user-generated content (UGC) as trustworthy, which increases its influence over conventional advertising (Christodoulides, 2012), especially when used within the context of social media platforms.

2.16 SOCIAL MEDIA & DESTINATION EQUITY

Social media strategies are a highly influential marketing tool, as they facilitate interaction processes among tourists and provide custom content and offers. This serves as a bridge for great advertising campaigns in destination marketing and its role in BE generation. The evolution of MarComms and the subsequent changes/differences in research agenda(s) reflect the technological advancement/social change rate.

Destination brand awareness content generated through networking platforms has become increasingly important and has a crucial impact on consumer destination brand awareness (Aluri et al., 2015; Aydın, 2016; Kim and Lee, 2018; Moro and Rita, 2018; Sigala, 2018). This is consistent throughout the literature from various perspectives, notably also in SM studies investigating BE. Consumers can be affected by SM content, particularly while comparing destination brands and making final travel-related purchase decisions (Kim and Chae, 2018; Morosan and Bowen, 2018; O'Connor, 2008; Sotiriadis, 2017). Furthermore, while providing information to consumers, social media content also actively introduces consumers to each other, satisfying their expectations for social status and prestige (Leung, 2009; Urista et al., 2009), while prompting WoM communications through digital frameworks that ultimately serve to drive human activity through the amplification/provocation of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, opinions, and beliefs.

Dedeoglu et al. (2021) examine the effect of SMC on tourism destination brand awareness and service quality while reviewing the moderating role of Country of Origin Image (COI) on the same two focus areas. 568 domestic and foreign visitors to Alanya, Turkey, provided the information. The study's relationships were looked at using structural equation modeling. Participant sharing, one aspect of social media sharing, was found to have a favourable impact on destination brand awareness, while nonparticipant sharing had no discernible impact on destination brand awareness. The team concludes: "Destination brand awareness positively influences tourist perceptions of both destination service quality and destination natural quality," (Dedeoglu et al., 2021) in line with aforementioned studies.

Similar to this, Im et al (2012)'s study provides evidence that cognitive image effects the intention to recommend a destination. As a result, it is suggested that the more valuable the two aspects of the destination image, the more likely people will be to promote it via e-WoM.

2.17 Applying the Literature to the Context of Bahrain

This visual was sketched to summarise the literature review in the form of a conceptual framework (Figure 1). The 11 hypotheses shown would be empirically assessed in Chapter 5.

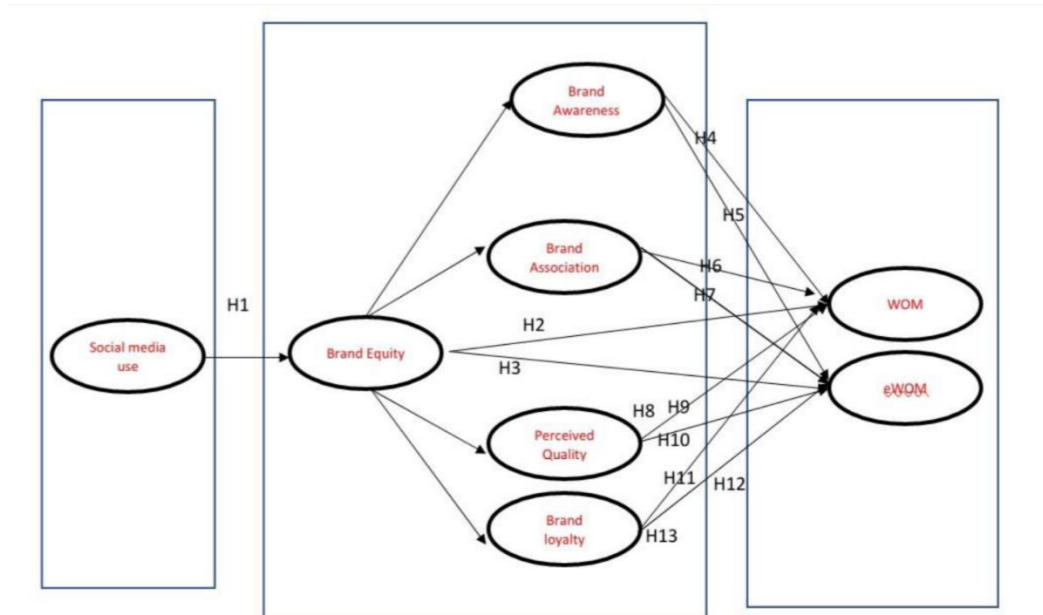


Figure 1 Summarised Conceptual Model and Research hypotheses based on reviewed literature (Source : Author)

The literature review also highlights the lack of correlational, comparative, or remotely similar studies in each of the subsections listed. Progress is to be acknowledged, but the advancements made remain practically theoretical. There needs to be greater urgency from academics to deliver valuable findings to industry with a view to test, apply, measure, and capitalise on it. The literature shows that there is a huge space for increased collaboration between academics and professionals, with industry-based practitioners offering a huge data collection opportunity across a recently socialised global marketing arena.

Research is growing on SM and e-WoM as two critical factors and modes of human/marketing communication. However, research on BE generation, brand loyalty, development and sustainability is sparse. Studies on destination BE investigate the relationship between brand awareness and the intention to recommend, but the dynamics between these two concepts remain largely unexplored. Researchers face great challenges in this transitional stage for the human species as we enter a technological age far beyond laypeople's comprehension.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted in the study outlined in the introduction to this thesis. A strong reflection on methodologies lets the researcher discuss how the gathered data was analysed and presented later (Mishra and Alok, 2019). The research process ranges from philosophy to data collection, while the research design outlines how the investigation is being conducted. The chapter systematically outlines the Research Philosophy and conceptual framework, objectives, the methods used, research instruments (questionnaire questions), limitations, ethical considerations, and research hypotheses.

3.2 Research Philosophy

The approach to developing this study's Research Theory is based on logical reasoning. The respective theorem is deductive. While the study highlights deductive inference, it should be noted that logical inference is a key philosophical technique, whereas if said premises are true, so too must be the conclusion (Saunders et al., 2016). The philosophy underpinning this investigation is *positivism*, which "relates to the philosophical stance of the natural scientist and entails working with an observable social reality to produce law-like generalisations that promise unambiguous and accurate knowledge" (Saunders, 2016).

The positivist framework is based on the principle that 'truth is independent', meaning it is an objective reality researchers can use to constrictive ends. This particular branch of philosophy encourages researchers to build a depiction of the - respective - truth as a relevant 'model of the study' and sets forward to test this model. Data collection and analysis validates/invalidates the model of the study, thereby approving/disapproving a depiction of *reality* in context (Hammersley, 2019; Igwenagu, 2016).

3.3 Research Instrument

The study utilised a questionnaire survey. The development of the questionnaire started with the Literature Review. Once the model was identified, measures for the variables were adapted from international research where they were repeatedly found, used, and found to be reliable. This is mainly because the research variables, such as BE and [the] intention to recommend a destination, have been used extensively in research over the last 30 years.

The study uses quantitative analysis through 53 questions over eight questionnaire sections. Section One collects demographic data. Section Two enquires about background data participants may already have on Bahrain. Section Three measures the study's independent variable, which is characterised by respondents' use of social media. Sections four, five, and six deliver questions on BE as the first dependent variable. Section seven explores participants' intention to post social media-based WoM communications about Bahrain, which forms the second dependent variable of this study.

The questionnaire was shared with five experts in the field to check for face validity and other supporting feedback. The questions use seven Likert scales ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. To ensure valid responses, the scale has eight points in total to enable the response: "Not Applicable". After ensuring the validity of each item on the questionnaire, it was distributed to several individuals to test the diction used, as well as the time it took each participant to complete, and the level of ease in doing so. Positive feedback was received.

Questionnaire: https://strathbusiness.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6xmffQxOHFuAca.

3.4 Population Sampling Technique and Size

The study's population consists of international tourists over 18 years old travelling to Bahrain for the first time in 2022. Respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire on arrival before any direct experience of the destination to ensure their knowledge of Bahrain came exclusively from information found on social media platforms that each visitor uses.

3.4.1 Sampling Technique

Due to the nature of the study and the challenges presented by the ongoing global pandemic COVID-19, this study used purposeful sampling, also known as convenience sampling (Wilson, 2019). Convenience sampling is a nonprobability sampling design in which information or data for the research are gathered from members of the sample population conveniently accessible to the researcher (Sekaran, 2003). Since there is no control over the demography and nationalities of inbound tourists to Bahrain, convenience sampling is the most appropriate for this research.

The investigation was conducted through the months of March to July in 2022. March was chosen due to the attraction of an F1 event in Bahrain, one of the biggest sporting events worldwide each year, attracting significant visitation from an international demographic (Oxford Business Group, 2021). Whilst April and May covered the celebration of Ramadan, the annual month-long fast undertaken by Muslims worldwide, followed by 'Eid' festivities. This study was conducted with the support of Bahrain's Tourism and Exhibition Authority, which provided data sets relating to inbound tourists.

The study expects that the demographics of the target sample will mainly consist of individuals who enjoy tourism-based trips and use social media to communicate. The study targeted potential participants with the following terms:

1. Participant is over 18 years of age
2. Participant has not visited Bahrain before
3. Participant has not yet seen Bahrain in person for any significant amount of time (i.e. discludes the airport and tourists' journey to their hotel)

3.5 Data Collection

The data collection process for the study took place at destination entry points using self-administered questionnaire surveys. In some cases of larger tourist groups, printouts were provided

in the presence of the researcher where tourists answered questionnaires manually, followed by the researcher data entered into Qualtrics (PC software).

The survey includes a welcome note to present the study's title and objectives with an assurance notice reference anonymity; moreover, it details that the data gathered will only be used for academic purposes.

The data was collected through questionnaires and processed using Qualtrics Survey:

https://strathbusiness.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6xmffQxOHFuAca.

3.5.1 Primary Data

This study's primary data refers to the information collected through said questionnaires.

3.5.2 Secondary Data

Secondary data sources include travel reports, social media usage reports, country-level tourism reports, Bahrain Economic Development Board and Bahrain Tourism and Exhibition Authority's annual reports, in addition to other corporate publications. This study surveys these to gain insight on the aforementioned topic and inform the study furthermore.

3.6 Quantitative Data Analysis

The data gathered was analysed using IBM SPSS v28 and SmartPLS3. Descriptive analysis was performed using IBM SPSS v28 to describe the variables where frequency tables, graphical representation (pie and bar charts), and mean and standard deviation computation are the main descriptive - statistical - methods employed. Box Plot was used to check outliers. Reliability was assessed using Alpha Cronbach's coefficient method. Exploratory factor analysis was then performed with Word Cloud's online portal to analyse each questionnaire's open-ended text-based items. SmartPLS3 was used to perform confirmatory factor analysis and assess the conceptual framework of hypothesised relations. Analysis performed using SmartPLS3 included a validity assessment too. Dr Hair, DBA Director and the Cleverdon Chair of Business at the University of South Alabama (USA), stated, "SmartPLS3 is a milestone in latent variable modelling that combines state-of-the-art methods with an easy-to-use and intuitive graphical user interface" (www.smartpls.com). Data-driven insights are at the core of what produces empirically valid and sustainable conclusions that are of value to the academic arena with scope for development by industry professionals.

3.7 Validity

The *validity* of the study explores to what extent the investigation has delivered accurate results and what the investigation aims to measure. This usually comprises face, content, convergent, and discriminant validity (Price et al., 2015). Face Validity refers to the ability of statements made by participants to measure the concept under study. This is the measure of the construct under investigation. Usually, items that constitute said measure are shown to an expert panel, which decides whether it is valid (Price et al., 2015). Content Validity ensures that measures are unique and evaluate the data collected with intent (Price et al., 2015). Content validity is the degree to which a measure *covers* or comprehensively includes the construct of interest. Convergent validity refers to how different items of the same measure correlate with each other (Price et al., 2015). Discriminant validity is the degree to which scores on a measure are *not* highly correlated with the measure(s) of other distinct variables. Discriminant validity ensures measures are significantly different from each other and there is no multicollinearity (where independent model variables correlate (Price et al., 2015).

3.8 Reliability

Reliability refers to the competence or consistency of a measure, as it should repeat itself in ongoing evaluation and/or retesting (Price et al., 2015). The consistency of a measure is suggestive of a sturdy research framework and solid findings that can be depended on and used to derive value. Price et al. note, ‘test-retest reliability’ refers to the extent that this is accurate (2015); and thus, any researcher unwilling to test and engage the data they produce in this manner can only be deemed inherently biased with a major overarching critique of their study that can invalidate findings. There is a close relationship between validity and reliability, however, they should not be confused; one precedes the other, as per the sections above.

