

# The Development of Oman Tourism Through the Use of Search Engine Optimization Techniques - A Study

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## ABSTRACT

The impact of search engine optimization (SEO) in the tourism industry is increasing with the growing number of individuals using search engines to explore and book their travel. In this review paper, the importance of SEO is examined in relation to Oman's tourism industry and general economy. The introduction of the paper delivers a quick overview of Oman's tourist sector and how digital marketing has contributed to its development. It then delves into SEO's advantages, drawbacks, and capability in this sector. In addition, it examines prior effective SEO tactics used by Oman tourism businesses. The evaluation displays positive impacts on tourism with SEO strategies. However, marketing tactics like link building, social media marketing elements, and website optimization etc. are required. Effective SEO strategies involve continuous monitoring and adaptation to keep pace with evolving search engine algorithms and user behavior. It is proven by well-established platforms and giant companies such as Google, Safari, Airbnb, etc., who utilize such strategies to increase customer interaction and reach-outs. This paper highlights the significance of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) for Oman's tourism industry and offers valuable insights into the advantages, obstacles, and optimal practices for implementing SEO in the sector. The results can assist infrastructure planners, decision-makers in the tourism industry, policymakers, and the Ministry of Tourism, which can leverage the power of digital marketing strategies to promote the growth and progress of Oman's tourism sector.

## Introduction

In keeping with the Sultanate's push for digital transformation, the Omani Ministry of Tourism encourages the provision of more tourist amenities to visitors via cutting-edge electronic platforms (Al Harmali et al., 2021). The Sultanate of Oman's ministry of tourism and heritage places a strong emphasis on the necessity of promoting tourism in order to boost the Sultanate's GDP, create more job opportunities for citizens, give young people career prospects, and provide lucrative opportunities for SMEs and other local businesses in the sector (Salim et al., 2021). Nowadays, search engine plays a significant role in the tourism sector as search engines and social media websites are commonly used by travelers for trip inspirations. According to a research conducted by Google (*The 2014 Traveler's Road to Decision*, 2014), online search engines continue to dominate the travel sectors; being used by 65% of leisure travelers and 69% of business travelers for travel planning and research. As a result, having a website on a search engine can increase sales, and having a website on a search engine can be made effective by taking advantage of SEO and its features.

## SEO and Its Features

Search Engine Optimization, SEO, means the practice of improving a website's visibility and placement in organic search results, in digital platforms, by promoting both the quality and quantity of traffic to the websites, with the help of a solid SEO plan, since organic search is the most familiar way for users to find and approach online contents.

(MOZ, 2019). SEO can be implemented by optimizing the websites to turn up in the search engine results page (SERPs) for keywords or phrases related to the sites. Types of SEO that can be applied are:- on-page SEO -which refers to optimization within the website (keywords, phrases, URL, title and header tags, meta tag etc.), off-page SEO – which refers to optimization outside the website (backlinks, link exchange, social media marketing etc.), technical SEO - optimizing the back-end (crawling) of the website (page load speed, navigation etc.), and content- insertion of high valued keywords and phrases to rank higher in SERPs (usage of graphics, detailed guides, blog posts etc.) (Fields, 2022). SEO is crucial because a high percentage of search engine users (above 70%) have an increased chance of clicking the top 5 suggestions in the SERPs as they trust search engine suggestions, along with improving the user experience and usability, and increases social promoting and organic traffic, therefore helping the business grow and reach new heights. (Chris, 2022)

## Observation of SEO and Its Trend in Oman

To understand the outlook of how social media is currently being utilized in Oman, we gathered some data about the influence of social media and digital marketing from research articles to know how effective implementation of SEO strategies would be in the local market.

According to the study of entrepreneurship using social media services in Oman by (Samuel and Sarprasatha, 2016), they referenced articles that had statistics on the top used social media apps in 2015. They referenced from (Salem et al., 2014) that Oman crossed 800,000 users on Facebook, the top used social media app. They also mentioned that 40% of the people that used social media used YouTube and Instagram for socializing (Arab Social Media Report, 2015).

