

SOCIAL MEDIA AND DESTINATION POSITIONING: EGYPT AS A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT: Destination marketing organizations (DMOs) have been seriously challenged by the rise of using social media, which opened up and improved communication in ways which could help in positioning their destination and services. This study examines DMOs attitude towards using social media in Egypt and the role it can play in positioning Egypt after 25 Jan. revolution. Data for this study was collected with the answers from 180 questionnaires from DMOs. The results have revealed that although DMOs believe that social media is important as a marketing tool and can help positioning a new image of Egypt and their products, most of them do not have sufficient strategies to be more competitive using social media. There has been a growth in the number of studies of positioning in the tourism literature. However, very few studies have addressed the relation of destination positioning and social media in the role of effective communication. **Keywords:** Destination Marketing Organizations, positioning, social media, Egypt.

RESUMEN: Las organizaciones de marketing de destinos (OMDs) vienen siendo seriamente puestas al reto por el aumento del uso de las redes sociales, que abrió y mejoró la comunicación de forma a ayudar en el posicionamiento de sus destinos y servicios. Este estudio examina la actitud de las OMDs para con el uso de medios de las redes sociales en el Egipto y el papel que puede tener en el posicionamiento del Egipto después de la revolución del 25 de enero. Los datos para este estudio fueron recogidos con respuestas de 180 cuestionarios de OMDs. Los resultados revelaron que a pesar de las OMDs creeren que las redes sociales son importantes herramientas de marketing y ayudaren a posicionar una nueva imagen del Egipto y de sus productos, la mayor parte no tienen estrategias suficientes para que sea más competitiva usando los medios de comunicación social. Ha habido un aumento del número de estudios de posicionamiento en la literatura del turismo. Sin embargo, muy pocos estudios han dado enfoque a la relación entre posicionamiento de destinos y las redes sociales en el papel de una comunicación eficaz. **Palabras clave:** Organización de Marketing de Destinos, posicionamiento, redes sociales, Egipto.

RESUMO: As organizações de marketing de destinos (OMDs) têm sido seriamente desafiadas pelo aumento do uso das redes sociais, que abrem e melhoram a comunicação de maneiras que podem ajudar no posicionamento dos seus destinos e serviços. Este estudo examina a atitude das OMDs para com o uso das redes sociais no Egito e o papel que podem tomar no posicionamento do Egito depois da revolução de 25 de Janeiro. Os dados para este estudo foram recolhidos com respostas de 180 questionários de OMDs. Os resultados revelaram que apesar de as OMDs acreditarem que as redes sociais são importantes ferramentas de marketing e ajudarem a posicionar uma nova imagem do Egito e dos seus produtos, a maioria delas não tem estratégias suficientes para se tornar mais competitiva através do uso destas redes. Houve um aumento do número de estudos de posicionamento na literatura do turismo. No

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entanto, muito poucos estudos abordaram a relação entre o posicionamento de destinos e o uso das redes sociais para uma comunicação eficaz. **Palavras-chave:** Organizações de Marketing de Destinos, posicionamento, redes sociais, Egito.

INTRODUCTION

Many destination marketers are struggling for attracting and satisfying tourists. What separates one destination from the other in this crowded market is that some are delivering a much stronger and a clear brand position. Without a position, it is almost impossible for a tourism destination to achieve a meaningful and sustainable point of differentiation (Wanderlust, 2012) and without an appropriate communication and delivering channel to send the positioning message and image, it is impossible to influence tourists.

The main goal for any marketer is communicating the destination position to tourists. One of the preferable sources to reach out for a wide audience and which facilitates the process of contacting as many people at the same time is using the social media as a mean of communication. Delivering an image and proper information through social media is considered a shift from the traditional communication tools used in the past. People now discover, read news and information far easier than before (Shimp, 2010; Lombardi, 2009).

Destination marketing organizations have to have the ability to create an atmosphere of caring and trust through social media, equal to the traditional way of face to face contact (Heinonen, 2011). They should change toward positioning their destination/products by using social media, because promoting tourism through traditional media is slimming down. Now clients prefer to collect information online from various interactive web pages and networks according to their needs rather than driving to a tour operator or agency (Ranjha, 2010).