Cronbach's *Alpha* was calculated for each of the constructs.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations mentioned below are the most relevant for this kind of research.

a. Privacy of Information (Gathering, Storage and Dissemination)

The information sought, stored, and disseminated through this study does not violate any participant's right to privacy. Each individual's privacy concerns do not constitute an issue, so much as a consideration in the design, as the survey used does not capture names or private data. There shall be no points of information sharing that identify participants before, during, or after completing the questionnaire. Furthermore, participants will remain anonymous, and the data collected will be held for a period in line with guidelines delivered by the University of Strathclyde. After the said period expires, all data will be disposed of with due diligence in-line with university policy and the relevant legal guidelines.

b. Storing Information on a Platform or System for Access and Retrieval

The researcher will not store any information gathered on a public system, nor will they grant access or retrieval by third parties, for academic citation or brand or business purposes (e.g. marketing).

c. The Use of Information

The data gathered is used exclusively for the purpose outlined herein, for which participants gave their full consent.

d. Monetary Benefits

The gathered data will not be traded or shared for capital gain or any other reason.

e. Data Assurance

The gathered data will not be compromised by negligence or deliberate acts of sharing. Data does not identify respondents in any manner. As such, there is little chance of such events.

f. Access to Data by Unauthorised Parties

No unauthorised individuals will be permitted to access the collected information.

g. Password Protected Storage

Collected information will be stored on a computer system with adequate password protection.

h. Researcher Adherence to Respondent Concerns

Under all circumstances, the researcher will adhere to respondents' privacy concerns, expressed or unexpressed.

3.10 Research Limitations

The study anticipates some challenges as per the below subsections.

3.10.1 Insufficient Sample Size

The chosen sample size may not adequately represent individual opinions. If there is a lack of ecological validity in the study's findings, this will be indicated by a lesser degree of generalisability. A sufficiently larger sample would enable the researcher to capture a broader cross section of opinions and achieve higher levels of validation (Alnap, 2012; Ustun and Eryilmaz, 2014).

3.10.2 Insufficient Statistics/Previously Published Works

There is a dearth of published studies on tourism in Bahrain and the destination overall in related contexts, as is noted by many scholars referenced throughout this paper's literature review in Chapter 2.

3.10.3 Sample Composition

The sample's composition significantly affects the study's ability to generalise results, as it is overly dependent on the sample's dominant demographics. For example, if many tourists travel from a certain country this would skew the percentage of the sample's composition reference nationals from the respective locality.

3.11 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to highlight the methodological considerations that underpin Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Presentation. This section details the researcher's steps in conducting the investigation: collecting data, analysing data, performing relevant testing, and presenting findings. Starting with population sample and size, the above touches on various aspects of research philosophy, research design and method, including primary and secondary data analysis, techniques, and the survey developed as an investigative tool.

The next chapter covers the findings of the data analysis and its presentation. The section is critical to validate the relationship between said variables. As such, the next chapter focuses on analysis and delivery, having adopted the proposed methods and approaches in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4: Findings of the Study

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents statistical results derived from descriptive and inferential treatment levels by applying appropriate statistical methods on the collected survey data.

This chapter provides sufficient information to address the research objectives and answer the main research questions. The chapter content will also allow testing the hypothesised relations among the studied variables as per the conceptual framework.

The main contribution of this research is noted as per the following structure: Part 1 delivers IBM SPSS univariate and bi-variate Analysis with a description of participants' general information, as well as their expectations as visitors, and its relation to their use of social media. These organic perceptions relate directly to BE and the potential for e-WoM communications. The section on Bivariate analysis will cover the preparatory steps taken, before exploratory factor analysis (principal component analysis), reliability assessment, normality assumption testing, and a check for outliers. Significant relations between multiple demographics and general information are highlighted. Part 2 offers SmartPLS Multivariate Model Testing, and Hypotheses Testing based on SEM, with a focus on validity, reliability, discriminant, and path analysis, concluding with a model summary, hypothesised relations testing, and a summary.

4.2 STATISTICAL TREATMENT

4.2.1. Introduction

Collected survey data was initially processed using IBM SPSS (statistical package) before the use of SmartPLS (structural equation modelling package).

4.2.2 Data Collection and Coding

Data collection/entry began on 3rd March 2022, and was completed on 5th July of 2022. The collected sample of 243 was compiled electronically and exported automatically by Microsoft Excel (format). Data coding was assigned carefully and appropriately to categorical variables. Said variables, such as gender, were assigned codes or numeric values. In addition, the measure level of all questionnaire-based variables was identified. The measure level included nominal level, such as gender, and ordinal level, such as age. The codebook for all variables can be found in Appendix

2. The codes used are useful in that they enable various statistical treatments. The interpretation of data herein relies upon the reader knowing these codes.

4.2.3 Statistical Packages

In part 1, the statistical package used was IBM SPSS. It produces descriptive statistics, such as frequency tables, mean computation, and standard deviation computation. It was also used to conduct exploratory factor analysis using the principal component analysis method. The reliability of the studied measures was assessed by computing the Alpha Cronbach's coefficient. Normality assumption assumed when performing parametric inferential analysis. Next, outliers were checked, before bi-variate analysis was performed to investigate any statistical significance relating to respondent demographics and/or general information.

Part 2 used SmartPLS to investigate and test the conceptual model hypotheses. This part covers path analysis, reliability, validity, confirmatory factor analysis, and tests the direct relations hypothesised between social media use and BE dimensions, the direct relation hypothesised between BE dimensions and e-WoM, as well as the mediation effect of BE dimensions between social media use and e-WoM communications.

4.3 Abbreviations Used

The abbreviations used in this chapter refer to the items belonging to the variables studied:

Abbreviation	Studied variable	Item
SM_usage1	Degree of social media usage	Facebook
SM_usage2		Twitter
SM_usage3		Instagram
SM_usage4		Pinterest
SM_usage5		YouTube
SM_usage6		SnapChat
SM_usage7		Trip Advisor
SM_usage8		Influencers
BHN_content1	Degree of use of social media for Bahrain content	I have seen the content of Bahrain on the Internet
BHN_content2		The content that I have seen on the Internet has helped me when choosing to travel to Bahrain
BHN_content3		The content has helped me to plan / organise my activities in Bahrain
BA1	Brand Awareness	Bahrain has a good name and reputation
BA2		Bahrain is a famous Country
BA3		Bahrain features come quickly to mind
BA4		I have seen a lot of publicity for Bahrain
BI1	Brand Image	Bahrain is a historical and cultural Country
BI2		The old centre of Bahrain is very attractive
BI3		Bahrain has a variety of interesting museums
BI4		Bahrain offers many interesting tourist attractions
BI5		Bahrain has attractive beaches
BI6		It has very beautiful parks and natural areas
BI7		The environment of Bahrain (towns and nature) is very beautiful
BI8		Bahrain has a very vibrant nightlife

BI9		Bahrain is a country that offers interesting cultural events
BI10		It has numerous facilities for shopping
BI11		The local gastronomy is very rich and varied
BI12		The People in Bahrain are friendly and hospitable
PQ1	Brand Perceived Quality	Bahrain has a very good tourist offering
PQ2		Bahrain offers high-end accommodation
PQ3		Bahrain has modern local infrastructure and good quality transport
PQ4		I think that Bahrain is a country where I will feel safe
PQ5		I have very high expectations of Bahrain
Loyalty1	Brand Loyalty	Bahrain is one of the preferred destinations to visit
Loyalty2		Bahrain provides more benefits
Loyalty3		I will visit Bahrain in the future
Loyalty4		I will recommend Bahrain to friends
WOM1	Word of mouth	I am going to speak positively about Bahrain as a tourist destination
WOM2		If someone asks me, I would recommend Bahrain as a tourist destination
WOM3		I would recommend Bahrain as a tourist destination to my friends or family
e-WOM1	e-Word of mouth	I will share the content of my trip on social media that I use
e-WOM2		I am going to recommend Bahrain as a tourist destination on social media
e-WOM3		I would recommend Bahrain as a tourist destination to my friends or family

Moreover, Structural Equation Modelling was abbreviated as SEM.

4.4 Part 1 – IBM SPSS Univariate and Bi-variate Analysis

4.4.1 Description of the sampled respondents general information

Figure 2 shows that almost two-thirds (62%) of the surveyed sample were male alongside female participants (38%). The majority of surveyed respondents (73.4%) stayed in Bahrain for less than a week, while the remaining respondents stayed for a longer period as follows: almost one-fourth (24.2%), for one to two weeks, less than a month (1.7%), and one to three months (0.8%; Figure 3). The age distribution of the surveyed sample varied (Figure 4) as the majority of respondents belong to the age group from 18 to 55 years (83.8%), followed by participants at 65 years old or beyond (7.9%), 55 to 64 years (7.1%), and under 18 years (1.3%). Figure 5 shows that the travelling categories of surveyed respondents were different, where the relative highest category was those who are travelling 'with friends' (38.3%), while the remaining had almost equal representation as follows: travelling 'with family' (21.7%), travelling as 'a couple' (20.8%), and travelling 'solo/single' (19.2%). Approximately two-thirds (64%) of the surveyed respondents reported that they know someone who is living in Bahrain (Figure 6) compared to those who did not (35.8%).

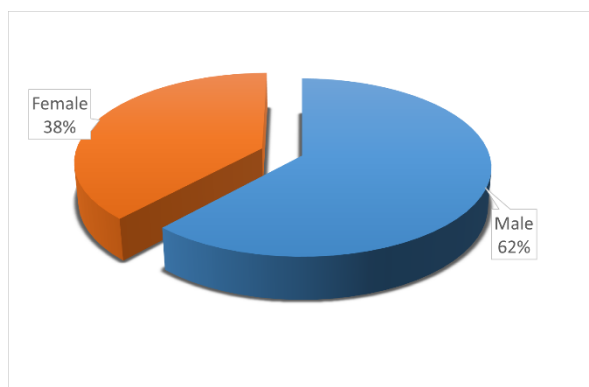


Figure 2 Surveyed respondents by gender

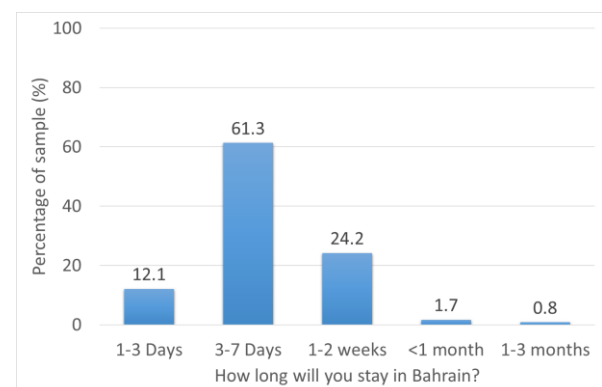


Figure 3 Length of Stay

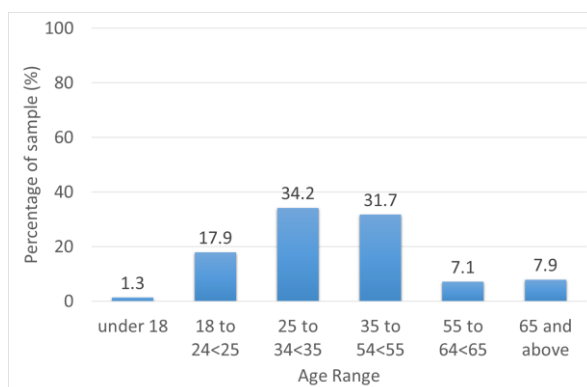


Figure 4 By Age

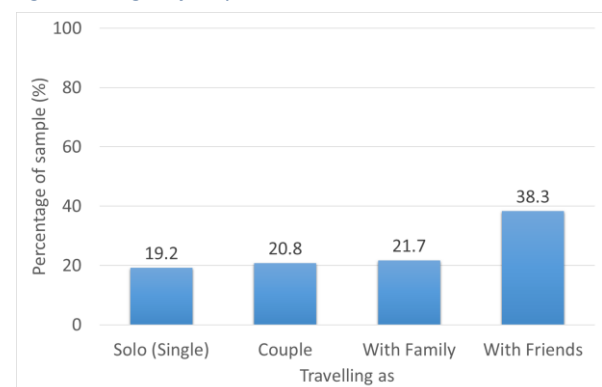


Figure 5 Travelling Category

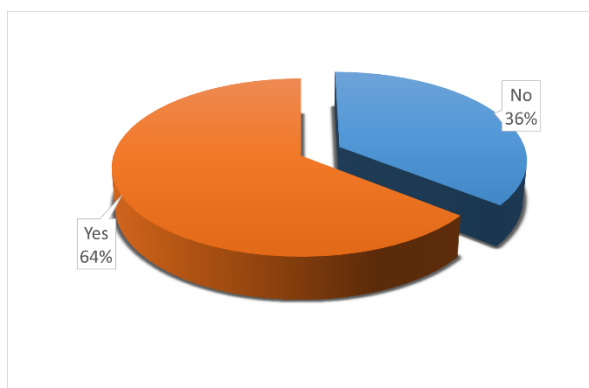


Figure 6 Prior Knowledge of a Bahraini-based individual

The general information describing respondents revealed that the sample can be viewed as a fair representation of the targeted population using various demographics and travel categories.

4.4.2 Tourist Expectation

A word cloud was produced using the responses from surveyed respondents concerning the images and/or features that come to mind when thinking of Bahrain (Figure 7). The word cloud highlights the following: beaches/beach/sea, islands/gulf, shopping/malls/markets, racing/F1, diverse, heritage/culture, concerts, traditional, gold, friendly, modern, nice/fun, family, restaurants/food and sunny/weather. These words absorbing the highest frequency among the surveyed respondents indicate that the image of Bahrain prior to visiting fairly captures the essence of its geographic location and internationally attractive public activities/services, as well as local people's character, culture, and Bahrain's natural assets.



Figure 7 Word cloud representing responses on "What images or features come to mind when you think of Bahrain?"