The use of digital socializing through social media networks can impact tourism in its promotion and help visitors in many ways. (Al-Hajri et al., 2021) noted that social media networks that are used to share travel experiences in Oman provided satisfaction among users. As travel information isn't always readily available, these social networks can be great outlets to promote tourism and have local authentic experiences.

This brings us to how we can utilize e-marketing tools in Oman in the field of tourism. A comparative approach is to observe online consumer behavior in Oman through the study done regarding this by (Al-Haraizah et al., 2022). Through their survey, they were able to identify that 90% of the participants who take part in online shopping were aware of e-marketing tools and they were most influenced by social media channels which comprised 36% of the sample group. Yet only 11% of the participants were aware of Search engine optimization (SEO) used for e-marketing.

Through this example, we can get an idea of the gap in the awareness of SEO knowledge by the public. Digital illiteracy is one of the key factors that prevents the wider use of e-marketing tools. There is insignificant research done in the field of SEO in Oman while local industries that do use SEO outsource their work to be done by companies, leading to the local population not really understanding how to harness the potential of e-marketing tools to their benefit.

To boost the SEO of Oman's tourism, the government has to invest in better digital literacy practices through training, courses and educational materials. In this way, tourism businesses in Oman can promote their products with higher rankings online, thereby promoting international trade and tourism rates.

## Oman Vision 2040

According to Oman Vision 2040, 'Economic Diversification and Fiscal Sustainability' aims at the expansion among economic sectors which includes the tourism sector along with other. With the help of SEO, the tourism online business will rank higher making them more accessible and visible in the search engine, offering awareness of Oman's tourism to potential travelers worldwide, which will lead to the boosting of organic traffic towards their business. This can bring in more workload and profit, followed by a rise in employment, subsequently helping the 'Labor Market

and Employment' goal also, which is to give out more jobs to the Omani youths and adapt the Omani labor market to the 'new global future of jobs' (Oman2040, n.d.).

## Literature Review

4 published research papers have been analyzed, 2 on SEO and its influence on tourism, 1 on SEO and how it helped marketing multi-national companies in Sri Lanka and 1 on tourism and its effects in Oman and its economy, to identify and synthesize trends, themes and findings of SEO. As we could not find research paper or study of SEO in Oman, we reviewed tourism in Oman and economy and SEO in overseas in order to comprehend and explore the current state and identify significance of SEO, gaps and highlight areas for further research.

Zilincan(2015) examined the use of SEO techniques and their influence on a tourism website published on May 2012, for research purpose, taking in consideration of two hypothesis. At beginning, maximum number of visitors were from referral websites as referral was their main way to get traffic. About 3 months in, they started to observe organic traffic was able to gain its height with referral traffic and eventually during 5<sup>th</sup> month, organic search customers were highest by 70% of all traffic. Over time, the website would rise higher and higher in SERPs, occasionally reaching at peak too. In due course, he observed, another source of traffic- the direct traffic- which means some users already knew the website and were able to enter it without searching or clicking other websites, probably had it bookmarked, in addition to this he observed keeping the contents clean and fresh and tidy was attracting in more tourists not only for searching but also to read articles. Zilincan also experiments and states the different types of SEO used to make this website successful, such as the use of long tail keywords, right keywords and also other methods. The author concluded using the right mix of on-page and off-page SEO and creating a unique and interesting website that can attract in the right users and can make their websites rank higher in SERPs.

Konidaris and Koustoumpardi(2018) carried out a study and reviewed on SEO and its state on a specific tourism destination, Kefalonia, arguing on the topic that the quality and position of a tourism's webpages determine its internet visibility targeting specific customers and differentiating themselves from competitors. Furthermore the authors explains about SEO metrics, for instance, top level domain, second-level domain, page title tag and the meta description and so much more. In addition to that, they highlights factors, such as keyword research and optimization, on-page and off-page optimization, and mobile optimization, that can be used to position the website higher in the search engine, after comparing the reports collected from over 400 travel related business.