While some of the destination marketers, especially those who deal with the hotel industry, have realized the importance of social media many others, especially in other sectors of the tourism industry such as travel agencies, have not yet followed this trend in Egypt. Evidently, the reason lies in the lack of knowledge, how to use this technology as well as the fear of not being able to fully control the information input, and reaction outcome. (Schmallegger & Carson 2008). As Milano mentioned, failing to recognize the importance of the social media is due to the lack of resources, capabilities and skills within the various companies (Milano, et al., 2011).

The primary objective of the research is to clarify the real situation of social media applications in the Egyptian tourism sector. As well as the DMOs' opinions about the possibility of using it to position a new image for Egypt after the revolution.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

APPLICATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

Social media, with its millions of users, has become an important distribution and communication channel. It has naturally spread to the travel and tourism sector, boosting the development of online travel worldwide as information sources for travelers (Chabot, 2007; Gretzel & Xiang, 2010). With Web 2.0 application, the Internet offers new ways for tourists to learn about tourism products and services directly from other consumers, helps tourists to save time, and rapidly access to the right and needed information.

Social media actually reduces risks and increases confidence during the decision making process. Tourists arrive to destinations more informed and empowered than ever before with higher expectations and all sorts of channels for sharing likes and dislikes with large volumes of people (Tourism –review.com, 2012; Gretzel, 2007; Chabot, 2007). Milano (2010) asserted that social media influences travel experience formation process through three stages: *"Pre-experience, built on other people's travel stories before travelling; Experience during travel or stay and Post-experience which disseminates comments, evaluations and emotions"*.

Certain social media Websites can be considered more comprehensive. Additionally, travel-specific information sites are becoming increasingly popular (Milano, et al., 2011). Sites like Facebook, with more than 800 million active users, TripAdvisor, with 50 million unique monthly visitors, YouTube with 100 million users, Google maps which help tourists to make their own itinerary and print them out (tourism –review, 2012).

According to the 2009 National Leisure Travel Monitor, nearly two-thirds of leisure travelers have used the Internet to obtain travel information and prices; nearly six in 10 have booked reservations online. Although a majority of leisure travelers will visit online travel agency sites such as Expedia, Travelocity or Orbitz, all agencies should consider having a professional website of their own as well (Ting, 2010).

DESTINATION POSITIONING:

Destinations are some of the most difficult entities to manage and market due to many reasons:

1. The increase of global competition among destinations
2. The change in the taste of tourists
3. The complexity of the relationships of local stakeholders involved in the development and production of tourism products

4. Word of mouth - people generally trust what other people say about their tourist experiences (Sautter & Leisen, 1999; Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003; Stankovic & Dukic, 2009; Wheeler, 2011).

Marketers can overcome these difficulties by positioning their destinations or services. Positioning is seen as the core of marketing, it can be mutually beneficial for the DMOs and the tourists as it evokes images of a destination in the tourist's mind, differentiating the destination from competitors and satisfying the customer's requirements. Additionally, it helps DMOs to access more quickly to the mind of the tourist (Pike, 2004; Chacko, 2007; Eraqi, 2007; Ndlovu 2009).

Positioning is creating and maintaining an image for the product or brand in the mind of the target audience relative to other brands. This positioning process should be designed in such a way that it occupies a different and valuable place in the mind of the target customers.

A market positioning process consists of: 1) identifying and selecting markets (target customers) that represent a business potential, 2) determining the important issues to this target market, 3) identify how the target market perceives the destination and the competitors, 4) determining the competitive criteria for a better success of the own destination (Chacko, 2007).

This process is based on thorough knowledge of the requirements and perception of this target market and the benefits offered by the destination (DiMingo, 1988; Heath & Wall, 1992).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND TOURISM POSITIONING:

Social media can be seen as a main element of the marketing positioning process. It helps marketers to understand the targeted tourist's taste and gives them a direct accurate evaluation of the quality of their products and services from their customers first hand . It also offers a unified communications' platform where users have the capability of interacting with others on a simultaneous basis (Haataja, 2010; Barnes & Barnes 2009). Additionally, it helps destination marketers to improve the competitive position of their destinations and thereby gain market share and increase profits.

Understanding the nature of the online tourism domain provides an important stepping-stone for the development of successful marketing programs and better information systems in tourism (Fesenmaier, et.al., 2006). Indeed, the building of a destination position and image is revolutionized because of the communication power of social media.