Figure 9 features a word cloud that combines the data of all respondents/responses, including the names of [any] different or unique local attractions, compared to other tourist destinations that the surveyed respondents already know. The word cloud highlights racing, market/markets/malls/souk, islands/beach, F1/circuit, pearl, forts, Bab Al Bahrain, and gold. These offer an accurate overview of Bahrain's key tourism themes and activities, including specific/unique features.



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4.4.3 Use of Social Media

Most surveyed respondents (88%) stated that they are users of a social network compared to those who do not (12%), as shown in Figure 10. Figure 11, however, shows that those who follow any official Bahraini channels on social media networks were only 39% compared to those who indicated that they do not follow any such accounts (61%).

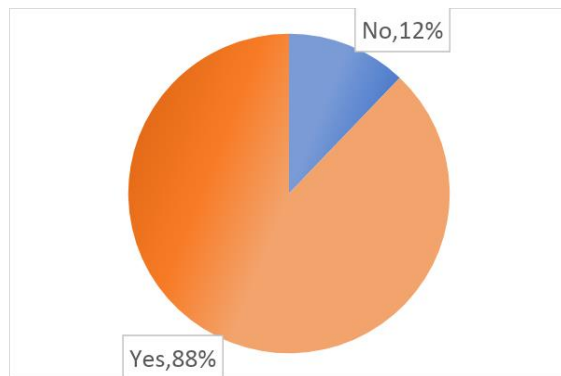


Figure 10 Usage of Social Network

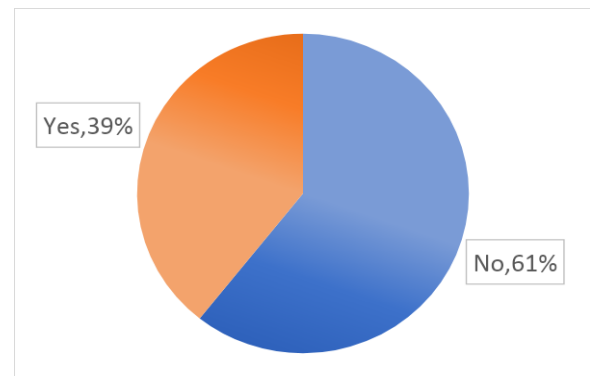


Figure 11 Respondents following status of any of Bahrain's official channels on social networks

Table 1 indicates respondents' degree of social media usage with the level of use measured on a seven-point scale. Accordingly, the mean values of surveyed respondents were interpreted as follows (researcher calculation):

- Mean value ranging from 1.00 to 1.85 were interpreted as 'I do not use it'
- Mean value ranging from 1.86 to 2.71 were interpreted as 'I use it infrequently'
- Mean value ranging from 2.72 to 3.56 were interpreted as 'I connect once a week'
- Mean value ranging from 3.57 to 4.42 were interpreted as '1-3 times a week'
- Mean value ranging from 4.43 to 5.28 were interpreted as 'More than 3 times a week'
- Mean value ranging from 5.29 to 6.14 were interpreted as 'Once a day'
- Mean value ranging from 6.15 to 7.00 were interpreted as 'Several times a day'

The mean values produced range from 1.17 to 4.60, which corresponds to 'I do not use it' being the lowest degree from within this sample, with 'more than 3 times a week' representing a moderate degree of social media use (Table 1). The respondents used YouTube the most (mean value = 4.60) compared to other social media platforms, such as Instagram (mean value = 4.42) and Facebook (mean value = 3.51). Trip Advisor received the lowest level of engagement (mean value = 1.17).

Table 1 Distribution and Summary Statistics of degree of social media usage (Best View Zoom to 150 %)

Social media	I do not use it (1)		I use it infrequently (2)		I connect once a week (3)		1-3 times a week (4)		More than 3 times a week (5)		Once a day (6)		Several times a day (7)		Summary statistics	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	Mean	SD ¹
Facebook	26	12.40%	14	6.70%	16	7.60%	31	14.80%	53	25.20%	34	16.20%	36	17.10%	3.51	1.913
Twitter	36	17.10%	28	13.30%	8	3.80%	27	12.90%	26	12.40%	43	20.50%	42	20.00%	3.31	2.187
Instagram	21	10.00%	17	8.10%	8	3.80%	6	2.90%	22	10.50%	26	12.40%	109	52.20%	4.42	2.14
Pinterest	89	42.80%	55	26.40%	15	7.20%	20	9.60%	16	7.70%	7	3.40%	6	2.90%	1.35	1.652
YouTube	2	1.00%	3	1.40%	4	1.90%	18	8.70%	67	32.20%	60	28.80%	54	26.00%	4.6	1.192
SnapChat	72	34.10%	12	5.70%	3	1.40%	2	0.90%	9	4.30%	23	10.90%	90	42.70%	3.39	2.741
Trip Advisor	48	22.90%	124	59.00%	14	6.70%	12	5.70%	5	2.40%	4	1.90%	3	1.40%	1.17	1.174
Influencers	99	46.90%	47	22.30%	6	2.80%	11	5.20%	13	6.20%	17	8.10%	18	8.50%	1.6	2.085

1 SD is standard deviation

Table 2 shows data on the sample's use of social media to find content relating to Bahrain. The degree of use was measured on a seven-point scale. The interpretation of this scale is as follows (research calculation):

- Mean values ranging from 1.00 to 1.85 were interpreted as 'not at all used'
- Mean values ranging from 1.86 to 2.71 were interpreted as 'low use'
- Mean values ranging from 2.72 to 3.56 were interpreted as 'slightly used'
- Mean values ranging from 3.57 to 4.42 were interpreted as 'neutral'
- Mean values ranging from 4.43 to 5.28 were interpreted as 'moderately used'
- Mean values ranging from 5.29 to 6.14 were interpreted as 'high use'
- Mean values ranging from 6.15 to 7.00 were interpreted as 'a lot used'

The mean values represent responses ranging from 4.80 to 5.09, corresponding to social media being 'moderately used' by participants (Table 2). The sample's moderate use of social media to source online content about Bahrain (mean value = 5.09) lead as the dominant trend, followed by searches for content that helped respondents plan/organise activities in Bahrain (mean value = 4.93), and content that aids user's choice to visit Bahrain (mean value = 4.80).

Table 2 Distribution and Summary Statistics of Degree of use of social media for Bahrain content

Items of Bahrain content	Not at all (1)		Low (2)		Slightly low (3)		Neutral (4)		Slightly high (5)		High (6)		A Lot (7)		Summary statistics	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	Mean	SD
I have seen the content of Bahrain on the Internet	2	0.90%	2	0.90%	20	9.50%	17	8.10%	100	47.40%	50	23.70%	20	9.50%	5.09	1.145
The content that I have seen on the Internet has helped me when choosing to travel to Bahrain	3	1.40%	4	1.90%	25	11.80%	31	14.70%	93	44.10%	47	22.30%	8	3.80%	4.8	1.166
The content has helped me to plan / organise my activities in Bahrain	2	0.90%	3	1.40%	41	19.40%	11	5.20%	79	37.40%	54	25.60%	21	10.00%	4.93	1.329

4.4.4 Perception of Brand Equity

This section presents the surveyed sample's perception of BE, as per the established parameters of Brand Awareness, Brand Image, Perceived Brand Quality, and Brand Loyalty. A seven-point scale was used to measure perception and was interpreted as follows (research calculation):

- Mean values ranging from 1.00 to 1.85 were interpreted as 'Strongly disagree'
- Means values ranging from 1.86 to 2.71 were interpreted as 'Disagree'
- Means values ranging from 2.72 to 3.56 were interpreted as 'Somewhat disagree'
- Means values ranging from 3.57 to 4.42 were interpreted as 'Neutral'
- Means values ranging from 4.43 to 5.28 were interpreted as 'Somewhat agree'
- Means values ranging from 5.29 to 6.14 were interpreted as 'Agree'
- Means values ranging from 6.15 to 7.00 were interpreted as 'Strongly agree'

4.4.4.1 Brand Awareness

Table 3 shows respondents' perception of Brand Awareness items with a mean value ranging from 4.66 to 5.89. This indicates that the level of alignment in perception was between 'somewhat agree' and 'agree'. The highest level of agreed perception - among Brand Awareness items - was towards the sentiment: 'Bahrain has a good name and reputation' with a mean value of 5.89, followed by 'Bahrain is a famous Country' (mean value = 5.46).

Table 3 Distribution and Summary Statistics of Brand Awareness

Brand Awareness	Strongly disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Somewhat disagree (3)		Neither agree nor disagree (4)		Somewhat agree (5)		Agree (6)		Strongly agree (7)		Summary statistics	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	Mean	SD
Bahrain has a good name and reputation	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	0.40%	2	0.80%	63	26.30%	130	54.20%	44	18.30%	5.89	71.20%
Bahrain is a famous Country	0	0.00%	1	0.40%	24	10.00%	7	2.90%	80	33.20%	89	36.90%	40	16.60%	5.46	113.60%
Bahrain features come quickly to mind	0	0.00%	15	6.20%	68	28.20%	11	4.60%	62	25.70%	59	24.50%	26	10.80%	4.66	151.90%
I have seen a lot of publicity for Bahrain	1	0.40%	10	4.10%	56	23.20%	10	4.10%	66	27.40%	71	29.50%	27	11.20%	4.87	146.50%

4.4.4.2 Brand Image

Table 4 shows respondents' perception of brand image items, with mean values ranging between 4.12 and 6.42 that correspond to the level of agreement being between 'neutral' and 'strongly agree'. The highest agreed perception found: "The local gastronomy is very rich and varied" and "the People in Bahrain are friendly and hospitable," where both had a mean value of 6.42, followed by "Bahrain has numerous facilities for shopping" (mean value = 6.41).

Table 4 Distribution and Summary Statistics of Brand Image (Best View Zoom to 150 %)

Brand Image	Strongly disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Somewhat disagree (3)		Neither agree nor disagree (4)		Somewhat agree (5)		Agree (6)		Strongly agree (7)		Summary statistics	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	Mean	SD
Bahrain is a historical and cultural Country	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	0.40%	4	1.70%	72	30.00%	111	46.30%	52	21.70%	5.87	0.779
The old center of Bahrain is very attractive	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	4	1.70%	20	8.30%	91	37.90%	94	39.20%	31	12.90%	5.53	0.882
Bahrain has a variety of interesting museums	0	0.00%	6	2.50%	22	9.20%	56	23.30%	87	36.30%	53	22.10%	16	6.70%	4.86	1.14
Bahrain offers many interesting tourist attractions	0	0.00%	1	0.40%	1	0.40%	2	0.80%	74	30.80%	133	55.40%	29	12.10%	5.77	0.717
Bahrain has attractive beaches	0	0.00%	6	2.50%	49	20.50%	27	11.30%	65	27.20%	65	27.20%	27	11.30%	4.9	1.371
It has very beautiful parks and natural areas	1	0.40%	27	11.30%	82	34.50%	27	11.30%	44	18.50%	48	20.20%	9	3.80%	4.12	1.471
The environment of Bahrain (towns and nature) is very beautiful	0	0.00%	1	0.40%	7	2.90%	5	2.10%	141	58.80%	72	30.00%	14	5.80%	5.33	0.778
Bahrain has a very vibrant nightlife	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	18	7.50%	40	16.70%	118	49.20%	64	26.70%	5.95	0.857
Bahrain is a country that offers interesting cultural events	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	0.80%	5	2.10%	43	18.00%	165	69.00%	24	10.00%	5.85	0.648
It has numerous facilities for shopping	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	0.40%	3	1.20%	20	8.30%	88	36.50%	129	53.50%	6.41	0.732
The local gastronomy is very rich and varied	0	0.00%	1	0.40%	0	0.00%	1	0.40%	10	4.20%	111	46.30%	117	48.80%	6.42	0.661
The People in Bahrain are friendly and hospitable	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	17	7.10%	105	43.60%	119	49.40%	6.42	0.622

4.4.4.3 Perceived Quality

Table 5 shows respondents' perception of Perceived Quality items with mean values that range between 4.42 and 6.46, which correspond to the level of agreement being between ‘neutral’ and ‘strongly agree’. The highest level of aligned perception was found with the sentiment: “I think Bahrain is a country where I will feel safe” (mean value = 6.46), followed by “I have very high expectations of Bahrain” (mean value = 6.22), and “Bahrain offers high-end accommodation” (mean value = 6.12).

Table 5 Distribution and Summary Statistics of Perceived Quality (Best View Zoom to 150 %)

Perceived Quality	Strongly disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Somewhat disagree (3)		Neither agree nor disagree (4)		Somewhat agree (5)		Agree (6)		Strongly agree (7)		Summary statistics	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	Mean	SD
Bahrain has a very good tourist offering	1	0.40%	18	7.50%	67	27.90%	20	8.30%	68	28.30%	59	24.60%	7	2.90%	4.42	1.406
Bahrain offers high-end accommodation	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	0.40%	9	3.70%	34	14.10%	114	47.30%	83	34.40%	6.12	0.813
Bahrain has modern local infrastructure and good quality transport	0	0.00%	4	1.70%	27	11.20%	3	1.20%	124	51.50%	61	25.30%	22	9.10%	5.15	1.1
I think that Bahrain is a country where I will feel safe	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	3	1.20%	20	8.30%	82	34.00%	136	56.40%	6.46	0.701
I have very high expectations of Bahrain	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	0.40%	28	11.60%	130	53.90%	82	34.00%	6.22	0.654

4.4.4.4 Brand loyalty

Table 6 shows respondents' perception of Brand Loyalty items, with mean values ranging between 4.28 and 5.36 that correspond to the level of agreement being between 'neutral' and 'agree'. The highest level of aligned perception was found with the sentiment: "I will recommend Bahrain to friends" (mean value = 5.36), followed by "I will visit Bahrain in the future" (mean value = 5.32), and "Bahrain is one of the preferred destinations to visit" (mean value = 4.73).