A research was implemented in Sri Lanka on SEO and its effect in Multi-national companies, by Azeez and Mohamed (2022) , to introduce new frames and their main aim was to identify marketing techniques, in addition with SEO and its usage and preparing a model for the application of SEO. They used qualitative research method to collect information. Along with the method, they interviewed 12 marketing professionals and analyzed the data. According to these results, businesses should set a high priority on producing relevant and high-quality website content, as well as keeping a structured and well-organized website, in order to raise their SEO ranks.

Dileep, M.R. & Mathew, V., (2017) , examined on tourism, its factors and competitiveness of Oman by reviewing past papers and conducting a survey. By studying various models, they understood the effect of tourism in the economy of Oman and the necessary action required to be taken to expand the tourism sector in Oman which thereafter will promote in enlargement of economy of Oman, for the reason that they summarized the annual research by World Travel and Tourism Council(2016) predicting the rise of tourists by 7.1% pa followed by expected growth of direct contribution of Travel and Tourism to Oman GDP by 6.1% pa, by 2025. In addition to this, the employment rate is assumed to grow by 3.8% pa over the period. The questionnaire further reveals that Oman has scope for tourists attractions but is lacking behind in some areas like adequate structure, entertainment options, cost and value rate and some more for tourists. In the final analysis, the authors highlights the lists of area where Oman is able to draw in tourists and other factors which need attention for major growth.

## Research Methodology

How SEO, Search Engine Optimization, can help Oman tourism industry to grow? - is our research study question. Research articles and study papers were reviewed, that included the keyword terms- Search engine optimization, SEO in tourism, tourism in Oman, SEO strategies and SERPs. About 20 articles were selected for review, from which 4 were critically analyzed to recognize effectiveness of SEO and its strategies for tourism websites in abroad to make it useful for Oman. SEO strategies and algorithms for 2 well-established platforms were also analyzed and revised.

## SEO Techniques

SEO can be broken in two techniques, white-hat SEO and black-hat SEO, understanding these can assist in building more advantageous tourism websites to boost online exposure in this competitive field of tourism sector.

White-hat SEO refers to the utilization of website optimization strategies, techniques, and tactics approved by Google, focusing and prioritizing on providing the user with the best SERPs, which includes- creating a beautiful website that focus on brand, works in mobile devices as well as PC and using white space efficiently, creating exceptional and worthwhile contents which will be easier to build links and make it more interesting to the users, link building by blog commenting, guest posting and linkbait+outreach, and much more white-hat techniques can be applicable to draw in additional traffics.(Soulo, 2018)

On the other hand, black-hand SEO refers to the use of unethical tactics to rank the website higher in the search engine by going against the search engine guidelines. They include keyword stuffing, packing the contents of the site with unrelated keywords to falsify the ranking, cloaking, displaying different contents to the user and to the search engine with the purpose of ranking for unrelated search terms(usually preferred by spam websites), sneaky redirects, this sends the user to a varying URL instead the one they initially selected, blog comment spam, involves the links to the websites in the blog comments and much more techniques are involved in black-hat SEO. (O'Conner, 2022)

## Evaluation

We will now look into some of the well-established platforms and what algorithms they use in their search engine results page for websites, followed by recommending what tourism websites in Oman can do and should do in order to rank higher in platforms, thereupon captivating more visitors.