The main problem with social media application is that Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) lose a large part of their controllability on the branding procedure while social media users generate most of the branding content such as videos and photos. Thus, to

avoid the negative effect of social media and to successfully create a new position and image for the destinations, DMOs need to understand how visitors use search engines in order to increase visibility through higher search engine rankings. They must meet the needs of travelers by providing value-added information and services that differentiate themselves from competitors (Xiang et al., 2010). Also, they need to create an online rapport to increase visitors to the DMO online presence. This requires information and feedback from social media and tourism portals on what travelers are saying about the destination (Fotis, et al., 2010; Pan & Li, 2011; Elliot & Faria, 2012).

Additionally, DMOs have to use suitable monitoring tools to help them track data in real time, mine it, and analyze it. In this way, social media can help DMOs to increase brand awareness for the services, sales, educate and inform customers, improve customer service and monitor brand reputation (Cook & Hopkins, 2008; Lim, 2010). Marketers should take into consideration that each social network site focuses on a specific target audience based on location, nationality, ethnicity or interests. Thus, if DMOs are looking to target a specific group and are considering to establish a presence on one of the major social media sites, they have to consider first whether their target group is actually using that site or not.

EGYPT AS A CASE STUDY:

During and before the Egyptian spring revolution on the 25th of January 2011, observations resulted in the acknowledgment that the platform of the internet contributed to the success of the people's mobility to participate in this revolution activity. In fact, it is said that it was the most important tool used to communicate with people as possible in a very short time frame, as at the beginning of the uprising more than 70000 Egyptians signed up on Facebook to exchange their personal stories of participating in the protests as well as following up with announcements and reaction news within the Egyptian community as a whole. But not only Facebook, but Twitter and YouTube also played an important role in Egypt (E-Marketing Egypt, 2012; The New York Times, 2011).

In spite of the importance of the revolution to the Egyptians, Egypt's economy has been in disarray with some of the main sources of foreign currency exchange, including tourism, having buckled. Tourism is the second largest revenue source for Egypt, but now Egypt's tourism industry is losing \$1 billion a month as tourists avoid the country in the wake of the revolution. The effects were drastic as Egypt forecast 16 million tourists for 2011 before the uprising, and in just a few days, a million tourists fled the country, abandoning the hotels and restaurants in Cairo, Luxor, Aswan and the Red Sea resorts of Hurghada and Sharm El Sheik (The New York Times, 2011; Egypt independent, 2012).

Egypt received 14.5 million tourists in 2010, but this number decreased by 33% in 2011 according to tourism statistics. Also, there was a decline in tourism income from 12.5 billion USD in 2010 to 8.8 billion in 2011 (Egypt independent, 2012; World bank, 2012). The recovery of Egypt's economy depends heavily on how the government and tourism marketing organizations will manage the tourism crisis.

Additionally, a study carried out by a global travel market research company in the Middle East indicates that the online travel sales in the Middle East will grow 31% from 2011 to almost \$10.4bn this year and are set to reach \$15.8bn by 2014, which means that in 2014, online bookings will make up nearly a quarter (22%) of all travel bookings made in the region. The research also shows the rapid development of regional Online Travel Agencies (OTAs), which are growing at a Compound Annual Growth Rate of 18% between 2010 and 2014 (E-Marketing Egypt, 2012).

According to the above challenges, Egyptian DMOs have to shift from using the traditional promoting tools to social media tools. Also, they need to adopt an efficient social media positioning strategy, especially because some social media transfer an exaggerated picture of the political situation in Egypt, affecting the image of Egypt negatively.

METHODOLOGY

The initial idea of this research was to identify how tourism companies in Egypt use social media so that the study uses quantitative methods to create a general view of how social media are used in the tourism industry. The target group was DMOs (180) from hotels and travel agents who have at least three years experience in tourism marketing. (60) respondents asserted that they do not use social media and (120) of the respondents used social media in some form. The sample was from companies of different regions, business fields and different sizes. In order to reach the target group, a questionnaire was used and distributed among DMOs.