Table 6 Distribution and Summary Statistics of Brand Loyalty (Best View Zoom to 150 %)

Brand loyalty	Strongly disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Somewhat disagree (3)		Neither agree nor disagree (4)		Somewhat agree (5)		Agree (6)		Strongly agree (7)		Summary statistics	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	Mean	SD
Bahrain is one of the preferred destinations to visit	0	0.00%	8	3.40%	60	25.20%	14	5.90%	74	31.10%	71	29.80%	11	4.60%	4.73	1.336
Bahrain provides more benefits	0	0.00%	24	10.10%	76	31.90%	24	10.10%	46	19.30%	59	24.80%	9	3.80%	4.28	1.476
I will visit Bahrain in the future	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	51	21.30%	92	38.50%	65	27.20%	31	13.00%	5.32	0.952
I will recommend Bahrain to friends	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	42	17.60%	99	41.60%	66	27.70%	31	13.00%	5.36	0.921

4.4.5 Perception of Word of Mouth

Respondents' perceptions on WoM were captured in two different scenarios:

- When the respondent is not using social media their *intention* was captured and is noted as WoM
- When the respondent is using social media their *intention* was captured and this is noted as e-WoM

4.4.5.1 Word of Mouth (WoM)

Table 7 shows that respondents' perception on WoM items ranges from 5.64 to 5.86, which corresponds to the 'agree' sentiment from most participants. The most prominent perception found toward: "I am going to speak positively about Bahrain as a tourist destination" (mean value = 5.86).

Table 7 Distribution and Summary Statistics of Word of Mouth (Best View Zoom to 150 %)

Non-user of Social Media Intention	Strongly disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Somewhat disagree (3)		Neither agree nor disagree (4)		Somewhat agree (5)		Agree (6)		Strongly agree (7)		Summary statistics	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	Mean	SD
I am going to speak positively about Bahrain as a tourist destination	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	9	32.10%	14	50.00%	5	17.90%	5.86	0.705
If someone asks me, I would recommend Bahrain as a tourist destination	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	3	10.70%	8	28.60%	13	46.40%	4	14.30%	5.64	0.87
I would recommend Bahrain as a tourist destination to my friends or family	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	5	17.90%	5	17.90%	11	39.30%	7	25.00%	5.71	1.049

4.4.5.2 e-Word of Mouth (e-WoM)

Table 8 shows respondents' perception of e-WoM items with mean values ranging between 5.35 to 6.13, corresponding to the 'agree' sentiment for most participants. The highest agreed perception found: "I will share the content of my trip on social media [platforms] that I use" (mean value = 6.13).

Table 8 Distribution and Summary Statistics of e-Word of Mouth (e-WoM) (Best View Zoom to 150 %)

Social Media User Intention	Strongly disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Somewhat disagree (3)		Neither agree nor disagree (4)		Somewhat agree (5)		Agree (6)		Strongly agree (7)		Summary statistics	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	Mean	SD
I will share the content of my trip on social media that I use	1	0.50%	2	0.90%	1	0.50%	2	0.90%	24	11.40%	109	51.70%	72	34.10%	6.13	0.89
I am going to recommend Bahrain as a tourist destination on social media	1	0.50%	2	0.90%	6	2.80%	18	8.50%	93	43.90%	70	33.00%	22	10.40%	5.35	0.993
I would recommend Bahrain as a tourist destination to my friends or family	0	0.00%	1	0.50%	1	0.50%	17	8.00%	95	44.60%	76	35.70%	23	10.80%	5.47	0.844

4.5 Bivariate Analysis

Previous sections presented univariate analysis. This section analyses sample responses to assess any statistically significant bivariate relations between BE and selected demographic variables. Exploratory factor analysis was performed, followed by an assessment on the reliability of measures, as well as testing normality assumption and outliers. To conclude, bivariate analysis was performed.

4.5.1 Preparation for Bivariate Analysis

To prepare for performing bivariate analysis, the following steps were followed:

- Exploratory Factor Analysis (Principal Component Analysis ‘PCA’)
- Reliability assessment based on PCA
- Normality assumption testing
- Outliers Check

4.5.1.1 Exploratory Factor Analysis (Principal Component Analysis)

Exploratory Factor Analysis was performed using the Principal Component Analysis ‘PCA’ method. Table 9 shows the summary of the PCA performed. PCA is useful to assess whether any of the items designed in the measure are extracted into one dimension or more. It was revealed that the studied measures were split into two sets: one dimension, and more than one dimension. PCA results found that the following measures were extracted to only one factor:

- Degree of use of social media for Bahrain content
- Brand Awareness
- Perceived Quality
- Loyalty
- WoM
- e-WoM

The remaining measures were found extracted to 2 or up to 5 sub-factors. This set included the following:

- Social Media Use (extracted to 4 sub-factors)
- Degree of Social Media Usage (extracted to 2 sub-factors)

- BE (extracted to 5 sub-factors)
- Brand Image (extracted to 3 sub-factors)

For more than one dimension, the researcher examined the set of items extracted in each sub-factor in order to derive a common name describing the set. In a few measures, the sub-factors were expected as these measures were originally obtained from previous studies and they were sub-factored. For this research purpose, it was decided that the findings of PCA would be combined with the findings for reliability (which will be presented in the next sub-section) to agree the final sub-factors that will be accepted for the bivariate analysis.

Table 9 Exploratory Factor Analysis using Principal Component Method

Composite variable	Total no. of items	No. of factors extracted (Principal Component method)	Total variance explained (cumulative %)
Social Media Use	12	Factor 1: 4 items [visual/video social media] SnapChat (SM_usage6)	17.944
		Influencers (SM_usage8)	
		Instagram (SM_usage3)	
		YouTube (SM_usage5)	
		Factor 2: 3 items [social media content about Bahrain] The content that I have seen on the Internet has helped me when choosing to travel to Bahrain (BHN_content2)	17.008
		I have seen the content of Bahrain on the Internet (BHN_content1)	
		The content has helped me to plan / organise my activities in Bahrain (BHN_content3)	
		Factor 3: 3 items [interaction/information social media] Trip Advisor (SM_usage7)	15.343
		Facebook (SM_usage1)	
		Twitter (SM_usage2)	
		Factor 4: 2 items [interest social media] Are you following any of Bahrain's official channels on social networks? (following)	10.461
		Pinterest (SM_usage4)	
		All factors	-60.756

Degree of Social Media Usage	8	Factor 1: 4 items [visual/video social media usage] SnapChat (SM_usage6) Influencers (SM_usage8) Instagram (SM_usage3) <i>YouTube (SM_usage5)</i>	35.303
		Factor 2: 4 items [interaction/information social media usage] Twitter (SM_usage2) Facebook (SM_usage1) <i>Pinterest (SM_usage4)</i> <i>Trip Advisor (SM_usage7)</i>	19.951
		Both factors	-55.254
Degree of use of social media for Bahrain content	3	One factor only	68.156
Brand Equity	25	Factor 1: 8 items [mixed; no concept] Bahrain provides more benefits (Loyalty2) Bahrain is one of the preferred destinations to visit (Loyalty1) I will visit Bahrain in the future (Loyalty3) I will recommend Bahrain to friends (Loyalty4) Bahrain features come quickly to mind (BA3) Bahrain has a very good tourist offering (PQ1) Bahrain has modern local infrastructure and good quality transport (PQ3) <i>The environment of Bahrain (towns and nature) is very beautiful (BI7)</i>	28.191
		Factor 2: 8 items [mixed; no concept] It has very beautiful parks and natural areas (BI6) I think that Bahrain is a country where I will feel safe (PQ4) <i>It has numerous facilities for shopping (BI10)</i> <i>Bahrain offers high-end accommodation (PQ2)</i> <i>Bahrain has a good name and reputation (BA1)</i> <i>I have very high expectations of Bahrain (PQ5)</i> <i>The People in Bahrain are friendly and hospitable (BI12)</i> <i>The local gastronomy is very rich and varied (BI11)</i>	10.101
		Factor 3: 4 items [mixed; no concept] I have seen a lot of publicity for Bahrain (BA4) Bahrain offers many interesting tourist attractions (BI4) <i>Bahrain is a famous Country (BA2)</i> <i>Bahrain is a country that offers interesting cultural events (BI9)</i>	13.399
		Factor 4: 4 items [brand image] Bahrain has a variety of interesting museums (BI3) The old centre of Bahrain is very attractive (BI2) Bahrain is a historical and cultural Country (BI1) <i>Bahrain has a very vibrant nightlife (BI8)</i>	6.273
		Factor 5: 1 item [brand image] Bahrain has attractive beaches (BI5)	8.232
		All factors	-66.195

Brand Awareness	4	One factor only	-74.885
Brand Image	12	Factor 1: 5 items [brand image] It has very beautiful parks and natural areas (BI6) It has numerous facilities for shopping (BI10) Bahrain has a variety of interesting museums (BI3) <i>The environment of Bahrain (towns and nature) is very beautiful (BI7)</i> <i>The local gastronomy is very rich and varied (BI11)</i>	34.131
		Factor 2: 5 items [brand image] Bahrain has attractive beaches (BI5) Bahrain offers many interesting tourist attractions (BI4) <i>Bahrain is a historical and cultural Country (BI1)</i> <i>The People in Bahrain are friendly and hospitable (BI12)</i> <i>Bahrain is a country that offers interesting cultural events (BI9)</i>	15.254
		Factor 3: 2 items [brand image] The old centre of Bahrain is very attractive (BI2) <i>Bahrain has a very vibrant nightlife (BI8)</i>	11.199
		All factors	-60.583
Perceived Quality	5	One factor only	-51.623
Loyalty	4	One factor only	-73.839
Word of Mouth	3	One factor only	-90.546
e-Word of Mouth	3	One factor only	-59.577

Italic: for items with loading less than 0.51

4.5.1.2 Reliability Assessment

The reliability of measures, including sub-factors revealed by the PCA, was assessed using Alpha Cronbach's coefficient (Table 10). An acceptable point that researchers consider for a reliable measure is 0.7 or greater (using Alpha Cronbach's coefficient). One sub-factor, Brand Image 3, was -0.126, indicating that the computed Alpha Cronbach's coefficient is not in the expected range and thus is considered unreliable. The Alpha Cronbach's coefficient for the remaining measures ranged from 0.491 to 0.928. Rounding to one decimal, eight measures were found reliable with Alpha Cronbach's coefficient higher than 0.7 (indicated in bold in Table 10). Perceived Quality had Alpha Cronbach's coefficient equal to 0.632, which is slightly lower than 0.7; however, it will be treated as reliable on the basis that some researchers consider 0.6 an adequate level of reliability coefficient.

The remaining two measures had Alpha Cronbach's coefficient at less than 0.7 and were thus deemed unreliable. The aforementioned two comprise: 'Degree of Social Media Usage2' and 'Brand Image2'. Based on the findings from reliability testing, bivariate analysis will be performed on the reliable measures found (presented in next sub-section).

Table 10 Reliability of measures using Alpha Cronbach's Coefficient method

Composite variable	Total number of items	Excluded items to improve reliability (if any)	Final Alpha Cronbach's coefficient of reliability (after excluding items)
Degree of Social Media Usage1	4	-	0.65
Degree of Social Media Usage2	4	-	0.491
Degree of use of social media for Bahrain content	3	-	0.76
Brand Awareness	4	-	0.833
Brand Image1	5	2	0.669
Brand Image2	5	3	0.498
Brand Image3	2	-	-0.126
Brand Image (all items)	12	2	0.655
Perceived Quality	5	3	0.632
Loyalty	4	-	0.851
Word of Mouth	3	-	0.928
e-Word of Mouth	3	1	0.742

4.5.1.3 Normality Assumption Testing

Normality assumption is assumed for inferential methods that are called ‘parametric’. The normality assumption is tested at this stage for those reliable measures, as shown in Table 11. Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality tests the null hypothesis that the variable is normally distributed, i.e. normality assumption is verified versus the alternative hypothesis that the variable is not normally distributed.

Table 11 shows that all measures had p-values under 0.01, therefore the null hypothesis is rejected at a significance level of 1%. It is concluded with 99% confidence that all measures were found not normally distributed.

Accordingly, to perform bivariate analysis ‘parametric’ methods are not suitable. One alternative is to perform ‘non-parametric’ tests as these tests do not assume normality. This will be considered in the next sub-section.