### Google Algorithm in SERPs

Google's algorithm is remarkably complex and how it works is not a public information and keeps updating regularly, on average, six times per day.(Widmer, 2022). Although Google has revealed some notable factors that affects the websites ranking and how it ranks result. When users search something, Google initially establishes what the user requires, then the search algorithm looks at many factors including the relevance- assessing if the information is relevant to the user or not, quality- confirming expertise, authoritativeness and trustworthiness, usability- the more accessibility means it performs better, and context and setting- to deliver content relevant to the users area. The websites ranking in higher certainly spotlights these factors while optimizing it. Google search has a software called crawlers that stores whatever information they find on accessible webpages of the sites and stores it, followed by organizing the information by indexing every word seen on the webpage. Google is constantly crawling to keep up the constant change of contents (Lutkevich, 2023.).

## Airbnb Algorithm

Airbnb search algorithm considers quality- this includes listing description, guest reviews and listing characteristics, popularity- involving how often it is booked and saved to wish list, price- comprising of price competitiveness, and variety- contents shouldn't be identical, of the listing when it appears on the results page. The more of these characteristics, the higher it will rank. It also emphasizes the importance of optimization of the listings contents, including the title, description, and photos to improve the ranking. Additionally, it is important to keep the listing up-to-date and provide an excellent guests experience to maintain a high ranking (Everything You Need to Know about the Airbnb Search Algorithm, n.d.)

## SERPs of Tourism in Oman

In this section, we will interpret an observation made on google when we searched “best tourist hotels in Oman”. In the first instance, we notice there are 3 websites sponsored. The term "sponsoring" refers to paying an online publication to promote a website's goods or services(Team, 2022). Following that are websites that are chosen by the google algorithm to be in the rank. We analyzed the first 4 of the websites, which all had the main keywords in the title tag- ‘Oman’, ‘hotels’, and ‘best’, as well as in the meta tag along with more keywords like ‘resort’ and ‘price’. The contents of these websites consists of information relevant to the title and the searched words showcasing the users what they actually wanted, along with properly organized and structured listings of hotels with reviews, pricing and location beside it to make it more accessible and efficient for the users. On the other hand, the websites below in the rank didn't make use of keywords throughout the contents and the contents are not mannerly organized, which didn't lead google to select them to be presented on top. Although, after reviewing all those websites, implantation of SEO is severely less compared to in foreign.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

While the role and usage of SEO, Search Engine Optimization, is by now common practice operated by business in foreign country that has contributed in the success of their website in online platform by engaging more and more organic traffic by ranking higher in the SERP, Search Engine Result Page. Use of on-page SEO and off-page SEO techniques and white-hat and black-hat SEO techniques in tourism websites in Oman can lead to a successful outcome just like in overseas. Moreover it is required to keep the factors, required by the well-established platforms to be in higher rank, in consideration while optimizing the websites, particularly use of keywords in the title tags, alt tags, meta tags and throughout the contents, backlinking, link exchange, and social media marketing. Taking on-page and off-page SEO and white-hat and black-hat SEO into consideration, SEO strategies can be prepared, as such example by Bailyn(2023) in SEO Strategy: 2023 Guide, to achieve success in 2023 and beyond. A strategy diagram( as shown in figure 1) highlighting 5 elements that is applicable to build up websites and to make them flourishing with more organic search.



**Figure 1.** SEO strategy diagram. Note. Bailyn, E. (2023). *SEO Strategy: 2023 Guide*[Image]. <https://firstpagesage.com/seo-blog/seo-strategy-2023-guide/>

The strategies consists of, firstly customers personas referring to selection of correct audience by taking in account of the target's market, their objectives and other attributes, followed by understanding search intent, being aware of reasons behind user's keyword search, and applying the hub and Spoke model, which is practice of systemizing the keywords for easy linking and to establish a straight path to long-tail keywords, and allocating suitable page types, implies to the design, contents, and framework of a page, and finally creating contents that includes direct tone, coherent elements, and visual aids (Bailyn, 2023)

As a lot of tourism websites in Oman are lacking behind in adaptation of SEO for attracting organic search, they could take suggestions and concepts from other websites using SEO and optimize their own tourism websites to develop and flourish with more organic search and clients, consequently advancing the business.

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