The questionnaire was based on the theoretical background of studies in social media - its ability to position a new image for the tourism destinations. It was divided into six sections:

1. The most used promotional marketing tools in the Egyptian tourism market.
2. The most used social media networks and tools by the Egyptian DMOs.
3. DMOs' opinions of social media actions.
4. Social media strategies in Egypt's tourism organizations.
5. Reasons for adopting social media .

6. Social media's ability to position a new image for Egypt.

The question types used in the questionnaires varied from selection and multiple choice questions to Likert scale from 1 to 5 in order to achieve a view as wide as possible. Also open-ended questions were used when necessary to give depth to the answers. The reliability of this research is based on several grounds. One is the anonymity of the responses; the respondents could answer freely about their practices and the reliability - Cronbach's Alpha (601).

The hypotheses tested in this study were as follows:

1. Social media is not well used in the Egyptian tourism sector.
2. There is no clear strategy for using social media in most of the Egyptian tourism organizations.
3. Social Media can help position a new image for Egypt after the revolution.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The total number of company respondents was 120 companies, 60 companies asserted that they do not use social media and so they did not complete the questionnaire.

The majority of respondents (76.7%) asserted that they are using Social Media from one to two years, 16.7% asserted that they used it from less than two years and only 6.7% used it from more than two years (figure 1). This indicates that using Social Media among DMOs is relatively new.

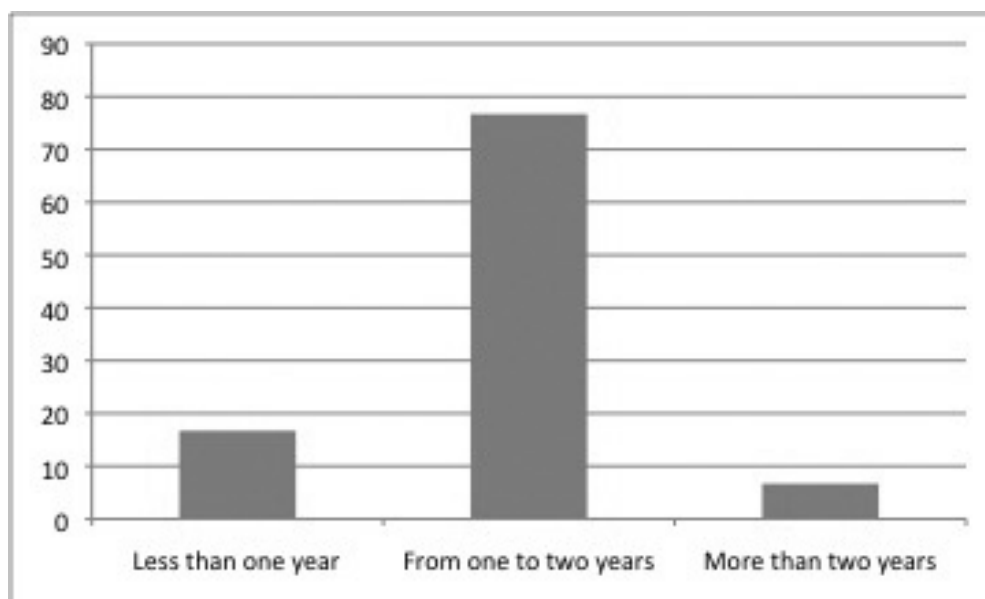


Figure 1: Length of using Social Media in marketing

One goal of this study is to determine the most used marketing promotional tools in the Egyptian tourism marketing (Table 1). The respondents were asked to arrange the promotional tools by degree (where 5 represents always and 1 represents never).

Table 1: The most used promotional marketing tools in the Egyptian tourism market

	1	2	3	4	5	mean	S.d.	t	Sig.	C.V.
	%	%	%	%	%					
E-mail	0.0	0.0	3.3	66.7	30.0	4.3	0.52	44.9	.000	0.12
Direct mail	0.0	3.3	30.0	66.7	0.0	3.6	0.55	35.8	.000	0.15
Participating in tourism events	0.0	0.0	33.3	53.3	13.3	3.8	0.66	31.3	.000	0.17
Printed marketing material	0.0	0.0	20.0	13.3	66.7	4.5	0.81	29.9	.000	0.18
Newspapers and magazines	3.3	16.7	20.0	60.0	0.0	3.4	0.88	20.7	.000	0.26
Social media	0.0	16.7	50.0	0.0	33.3	3.5	1.10	16.9	.000	0.32
Television	10.0	40.0	26.7	3.3	20.0	2.8	1.20	12	.000	0.45

Tourism marketers prefer using e-mails, followed by direct mail, participating in tourism events, printed marketing material (brochures, pamphlets, newspapers and magazines), social media ranked the sixth and, finally, television.