Table 11 Test of Normality using Kolmogorov-Smirnov method

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a test of normality		
	Statistic	df	p-value
Degree of Social Media Usage1	.109**	210	0.000
Degree of use of social media for Bahrain content	.132**	210	0.000
Brand Awareness	.119**	210	0.000
Brand Image1	.128**	210	0.000
Perceived Quality	.147**	210	0.000
Loyalty	.136**	210	0.000
Word of Mouth	.231**	28	0.001
e-Word of Mouth	.168**	210	0.000

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

* significant at 5% (p-value < 0.05); ** significant at 1% (p-value < 0.01)

4.5.1.4 Outliers Check

One consideration prior to performing bivariate analysis is to check for outliers. If they are present, outliers can distort findings and therein mislead conclusions. To conduct a visual check for outliers, box plots were generated (Figure 12 a & Figure 12 b). It was found that all measures had no outlier except for the degree to which travellers use social media to source content on Bahrain and deliver e-WoM communications. For these two scenarios, there were only two outliers found in each. Carefully examining these two would not result in a significant digression on the seven-point scale and thus said outliers were neglected.

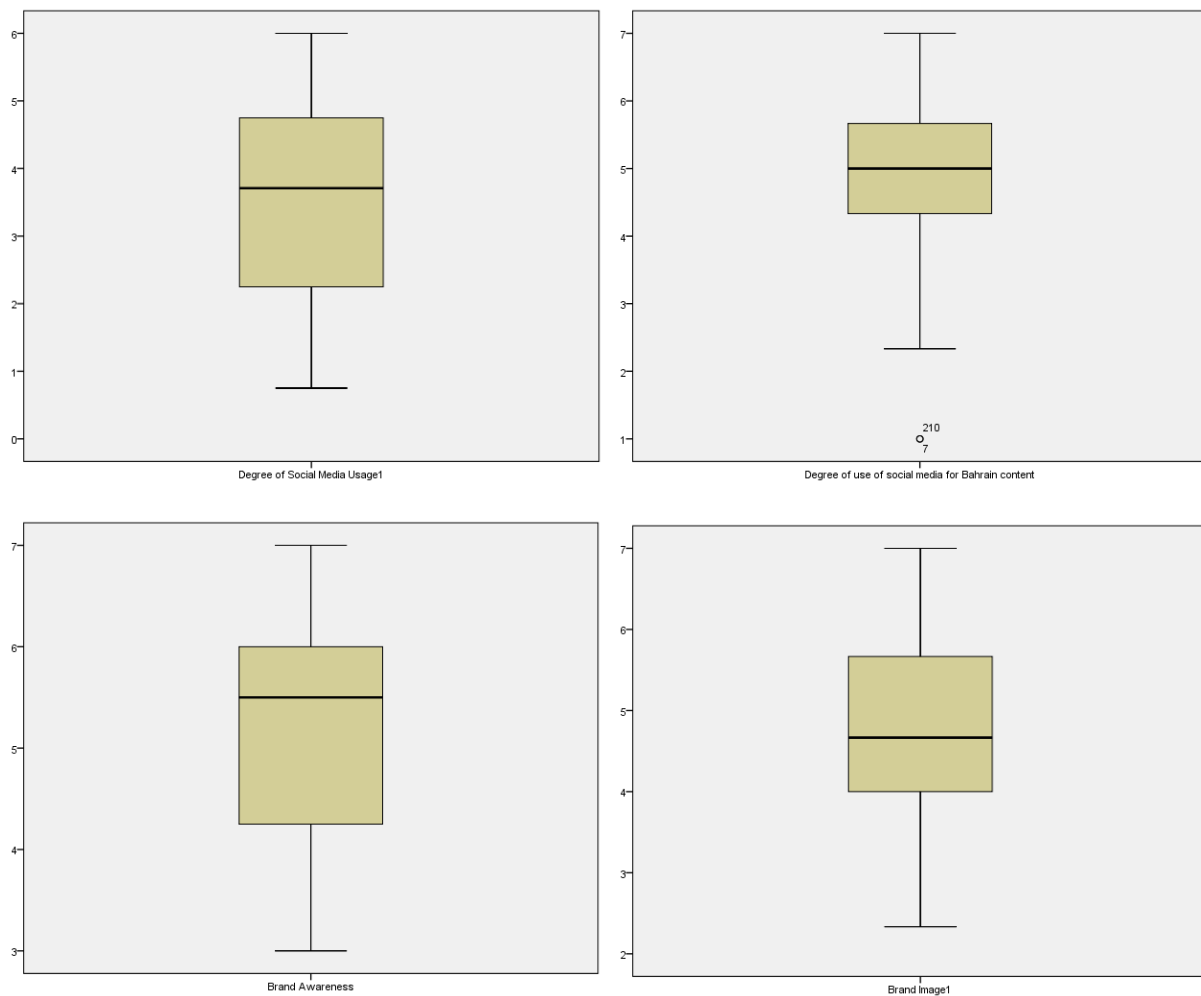


Figure 12a Box Plot for outliers checking

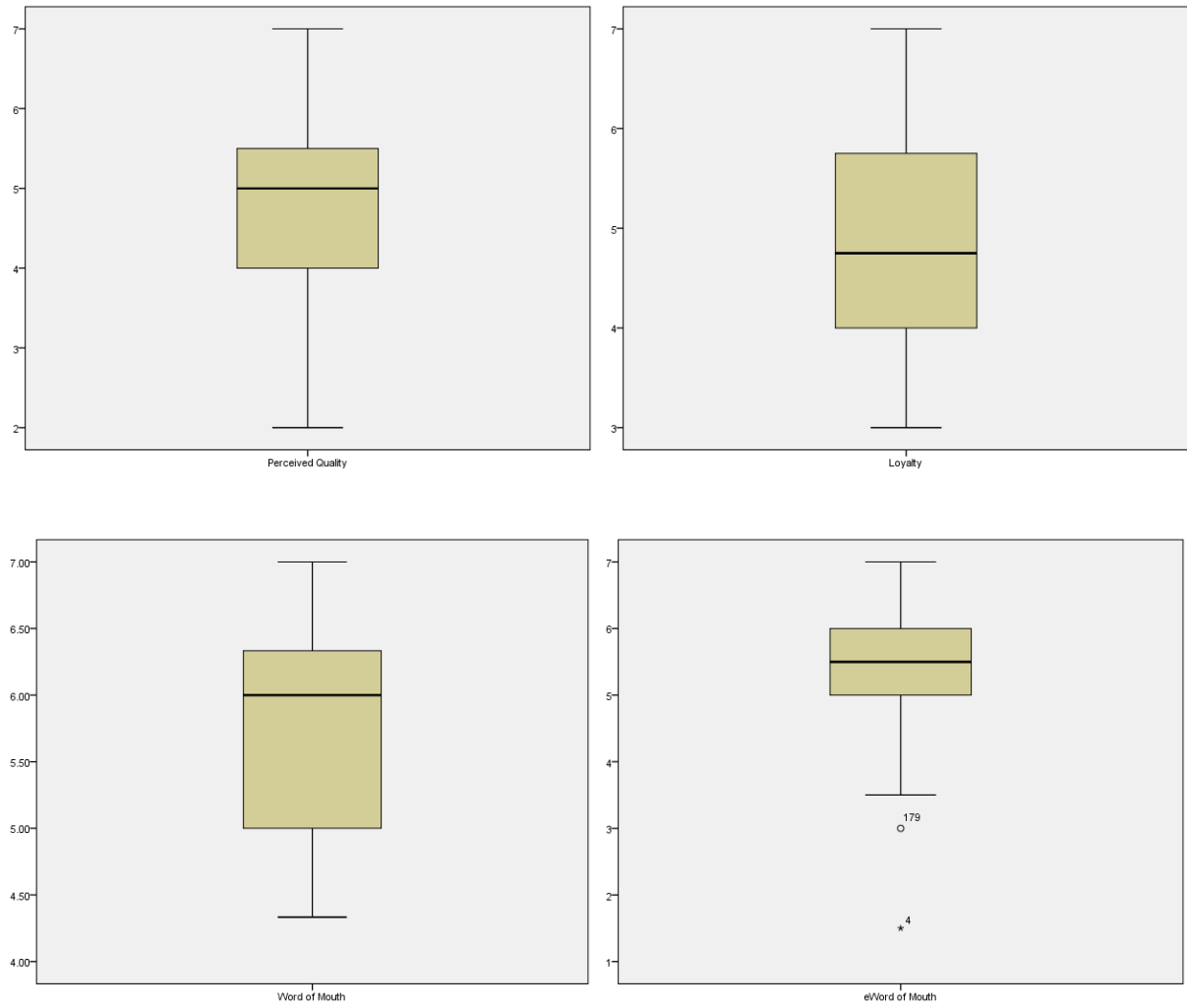


Figure 12b Box Plot for outliers checking

4.5.2 Relations with Demographics and General Information

Composite variables were created to perform bivariate analysis. Table 12 offers a summary of statistics noting composite variables. Table 13 summarises the findings of Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis' non-parametric tests to assess the statistical significance and relations between 'BE and social media use' on one hand, and on the other selected general information demographics, including: sex, 'Do you know anyone living in Bahrain?', 'Are you a user of any social network?', 'How long will you stay in Bahrain?', Age Range, and Travelling type.

Table 12 Summary statistics of studied variables

Studied variables (unobserved composite)	Mean	SD
Degree of Social Media Usage	3.49	1.48
Degree of use of social media for Bahrain content	4.94	1
Brand Awareness	5.22	1.026
Brand Image1	4.78	0.912
Perceived Quality	4.78	1.076
Loyalty	4.92	0.993
Word of Mouth	5.74	0.828
e-Word of Mouth	5.41	0.831

In Table 13, Bivariate analysis shows there is no statistically significant relation between sex, responses to survey questions - such as, "are you a user of any social network?" - and BE. There were, however, statistically significant relations with the following: "Do you know anyone living in Bahrain?" as well as five variables: Degree of Social Media Usage1, Brand Awareness, Perceived Quality, Loyalty, and e-WoM. Reference to the significant relations found, travellers who knew at least one person living in Bahrain had higher agreement than those who did not.

The survey question, "how long will you stay in Bahrain?" was found to have a statistically significant relation with four variables (Degree of Social Media Usage1, Brand Awareness, Loyalty, and e-WoM). Reference to the significant relations found, a longer period of stay in Bahrain (1-3 months) noted the highest agreement compared to other shorter periods for all statistically significant variables except for Degree of Social Media Usage1, which in turn found that shorter stay periods of 1-3 days had the highest agreement compared to each alternative.

Age Range was found to have a statistically significant relation with five variables (Degree of Social Media Usage1, Brand Awareness, Brand Image1, Perceived Quality, and Loyalty). Reference to the significant relations found, older respondents (65 years and above) had the highest levels of agreement compared to all others, as were reviewed for statistically significant variables, with the exception of the

Degree of Social Media Usage¹, where users under 18 years of age had the highest agreement level compared to the other age groups in this study.

The ‘travel type’ was found to have a statistically significant relation with two variables (Degree of Social Media Usage¹ and Brand Image¹). Reference to the significant relations found, travelling with ‘family’ had the highest agreement when compared to related types.

Table 13 Summary of bivariate analysis based on Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests

Bi-variate analysis		Test results	Interpretation
Demographic variable	Studied variable		
Sex	All	Mann-Whitney test showed no statistically significant at 5% significance level (p-value > 0.05)	
Do you know anyone living in Bahrain?	Degree of Social Media Usage ¹	Mann-Whitney test showed statistically significant relation at 1% significance level (p<0.01)	Those who know anyone living in Bahrain had higher agreement compared to those who do not have
	Brand Awareness	Mann-Whitney test showed statistically significant relation at 1% significance level (p<0.01)	
	Perceived Quality	Mann-Whitney test showed statistically significant relation at 1% significance level (p<0.01)	
	Loyalty	Mann-Whitney test showed statistically significant relation at 1% significance level (p<0.01)	
	e-Word of Mouth	Mann-Whitney test showed statistically significant relation at 5% significance level (p=0.01)	
Are you a user of any social network?	All	Mann-Whitney test showed no statistically significant at 5% significance level (p-value > 0.05)	
How long will you stay in Bahrain?	Degree of Social Media Usage ¹	Kruskal-Wallis test showed statistically significant relation at 1% significance level (p<0.01)	Longer period of stay in Bahrain (1-3 months) had highest agreement compared to other shorter periods of stay for all statistically significant variables except for Degree of Social Media Usage 1 where shorter stay period (1-3 days) had the highest agreement level compared to other periods of stay
	Brand Awareness	Kruskal-Wallis test showed statistically significant relation at 1% significance level (p<0.01)	
	Loyalty	Kruskal-Wallis test showed statistically significant relation at 1% significance level (p<0.01)	
	e-Word of Mouth	Kruskal-Wallis test showed statistically significant relation at 5% significance level (p<0.01)	
Age Range	Degree of Social Media Usage ¹	Kruskal-Wallis test showed statistically significant relation at 1% significance level (p<0.01)	Older age (65 and above) had highest agreement compared to other age ranges for all statistically significant variables except for Degree of Social Media Usage 1 where younger age (under 18 years) had the highest agreement level compared to other age ranges
	Brand Awareness	Kruskal-Wallis test showed statistically significant relation at 5% significance level (p=0.011)	
	Brand Image ¹	Kruskal-Wallis test showed statistically significant relation at 1% significance level (p<0.01)	
	Perceived Quality	Kruskal-Wallis test showed statistically significant relation at 1% significance level (p<0.01)	
	Loyalty	Kruskal-Wallis test showed statistically significant relation at 1% significance level (p<0.01)	
Travelling type	Degree of Social Media Usage ¹	Kruskal-Wallis test showed statistically significant relation at 1% significance level (p<0.01)	Travelling with family had the highest agreement compared with other travelling types
	Brand Image ¹	Kruskal-Wallis test showed statistically significant relation at 5% significance level (p=0.011)	

4.6 Part 2 – SmartPLS Multivariate Model Testing

4.6.1 Hypotheses Testing based on SEM

This section approximates the parameters of the relationships hypothesised in the conceptual model using Partial Least Squares (PLS). The decision to use PLS for the verification of the conceptual model was profoundly due to the fact that it is an algorithm that allows the measurement of models with formative constructs, and as such there is no need for additional global indicators to identify the model (Igor Stojanovic et al., 2018). In addition, PLS Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) is suitable in situations where theory is less developed or entirely untested, and is thus often used for further exploratory research (Hair et al., 2014), as is the case in this study. Performing PLS-SEM has one other additional advantage, specifically that the software - unlike humans - does not make any assumptions regarding data distribution (Hair et al., 2014). PLS-SEM also works efficiently with small sample sizes and complex models (example of data distribution, see Cassel et al., 1999).

The following hypotheses are outlined by this study's Conceptual Model that was derived from the Literature Review Chapter:

H1: The intensity of social media use positively influences brand equity (awareness, image, perceived quality, loyalty)

H2: Brand equity on social media has a positive influence on the intention to develop WoM

H3: Brand equity has a positive influence on the intention to develop e-WoM

H4: Brand awareness on social media has a positive influence on the intention to develop WoM

H5: Brand awareness on social media has a positive influence on the intention to develop e-WoM

H6: Brand image on social media has a positive influence on the intention to develop WoM

H7: Brand image on social media has a positive influence on the intention to develop e-WoM

H8: Perceived Quality on social media has a positive influence on the intention to develop WoM

H9: Perceived Quality on social media has a positive influence on the intention to develop e-WoM

H10: Brand Loyalty on social media has a positive influence on the intention to develop WoM

H11: Brand Loyalty on social media has a positive influence on the intention to develop e-WoM

SmartPLS was used to perform PLS-SEM analysis and investigate the aforementioned 11 hypotheses. PLS-SEM is robust as long as missing values are below a reasonable level, such as, in this case. The testing of hypotheses was conducted at two stages to limit missing values to the lowest possible level. One stage focuses on the responses collected from the surveyed sample, including WoM communications, while the other focuses on the set of data collected, including e-WoM

communications. Accordingly, the following sections present the findings from the two aforementioned scenarios.

4.6.2 Stage 1 – e-WoM data set

This section first presents the results of the PLS-SEM measurement model, focusing on verifying that the model enjoys the proper conditions of reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity based on the e-WoM data set. Secondly, it presents the structural relations testing of hypotheses.

4.6.2.1 Measurement Model

The SEM fitting based on the e-WoM data set was made first for BE dimensions (Awareness, Image, Perceived Quality, and Loyalty), and repeated for BE as a whole. This allows testing hypotheses 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11.

For the BE dimensions level, fitting the path model, as per the hypothesised conceptual model for e-WoM, where all items were included, is shown in Figure 13. The final modified model - where only high loadings of ≥ 0.5 were kept - is shown in Figure 14. The SEM measurement model for the final path model was assessed with regard to: reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, as is shown in Table 14.

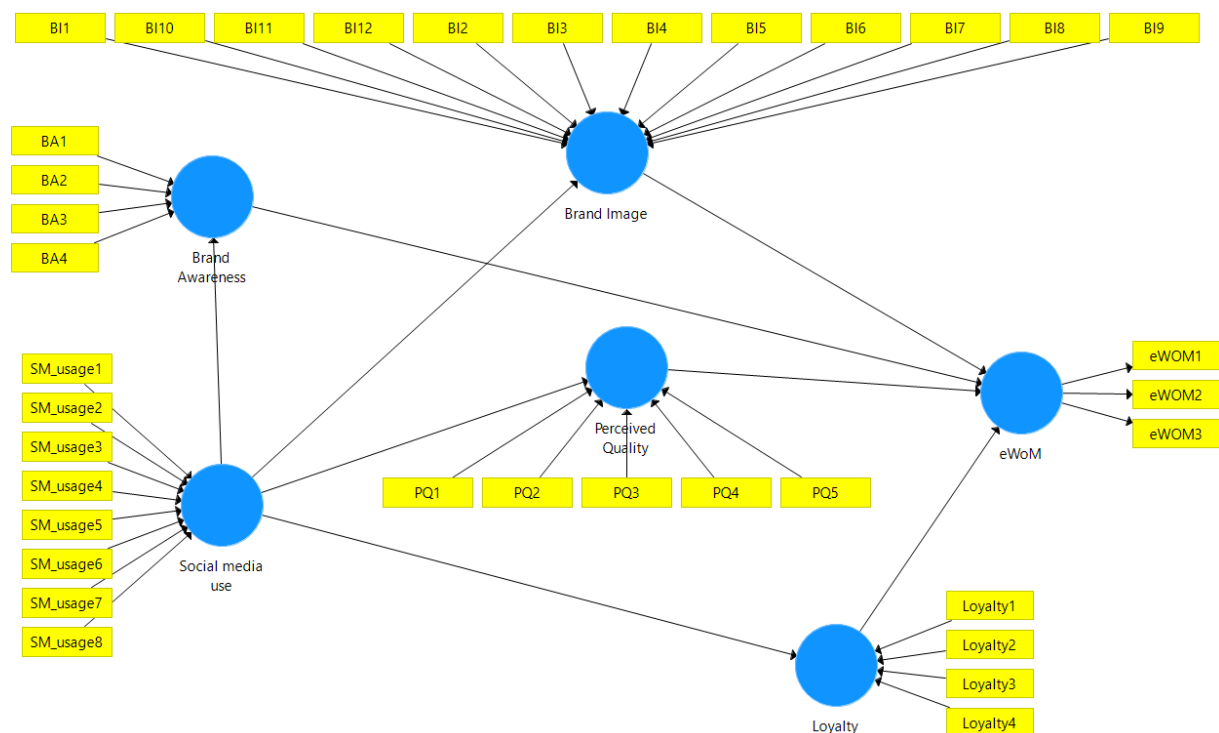


Figure 13 Initial Path Model for e-WoM Data Set – Brand Equity Dimensions

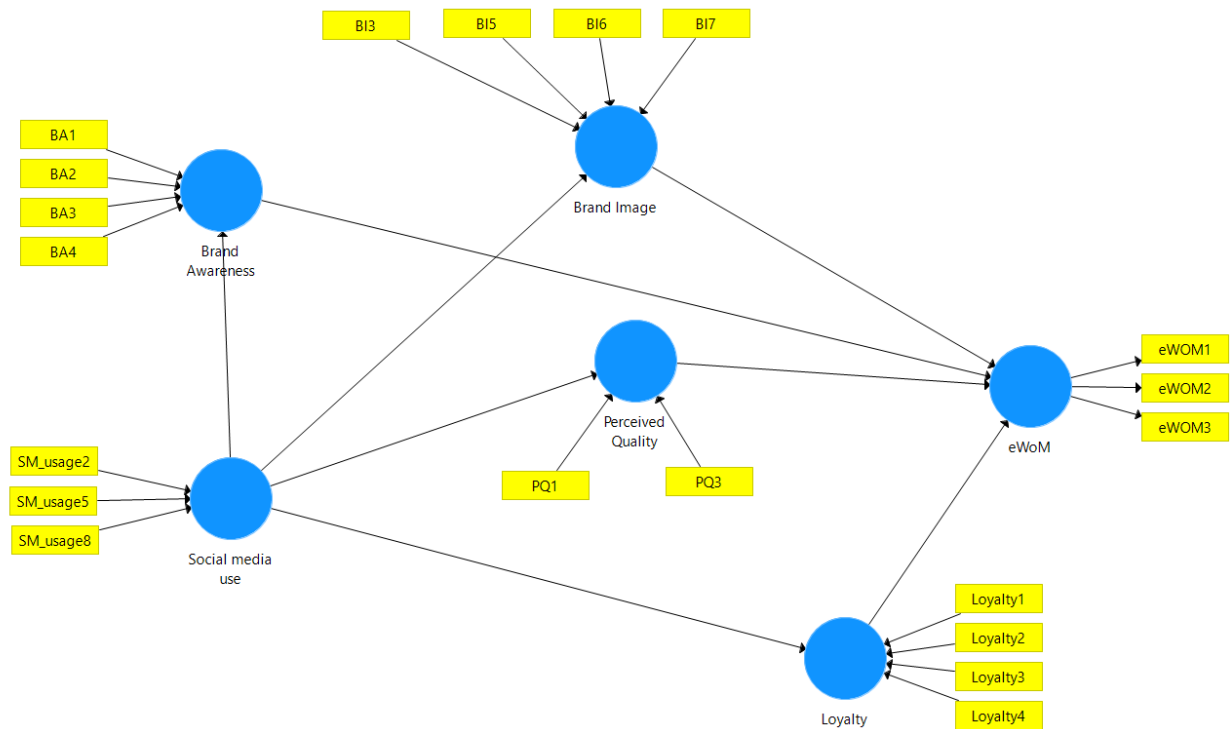


Figure 14 Final Path Model for e-WoM Data Set – Brand Equity Dimensions

Evaluating the measurement modified model was made as per three indicators, as per the following: 1) For the validation of the reliability of the measurement instrument were the Cronbach α coefficient computed (Cronbach, 1951); critical acceptance value = 0.7, 2) The composite reliability (CR) index (Fornell and Larcker, 1981); critical acceptance = 0.7, and 3) The extracted variance index AVE (Fornell and Larcker, 1981); critical acceptance value = 0.5. Table 14 shows that all three reliability indicators exceeded the corresponding critical values for each of the factors (except Cronbach's α for the perceived quality, social media use, and e-WoM, which had a value slightly below 0.7).

Table 14 Reliability and convergent validity for e-WoM data set – Brand Equity Dimensions

Factor	Item	Convergent Validity	Reliability		
		Loads	Item Cronbach Alpha	CR	AVE
Brand Awareness	BA1	0.735	0.844	0.895	0.681
	BA2	0.833			
	BA3	0.895			
	BA4	0.831			
Brand Image	BI3	0.685	0.72	0.825	0.543
	BI5	0.69			
	BI6	0.863			
	BI7	0.695			
Loyalty	Loyalty1	0.809	0.858	0.903	0.7
	Loyalty2	0.823			
	Loyalty3	0.86			
	Loyalty4	0.852			
Perceived Quality	PQ1	0.882	0.648	0.85	0.739
	PQ3	0.837			
Social media use	SM_usage 2	0.583	0.496	0.726	0.479
	SM_usage 5	0.586			
	SM_usage 8	0.868			
e-WoM	e-WOM1	0.064	0.532	0.696	0.517
	e-WOM2	0.849			
	e-WOM3	0.908			

Note: CR refers to composite reliability; AVE refers to average variant extracted

Convergent validity is the extent to which a measure correlates positively with other measures (indicators) of the same construct. When evaluating formative measurement models, the researcher must test whether the formatively measured construct is highly correlated with a reflective measure of the same construct (Hair et al., 2014; www.smartpls.com). As evidence of convergent validity (Table 14), the results provided by SmartPLS indicate that all loads of the items on their predicted factor were on par or greater than 0.7 (Carmines and Zeller, 1979).

As per the evidence of discriminant validity (Table 15), it was found that the correlations between constructs were not higher than the square root of the variance extracted between each pair of factors (shown in *italics* in a diagonal descent).

Table 15 Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion) for e-WoM data set – Brand Equity Dimensions

	BA	BI	Loyalty	PQ	SM use	e-WoM
Brand Awareness	<i>0.825</i>					
Brand Image	0.366	<i>0.737</i>				
Loyalty	0.626	0.561	<i>0.837</i>			
Perceived Quality	0.516	0.6	0.703	<i>0.86</i>		
Social media use	0.451	0.292	0.487	0.451	<i>0.692</i>	
e-WoM	0.463	0.435	0.6	0.574	0.384	<i>0.719</i>

Notes: The square root of the VE is shown on the diagonal in italics; the correlations between the constructs are shown under the diagonal

4.6.2.2 SEM Results

Table 16 shows the values of the standardised coefficients of the structural relationships, and the respective levels of significance of their associated statistic. It should be noted that hypothesis 1 was statistically supported, while hypotheses 5, 7, 9, and 11 were not found to have any statistically significant relations.

The effect of social media intensity on brand awareness was found to be statistically significant, where the research hypothesis H1BA was supported at 1% significance level ($\beta = 0.615^{**}$). It is thus expected that as social media use increases by one unit, Brand Awareness would increase by 61.5% on average.

Social media intensity was found to have a statistically significant positive relation on Brand Image, which supports research hypothesis H1BI at 1% significance level ($\beta = 0.431^{**}$). It is thus expected that as social media use increases by one unit, Brand Image would increase by 43.1% on average.

Social media intensity was found to have a statistically significant positive relation on Brand Loyalty, which supports research hypothesis H1Loyalty at 1% significance level ($\beta = 0.679^{**}$). It is thus expected that as social media use increases by one unit, Brand Loyalty would increase by 67.9% on average.

Social media intensity was found to have a statistically significant positive relation on Perceived Quality, which supports research hypothesis H1PQ at 1% significance level ($\beta = 0.725^{**}$). It is thus expected that as social media use increases by one unit, Perceived Quality would increase by 72.5% on average.