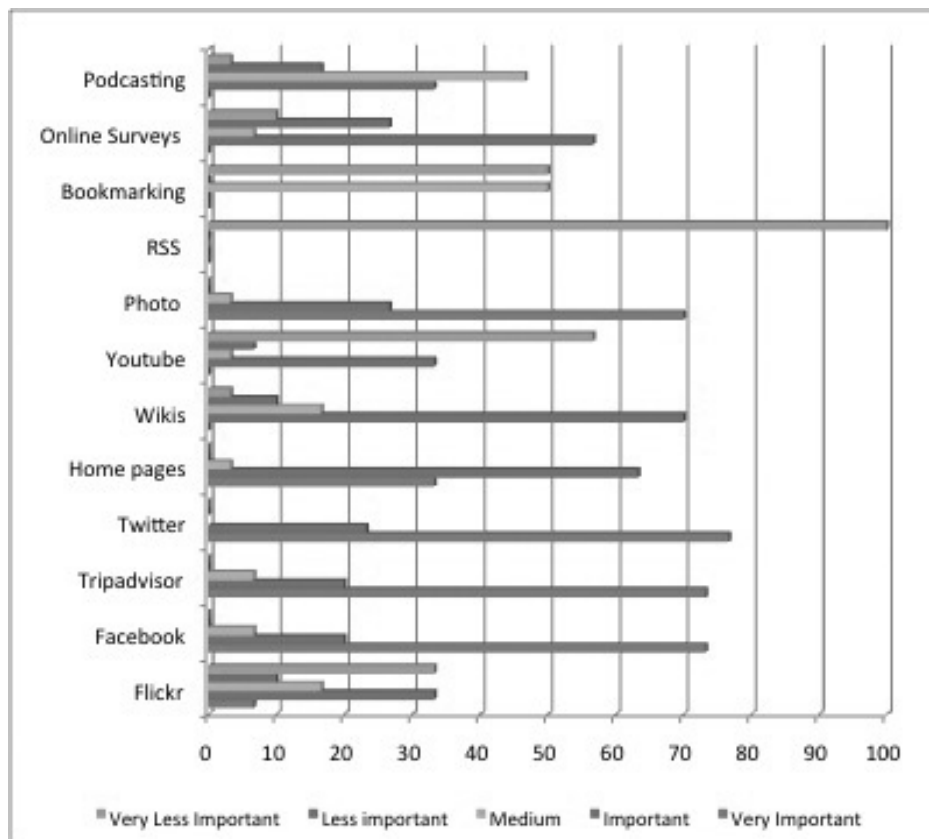


Figure 2: The most used social media networks and tools by the Egyptian DMOs

Figure 2 shows that the vast majority (100%) of DMOs involved in social media marketing are using social networks, with Twitter (100%), Trip Advisor and Facebook (93.3%) being the clear leaders. This partially agreed with a survey held in 2011 by Sparklof which mentioned that the most important tools for travel/tourism in 2011 were:

- a. Facebook.
- b. Twitter.
- c. Trip Advisor.
- d. YouTube (Social media services, 2011).

And the survey held by Sticky media 2011 which mentioned that Facebook has the greatest influence over 25-34 year-old's holiday choices, and the greatest influence over men with more than 500 million active users. Followed by Trip Advisor which had the greatest impact on female booking habits with 34 million unique monthly visitors and Twitter's search engine which receives around 600 million search queries per day (Sticky media, 2011).