Table 16 Hypotheses testing based on SEM for e-WoM data set (bootstrap) – Brand Equity Dimensions

Hypothesis	Structural relation	β coefficient	t Bootstrap
H5	Brand Awareness -> e-WoM	-0.036	0.013
H7	Brand Image -> e-WoM	-1.046	0.089
H9	Loyalty -> e-WoM	-1.063	0.048
H11	Perceived Quality -> e-WoM	2.762	0.092
H1BA	Social media use -> Brand Awareness	0.615	6.184**
H1BI	Social media use -> Brand Image	0.431	4.004**
H1Loyalty	Social media use -> Loyalty	0.679	6.730**
H1PQ	Social media use -> Perceived Quality	0.725	6.263**

Notes: SRMR= 0.184; R^2 (Brand Awareness) = 0.199; R^2 (Brand Image) = 0.080; R^2 (Loyalty)= 0.233; R^2 (Perceived Quality) = 0.199; R^2 (e-WoM) = 0.403.

* significant at 5% (p-value < 0.05); ** significant at 1% (p-value < 0.01)

Fitting the measurement model for BE as a whole and following the rules of evaluating it for acceptance, the results for structural relations results are presented in Table 16. It was found that both hypothesis 1 and 3 were statistically significant at 1% significance level. The influence of social media use was found statistically significant where the research hypothesis 1 was supported ($\beta = 0.624^{**}$). It is thus expected that with a one unit increase in social media use, BE would increase by 62.4% on average.

BE was found to have a statistically significant relation with e-WoM ($\beta = 0.781^{**}$). It is thus expected that with a one-unit increase in BE, e-WoM would increase by 78.1% on average.

Table 17 Hypotheses testing based on SEM for e-WoM data set (bootstrap) – Brand Equity

Hypothesis	Structural relation	β	t Bootstrap
H3	Brand Equity -> e-WoM	0.781	15.935**
H1	Social media use -> Brand Equity	0.624	16.617**

Notes: SRMR= 0.083; R^2 (Brand Equity) = 0.352; R^2 (e-WoM) = 0.398.

* significant at 5% (p-value < 0.05); ** significant at 1% (p-value < 0.01)

4.6.3 Stage 2 – WoM data set

This section presents the results of the PLS-SEM measurement model, focusing on verifying that the model enjoys the proper conditions of reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, based on the WoM data set. It further presents the structural relations testing of hypotheses.

Fitting the measurement model using a WoM data set in compliance with the acceptance rules, delivered the structural relation testing shown in Table 18. The SEM fitting based on a WoM data set was made first for BE dimensions (Brand Awareness, Brand Image, Perceived Quality and Brand Loyalty) then for BE overall. This enabled the testing of hypotheses 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10.

No statistically significant evidence was found to support hypotheses 4, 6, or 10 at a 5% significance level (Table 18).

However, statistically significant evidence supported Hypothesis 8 at a 5% significance level. Brand Loyalty was found to be of statistical significance as an influence of WoM ($\beta = 0.766^*$). Thus, with one unit increase in Brand Loyalty, it is expected that on average WoM would increase by 76.6%.

Table 18 Hypotheses testing based on SEM for WoM data set (bootstrap) – Brand Equity Dimensions

Hypothesis	Structural relation	β	t Bootstrap
H4	Brand Awareness -> WoM	0.123	0.588
H6	Brand Image -> WoM	-0.178	0.818
H8	Loyalty -> WoM	0.766	2.408*
H10	Perceived Quality -> WoM	0.111	0.574

Notes: SRMR= 0.089; R^2 (WoM)= 0.588.

* significant at 5% (p-value < 0.05); ** significant at 1% (p-value < 0.01)

Finally, the measurement model was fitted for BE as a whole - in full compliance with the evaluation rules for acceptance - to test Hypothesis 2. The PLS-SEM findings for this structural relation is shown in Table 19. There was evidence of statistical significance found which supports Hypothesis 2 at a 1% significance level. BE was found to have a statistically significant influence on WoM ($\beta = 0.810^{**}$). It

is thus expected that if there was a one unit increase in BE, this would likely yield an increase in WoM by 81% on average.

Table 19 Hypotheses testing based on SEM for WoM data set (bootstrap) – Brand Equity

Hypothesis	Structural relation	β	t Bootstrap
H2	Brand Equity -> WoM	0.81	8.851**

Notes: SRMR= 0.089; R^2 (WoM)= 0.588.

* significant at 5% (p-value < 0.05); ** significant at 1% (p-value < 0.01)

4.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter details the study's contribution to the social media theory field, as well as empirical studies on BE. Part 1 of the chapter outlines the findings of univariate analysis, where respondents' profiles are reported, followed by responses on the 'tourist experience', social media use, and brand equity related perceptions.

Bivariate analysis investigates statistically significant relations between BE dimensions and social media intensity, as well as selected demographics and other general variables noted by respondents.

Part 2 of the chapter fitted PLS-SEM models by assessing the measurement model, as per the conceptual model, before testing the structural relations hypothesised. This was made in line with PLS-SEM evaluation rules and established guidelines. Said testing of PLS-SEM models was undertaken in two stages; firstly, with the e-WoM data set, and secondly with the WoM data set.

The next chapter discusses this study's findings amid established new and long-standing theories from various related fields of academic and professional research, as noted previously throughout the literature review in Chapter 2.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This academic investigation focuses on the impact of social media intensity and how it can influence consumer's decision-making process in the travel and tourism context. The research has produced data that confirms the importance of online SM-based engagement as a key driver of destination BE, while further outlining the relationality - and the lack of positive linkage - between dynamics outlined by the aforementioned hypotheses.

Hypotheses one, two, three, and eight were found to have sufficient statistical support in this study, whereas hypotheses five, seven, nine, and eleven did not report any statistically significant evidence.

H1: The intensity of social media use positively influences brand equity (awareness, image, perceived quality, loyalty).

The effect of social media intensity on brand awareness was found to be statistically significant. This falls in-line with the results of Stojanovic et al.'s investigation (2018), which found a statistically significant structural relation between the intensity of social media usage and brand awareness ($\beta = 0.345^{**}$). This further correlates with other published and peer-reviewed studies, including but not limited to Bruhn et al., (2012); Hutter et al., (2013); Schivinski and Dabrowski, (2015); and Barreda et al. (2015).

The intensity of social media was found to have a statistically significant and positive relation on brand image. This finding aligns with the results of Igor Stojanovic et al. (2018), who found a statistically significant structural relation between the intensity of social network use and both affective and cognitive images ($\beta = 0.412^{**}$ and $\beta = 0.199^{**}$ respectively). Responses indicate that participants held accurate knowledge regarding Bahrain's image, reference objectively observable realities such as the state's new positioning/nation brand, by highlighting a range of the experiences promised to visitors alongside tourist attractions.

Similarly, social media intensity was found to have a statistically significant positive relation on brand loyalty, with a noted level of significance ($\beta = 0.679^{**}$). It is thus expected that as social media intensity/use increases, brand loyalty will also increase significantly.

To note the final component in BE generation, social media intensity was found to have a statistically significant and positive relationship with the level of quality perceived by consumers. This also falls in line with the results of Stojanovic et al. (2018), who found a statistically significant structural

relationship between the intensity of social media and brand quality ($\beta = 0.472^{**}$), and thus denotes - at least - a degree of ecological validity in these findings reference Hypothesis 1.

H2: Brand equity on social media platforms has a positive influence on users' intention to develop WoM communications

The measurement model fitted for BE as a whole was used to test Hypothesis 2 (see PLS-SEM findings in Table 19). Evidence of statistical significance was found in support of Hypothesis 2. BE was found to be a statistically significant influencer of consumer/traveller's intention to develop WoM ($\beta = 0.810^{**}$). It is therefore expected that even small increases in BE will likely yield a major increase in WoM communications and thus further the value generation cycle. Stojanovic et al.'s (2018) found significant positive influence of BE subconstructs (affective image, Brand quality and customer value by WoM but did not study the second-layer BE influence on WoM thus one would deduce that the latter is also positively related to WoM as was found in this research.

H3: Brand equity has a positive influence on the intention to develop e-WoM communications

Fitting the measurement model for BE as a whole, the results for structural relations are presented in Table 16. It was found that both hypothesis 1 and 3 were statistically significant. The influence of social media was found to be statistically significant where the research hypothesis 1 was supported ($\beta = 0.624^{**}$). Thus, it is expected that in line with an increase in social media usage, BE will increase with notable significance. This finding is in line with the results of Stojanovic et al. (2018), which reports a statistically significant structural relationship between the *intensity* of social media usage and brand awareness ($\beta = 0.345^{**}$). BE was further found to have a statistically significant relationship with e-WoM ($\beta = 0.781^{**}$). It is thus expected that following a notable increase in BE, e-WoM will likely observe a major increase (78.1% on average).

H8: Perceived quality on social media has a positive influence on the intention to develop WoM communications

There is statistically significant evidence supporting Hypothesis 8. Brand loyalty was found to be of statistical significance as an influencer of WoM ($\beta = 0.766^{*}$). As such, an increase in brand loyalty should be complemented by an increase in positive online consumer sentiments that are developed in the form of WoM communications. This is in line with Stojanovic et al.'s (2018) findings.

Chapter 6: Implications & Recommendations

The implications of this study's findings suggest that the intensity of social media use on various leading networks can - and will thus at some point in the future - be used to strategically develop a theoretical approach, including applicable/practical systems of value generation that drive sustainable growth in the destination context, if not surely also beyond the travel and tourism market.

The findings demonstrate that the intensity of social media use significantly influences brand potential in relation to the dimensions of awareness, including image, quality, value, and the intention consumers to deliver e-WoM communications. As such, brands, businesses, and organisations should further support academic research and industrial collaborations to investigate further and apply the respective findings to the ends of brand value creation.

Findings confirm a positive effect of the intensity of social media usage with reference to brand awareness and each of the dimensions outlined. Results further imply that brand awareness influences other dimensions of BE and thus the influence of destination marketing on consumers with the intention/inclination to deliver WoM communications.

There is a positive relationship between brand awareness and destination brand marketing via social media, and as such the quality and presentation of nation/travel/tourism related brands to the consumer market segment. Tourists who obtain data about destinations through social media platforms increase their brand awareness and therein employ perceptions on quality and value to evaluate the destination.

Brand awareness has a direct positive link with the cognitive and affective image of brands, their quality, customer value and consumers' intention to make e-WOM. As for the relationship between the two dimensions of image, the results show that the Affective Image derives from the Cognitive Image.

On the contrary, to said positive relation, no less the outlined correlations with Stojanovic et al. (2018), this study did not find any statistically significant evidence to support hypotheses four, six, and ten, unlike the study above, which notes positive correlations within the published data set.

These results constitute a significant contribution to the study of the effect of the use of social media on BE that has not previously been studied to a notable extent in the context of destination marketing, brand management, or strategic communication. The verification of hypotheses that make up the proposed model enables a better understanding of the dynamics between social media as a source of

data and the effect this has on the outlined dimensions of BE, including consumer reviews and recommendations that encourage visitation and other tourism activities.

This study and its findings offer a working theory of Bahrain as a tourist destination where social media can and should be used as an economic enabler. BE is a mediator of the desired outcome: positive e-WoM communications.

Univariate analysis revealed market perception of BE dimensions for the consumer travel context, while bivariate analysis put forth statistically significant relations for consideration when managing tourist spaces in Bahrain and during related marketing campaigns or social programmes.

PLS-SEM relationship testing revealed a set of hypotheses which in-turn found statistically significant evidence, and in contrast, another set of hypotheses that are insignificant. Said findings are useful to direct industry professionals while also guiding policy makers.

Recommendations to Policy Makers

- Policy makers should be informed by the univariate, bivariate, and multivariate results of this study
- Policy makers should consider the findings of bivariate analysis to establish new approaches to campaigns and programmes, if not to modify existing content/strategies
- Policy makers should be guided by the structural relations that were found to be statistically significant and aim to maintain these high value relations. On the other hand, policy makers should intervene where the structural relations that were hypothesised are not found to be statistically significant - and thus ensure this has a strong chance at positive growth in the future

Theoretical Implications

The findings of PLS-SEM offer a sturdy starting point in the quest to develop a theory that explains the dynamics or nature of BE-based interactions between social media users and - their – WoM communications. The nature of said peer-to-peer engagement and the publication of data, such as reviews of a destination experience, are sometimes also one directional and purely for what we might term ‘open market access’ on a global scale.

Practical Implications

Practical implications include revising existing policies, planning, programmes, and previously developed campaigns in light of these findings. Another practical implication may see the development of new policies, plans, programmes or campaigns that address this research's findings to further strengthen Bahrain as an increasingly popular - and positively considered - destination among travel segments worldwide.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Future studies will do well to consider testing moderator variables, such as respondents' profile, nationality, and the economy scale of each country. A second recommendation is deduced from the sub-factors which resulted from PCA testing, and suggests their further use with the goal of defining them well with validation through future studies.

Conclusion

While major advancements in technology further the level of integration and immersion that consumers around the world experience free of charge via social media, this study is among the first to deliver an investigative framework of this kind, no-less an original contribution inspired by Bahrain's ongoing success as a regional leader in tourism (GCC). The following questions remain at the core of this study and form the basis of its conclusion:

1. What is the effect of social media on BE?
2. What is the effect of social media on user-based BE (brand Awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand association), and consumer intentions with a focus on WoM communications?
3. What is the effect of the dimensions of BE (brand Awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand association) on the intention of WoM communications?

Following the presented and discussed results, this study delivers solid ground to begin new academic works that tackle the outlined - and rather major - research gap to garner focus and fresh funding and enables ongoing academic investigation. Beyond the research area, continued investigation would enable organisations and industry professionals in terms of strategic brand management, as well as nation brands in their hope to capitalise on local assets in line with the potential of social media as a relatively new global phenomenon.

The findings of this study and the outlined implications for strategic business practitioners, related industry professionals, academics, destination marketing organisations, government and industry leaders, as well as technologists and other investment related stakeholders, ultimately promote *more* deliberate efforts to drive specific types of digital/online engagement in related scenarios on an [inter]national scale.

A more holistic view of brand and social equity in the destination context can be delivered through longer and more specific analysis in line with related objectives in follow-up studies. The relevance and ongoing influence of the COVID_19 pandemic is one immediate factor that is already trending in research due to the far-reaching impact of said global health crisis and it may come to bare on the conclusion of this work, however, the only way to test that proposal is to extend this investigation.

Chapter 7: Reflection

My research into the effects of the use of social media on BE has been an incredibly rewarding experience. The journey has been insightful, with many revelations along the way. Overall, my study has revealed that social media is a powerful tool when it comes to promoting a destination and increasing BE. To make a destination attractive to potential tourists, it is not just about the country or its branding, but how it is communicated to the world and made attractive through social media. I have learned that when it comes to marketing and promoting a destination, social media can effectively increase BE and attract more tourists. As such, countries should take advantage of social media to promote their destination and attract more visitors.

My research reveals that social media plays an important role in promoting the message, increasing visibility, and creating a positive image of the destination. By making the destination attractive to potential tourists and making it more accessible, potential tourists can better understand the destination and be more likely to visit. Additionally, social media can help to create a sense of community between potential tourists and people of the destination, leading to increased brand loyalty. Furthermore, the use of social media can also increase the number of tourists visiting the destination, resulting in a positive economic impact. This can also help improve the country's reputation, increasing investment, job creation, and economic growth.

At the start of my research, I thought my study focus would be much simpler - but it turned out to be far more interesting than I anticipated. During my visit to the airport, I had the chance to observe and engage with travellers arriving from all over the world and it reminded me of an important lesson that many businesses in the Gulf region and beyond have yet to learn: engagement is key. Conversations with the travellers made it clear that what truly drew them to their destinations was the engaging content they encountered. It wasn't just the typical posts or advertisements that drove them to make their journey, but the videos, conversations and shared heritage that made it worth their while. This valuable insight shows that for businesses looking to succeed in the Gulf region and beyond, building relationships and creating lasting engagement with their audience is essential.

One of the best ways to attract tourists and travellers to a country is to provide them with an immersive and engaging experience that speaks to the unique identity of the place. Videos that capture the vibrant local culture, stories that illustrate the region's rich history, and conversations that emphasise the shared culture of the destination are all effective ways to engage potential visitors. Businesses in the Gulf region should take note of this lesson and make sure that they are not only focusing on boosting and payment, but also ensuring that their campaigns create an engaging experience for travellers. By creating content that captures the unique culture and identity of the destination, businesses can ensure that their efforts are rewarded in the long run. I had an eye-opening experience during my visits to the

airport, when I realised the extent to which people were using social media to research and plan their destination before they even arrived. This emphasises the importance of creating engaging experiences that truly capture the identity of the country and its culture - something that businesses in the Gulf region should not overlook.

My research has shown that social media can significantly impact how people form their opinions and make decisions about a destination. Through my observations, I saw how people used social media to find out more about local attractions, events and activities, giving them an idea of what the destination had to offer. Additionally, I found that social media had an even greater effect when it came to BE. By monitoring the way people interacted with the brands associated with the destination, I saw how social media had created a platform for people to express their opinions and build a reputation for the brand. This made it clear that a brand's reputation on social media had a major influence on how people perceived it. In conclusion, my research has uncovered that social media has a significant influence on BE.

This research has highlighted the importance of having a positive social media reputation to create a positive image of a brand and its associated destination. Doing this research was a great learning experience for me, providing valuable insight into the power of social media on BE. I had the privilege to talk to different nationalities and learn about the countries they were coming from. After submission, I am delighted to share some of my research findings and some of the statistics with the relevant authorities in Bahrain, who have been very supportive of my work. This study has certainly helped me to develop a more comprehensive view of the world and given me a better appreciation of the different cultures out there. I look forward to discussing these findings and potentially having them incorporated into Bahrain's new tourism strategy.

As globalisation continues to rapidly evolve and shape our world, governments are recognising the importance of staying connected to their citizens through accessible digital channels. With traditional media like TV, radio, and print no longer enough, governments must also move into social media and other digital platforms to remain relevant. One of the biggest challenges for governments in this digital world is reaching all citizens across different countries, cultures, and languages. Different regions use various digital platforms, and understanding how to best engage citizens can be difficult. For example, while social media is a popular platform throughout much of the world, Scandinavia has a much different online landscape, with a variety of different platforms and languages. Similarly, China is transitioning away from traditional media and towards digital platforms.

In this country, people rely heavily on WeChat, a unique social media network, to access information. For a government to effectively reach its Chinese citizens, understanding the region's culture, language, and communication style is paramount. To ensure their messages are reaching the right audience, governments must understand the platforms used by their citizens and adjust their communication

methods accordingly. To effectively engage with the Chinese public, governments must learn how to communicate through WeChat. This platform provides a direct and culturally relevant way to reach citizens and deliver messages that matter to them. By taking the time to understand the culture and platform of each region, governments can ensure their messages are reaching the right people at the right time. Ultimately, as globalisation continues redefining our world, governments must stay ahead of the changes and ensure they engage with their citizens on the platforms they use most. By understanding the various platforms, cultures and communities, governments can better connect with their constituents and ensure their messages are being heard and understood. With effective communication and outreach, governments can build stronger relationships with their citizens and foster a stronger, more connected society.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire

https://strathbusiness.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6xmffQxOHFuAcaG

Appendix 2: Variables Codebook

Variable Information		
Variable	Label	Measurement Level
Serial	Serial	Nominal
Country	Country of Residence	Nominal
Sex	Sex	Nominal
Stay	How long will you stay in Bahrain?	Ordinal
Age	Age Range	Ordinal
travel_type	Travelling as	Nominal
Know	Do you know anyone living in Bahrain?	Nominal
Image	What images or features come to mind when you think of Bahrain?	Nominal
Mood	How would you describe the atmosphere or mood you hope to experience during your visit?	Nominal
tourist_attractions	Can you name any different or unique tourist attractions in Bahrain compared to other tourist destinations you know?	Nominal
social_media	Are you a user of any social network?	Nominal
SM_usage1	Facebook	Ordinal
SM_usage2	Twitter	Ordinal
SM_usage3	Instagram	Ordinal
SM_usage4	Pinterest	Ordinal
SM_usage5	YouTube	Ordinal
SM_usage6	SnapChat	Ordinal
SM_usage7	Trip Advisor	Ordinal
SM_usage8	Influencers	Ordinal
BHN_content1	I have seen the content of Bahrain on the Internet	Ordinal
BHN_content2	The content that I have seen on the Internet has helped me when choosing to travel to Bahrain	Ordinal
BHN_content3	The content has helped me to plan / organise my activities in Bahrain	Ordinal
Following	Are you following any of Bahrain's official channels on social networks?	Nominal
following_BHN_channel	If Yes, which one?	Nominal
BA1	Bahrain has a good name and reputation	Ordinal
BA2	Bahrain is a famous Country	Ordinal
BA3	Bahrain features come quickly to mind	Ordinal
BA4	I have seen a lot of publicity for Bahrain	Ordinal
BI1	Bahrain is a historical and cultural Country	Ordinal
BI2	The old center of Bahrain is very attractive	Ordinal
BI3	Bahrain has a variety of interesting museums	Ordinal
BI4	Bahrain offers many interesting tourist attractions	Ordinal
BI5	Bahrain has attractive beaches	Ordinal

BI6	It has very beautiful parks and natural areas	Ordinal
BI7	The environment of Bahrain (towns and nature) is very beautiful	Ordinal
BI8	Bahrain has a very vibrant nightlife	Ordinal
BI9	Bahrain is a country that offers interesting cultural events	Ordinal
BI10	It has numerous facilities for shopping	Ordinal
BI11	The local gastronomy is very rich and varied	Ordinal
BI12	The People in Bahrain are friendly and hospitable	Ordinal
PQ1	Bahrain has a very good tourist offering	Ordinal
PQ2	Bahrain offers high-end accommodation	Ordinal
PQ3	Bahrain has modern local infrastructure and good quality transport	Ordinal
PQ4	I think that Bahrain is a country where I will feel safe	Ordinal
PQ5	I have very high expectations of Bahrain	Ordinal
Loyalty1	Bahrain is one of the preferred destinations to visit	Ordinal
Loyalty2	Bahrain provides more benefits	Ordinal
Loyalty3	I will visit Bahrain in the future	Ordinal
Loyalty4	I will recommend Bahrain to friends	Ordinal
WOM1	I am going to speak positively about Bahrain as a tourist destination	Ordinal
WOM2	If someone asks me, I would recommend Bahrain as a tourist destination	Ordinal
WOM3	I would recommend Bahrain as a tourist destination to my friends or family	Ordinal
e-WOM1	I will share the content of my trip on social media that I use	Ordinal
e-WOM2	I am going to recommend Bahrain as a tourist destination on social media	Ordinal
e-WOM3	I would recommend Bahrain as a tourist destination to my friends or family	Ordinal

Variable Values

Value	Label
1	Bahrain
2	Saudi Arabia
3	UAE
4	Kuwait
5	Jordan
6	Egypt
7	Turkey
8	Cyprus
9	Greece
10	Malta
11	France
12	Italy
13	Germany
14	Portugal
country	15 Spain
	16 United Kingdom/Scotland
	17 Ukraine
	18 Serbia
	19 Ireland
	20 Iceland
	21 Sweden
	22 Russia
	23 China
	24 India
	25 Singapore
	26 USA
	27 Brazil
	28 Argentina
	29 Australia
sex	0 Male
	1 Female
	1 1-3 Days
	2 3-7 Days
stay	3 1-2 weeks
	4 <1 month
	5 1-3 months
	6 3 months or more
	1 under 18
	2 18 to 24<25
age	3 25 to 34<35
	4 35 to 54<55
	5 55 to 64<65
	6 65 and above

travel_type	1	Solo (Single)
	2	Couple
	3	With Family
	4	With Friends
know	0	No
	1	Yes
social_media	0	No
	1	Yes
SM_usage1	0	I do not use it
	1	I use it infrequently
	2	I connect once a week
	3	1-3 times a week
	4	More than 3 times a week
	5	Once a day
SM_usage2	6	Several times a day
	0	I do not use it
	1	I use it infrequently
	2	I connect once a week
	3	1-3 times a week
	4	More than 3 times a week
SM_usage3	5	Once a day
	6	Several times a day
	0	I do not use it
	1	I use it infrequently
	2	I connect once a week
	3	1-3 times a week
SM_usage4	4	More than 3 times a week
	5	Once a day
	6	Several times a day
	0	I do not use it
	1	I use it infrequently
	2	I connect once a week
SM_usage5	3	1-3 times a week
	4	More than 3 times a week
	5	Once a day
	6	Several times a day
	0	I do not use it
	1	I use it infrequently
SM_usage6	2	I connect once a week
	3	1-3 times a week
	4	More than 3 times a week
	5	Once a day
	6	Several times a day

SM_usage7	0	I do not use it
	1	I use it infrequently
	2	I connect once a week
	3	1-3 times a week
	4	More than 3 times a week
	5	Once a day
SM_usage8	6	Several times a day
	0	I do not use it
	1	I use it infrequently
	2	I connect once a week
	3	1-3 times a week
	4	More than 3 times a week
BHN_content1	5	Once a day
	6	Several times a day
	1	Not at all
	2	Low
	3	Slightly low
	4	Neutral
BHN_content2	5	Slightly high
	6	High
	7	A Lot
	1	Not at all
	2	Low
	3	Slightly low
BHN_content3	4	Neutral
	5	Slightly high
	6	High
	7	A Lot
	1	Not at all
	2	Low
following	3	Slightly low
	4	Neutral
	5	Slightly high
	6	High
	7	A Lot
	0	No
BA1	1	Yes
	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
BA2	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree

BA3	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
BA4	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
BI1	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
BI2	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
BI3	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
BI4	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
BI5	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree

BI6	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
BI7	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
BI8	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
BI9	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
BI10	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
BI11	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
BI12	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
PQ1	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree

PQ2	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
PQ3	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
PQ4	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
PQ5	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
Loyalty1	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
Loyalty2	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree

Loyalty3	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
Loyalty4	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
WOM1	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
WOM2	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
WOM3	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
e-WOM1	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
e-WOM2	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree
e-WOM3	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Somewhat disagree
	4	Neither agree nor disagree
	5	Somewhat agree
	6	Agree
	7	Strongly agree

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