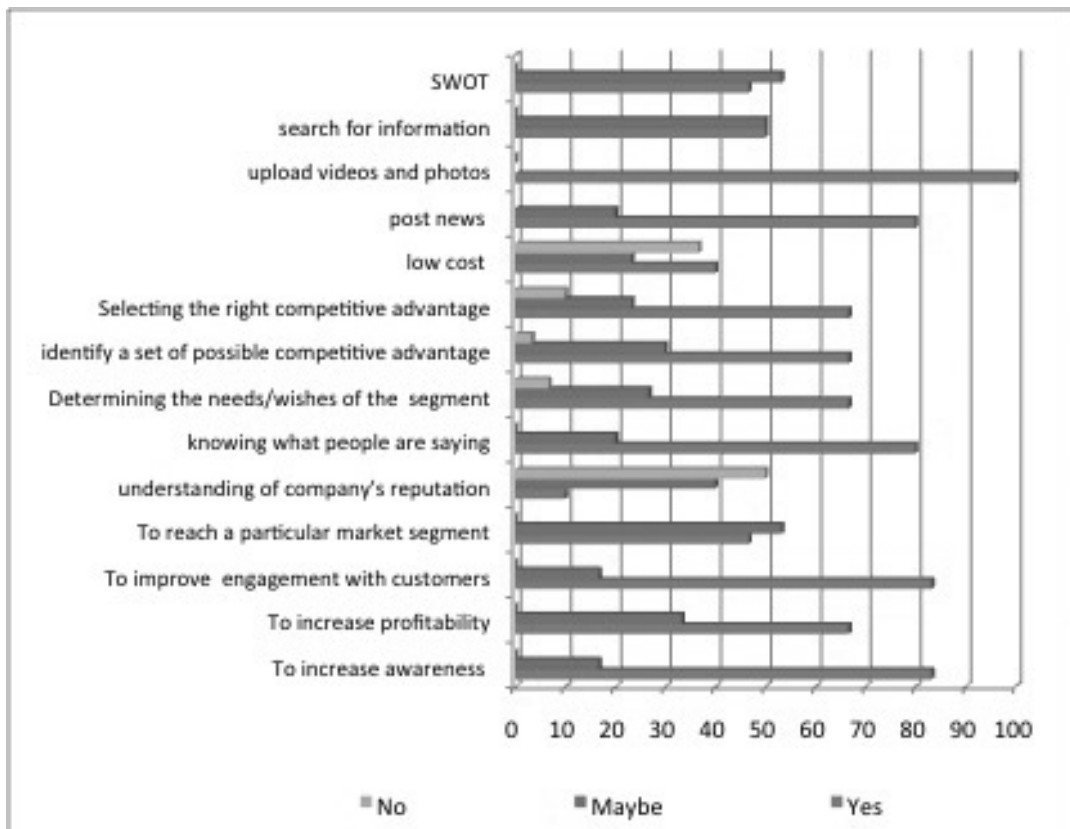


Figure 3: Reasons for adopting social media in tourism marketing

This part of the survey set out to discover the reasons behind adoption of social media by Egyptian DMOs. The primary reason for adopting Social Media as mentioned in Figure 3 is to upload vid-

eos and photos (100%), to improve networking/engagement with customers (83.3%), post news (80%) and knowing what people are saying (80%). However, 53.3% of DMOs do not think that Social Media can help either reaching a particular market segment or finding out strengths, weaknesses, opportunities or threats in the market.

Table 2: DMOs opinions of social media actions

	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly agree %	Mean	S.d.	T	Sig.
Social Media is effective in marketing	0.0	0.0	6.7	26.7	66.7	4.6	.62	40.5	.000
Social Media effective in marketing but it should combined by traditional tools	0.0	0.0	33.3	33.3	33.3	4	.83	26.3	.000
Social Media is less effective than the traditional marketing tools	3.3	66.7	30.0	0.0	0.0	2.2	.52	23.8	.000
It is risky to use Social Media	0.0	33.3	16.7	16.7	33.3	2.5	1.7	7.7	.000

When comparing the effectiveness of social media with traditional marketing tools, respondents indicate that Social Media is effective in marketing (93.4%) and that it is not less effective than the traditional marketing tools (70%), but most of them believe that it should be combined with traditional marketing tools (66.6%). DMOs think that the usage of social media is risky (Table 2). According to Pike 2008, customers prefer to use the internet, as 81% of travelers 'always or often' use the internet to plan their holidays, which means that 'traditional' marketing has to move over (Guarente, 2010).

These results prove the first hypothesis of this study: Social media is not well used in the Egyptian tourism sector.

Table 3: Social media strategy

	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly agree %	Mean	S.d	T	Sig
There is a clear social media strategy in your company	16.7	16.7	66.7	0.0	3.5	.77	24.6	.000
You use a social media measurement tool	0.0	43.3	33.3	23.3	3.8	.80	25.8	.000
There is a suitable budget for social media	6.7	36.7	23.3	33.3	3.9	.98	210.3	.000

Concerning the social media strategy in the Egyptian tourism companies (Table 3), 66.7% of DMOs asserted that there is a social media strategy while 16.7% were neutral as they do not know if there is a strategy or not and 16.7% disagree about the existence of social media strategy. For social media measurement tools, 43.3% were neutral. As for social media budget, 36.7% were neutral.

Table 4: Correlation between degree of using social media and existence of social media strategy

	Rank	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Str. Agree %
There is a clear social media strategy in your company	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	2	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	3	0.0	33.3	66.7	0.0
	4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	5	0.0	0.0	100	0.0
You use a social media measurement tool	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	2	0.0	100	0.0	0.0
	3	0.0	53.3	0.0	46.7
	4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	5	0.0	100	0.0	0.0
There is a suitable budget for social media	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	2	40.0	60.0	0.0	0.0
	3	0.0	53.3	46.7	0.0
	4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	5	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0

Table 4 shows the relation between the degree of social media usage (Table 1) and the existence of strategy in the tourism companies (Table 3).

The uncertainty in the answers of the DMOs is clear, except for the permanent users (5) of social media who agreed that they have a social media strategy, and suitable social media budgets.

It is clear that there is a lack of a social media strategy to guide most of the tourism companies in Egypt, which can obstruct its success in this arena to a larger extent.

A well-developed social media strategy is a necessity for any destination as it could provide visibility and acknowledgment to unique aspects of the tourism products, services and destinations as well as a differentiated approach to reach and fulfil key customer segments (Weintraub, 2008). Additionally, it can help eliminate confusion and prevents ambiguity.

These results prove the second hypothesis of this study: There is no clear strategy for using social media in most of the Egyptian tourism organizations.

Table 5: Social media and positioning a new image for Egypt after the revolution

	Str. disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Str. agree %	Mean	S.d.	T	Sig.
Redefine the image of Egypt	3.3	3.3	6.7	66.7	20.0	3.9	.85	25.5	.000
Confidently position Egypt as travel destinations	0.0	0.0	16.7	43.3	40.0	4.2	.73	31.8	.000
Reflect the spirit, character, warmth and invitation of the people of Egypt	0.0	6.7	16.7	36.6	40.0	4.1	.92	24.3	.000
Positioning the benefits of the destination to create a new image	0.0	0.0	10.0	16.7	73.3	4.6	.67	37.9	.000
Communicating those benefits through images to the target group	0.0	0.0	10.0	20.0	70.0	4.6	.67	37.3	.000
Restoring traveler confidence in travel to the region	0.0	6.7	13.3	43.3	36.7	4.1	.88	25.3	.000
Re-stimulating Travel & Tourism industry activity In Egypt	0.0	0.0	26.7	16.6	56.7	4.3	.88	26.8	.000

In Table 5, 86.7% of DMOs believe that social media can play a vital role in redefining the image of Egypt, 83.3% asserted that it can confidently position Egypt and 90% see that it can create a new image for Egypt .

These results prove the third hypothesis of this study: Social Media can help positioning a new image for Egypt after the revolution.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The above study indicates the importance of social media and its advantages in destination marketing and how social media tools are becoming beneficial methods of communication and promotion. Marketers have to be involved in the social media technology which can help emphasize and distinguish their products or services from their competitors. Consequently, success in marketing destinations requires carefully prepared and planned social media positioning strategies. Furthermore, implementing and monitoring such strategies successfully would have a great competitive edge over competitors.

For Egypt, it is clear that social media is not well used in tourism marketing, although marketers believe that it can help position Egypt in the current period. Social media positioning strategy for Egypt is needed for selecting the desired position with regard to a particular

market segment and creating a new image after the revolution as well as providing an opportunity for DMOs to compete in the tourism market.

The number of surveyed destination marketing organizations is considered one of the limitations. Also, at the time of research at hand, there were no official reports from the official tourism organizations about the application of social media in Egypt's tourism sector. Since this study examined the tourism private sector's perspective about using social media, future research should focus on the perspective of the official tourism sector in Egypt.

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