

ASSESSMENT OF THE INTERNET AS TOOL FOR TOURISM MARKETING IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *The study was an assessment of the internet as a tool for tourism marketing in Cross River State. The study sought to determine the significant relationship between website and tourism product awareness; and also evaluate the extent social media marketing affect the level of patronage of tourism products in Cross River State. The area of study was Cross River State, while the study frame were tourism stakeholders, tourism managers/staff and both local and international tourists found in the twelve (12) tourism destinations selected for this study. The sample size of the study was 120 and primary data were obtained using a structured questionnaire. The instrument was content-validated, while the Cronbach Alpha coefficient was used to confirm the reliability. Data analysis was done electronically by the use of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 21. Among the findings were that the website marketing did not have any significant relationship on the level of awareness of tourism products in Cross River State. Also, social media marketing did not significantly affect the level of patronage of tourism products in Cross River State. It is then recommended that the website and other internet tools should be efficiently handled preferably by experts to generate and maintain interest and level of patronage of Cross River State's tourism products.*

KEYWORDS: Internet Marketing, Tourism Product Awareness, Website Marketing, Social Media Marketing, Patronage, Tourism Marketing.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a viable factor in the World economy. The rise of travel and tourism has shown significant resilience globally. Despite slow economic growth in advanced economies and geopolitical tensions in some regions, the Travel and Tourism sector still accounts for a large part of the global economy (estimated to be approximately 9% of global GDP or US\$ 7 trillion) and employment, while the number of international travellers continue to increase. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, 2015), the travel & tourism sector is forecast to continue growing at 4% annually—faster than financial services, transport and manufacturing (Crotti and Misrahi, 2015). Meke (2008) notes that over the past six decades, tourism has witnessed progressive growth and diversification which has made it one of the leading, largest and fastest growing economic sectors of the world. For instance, in 2012, tourists from China spent \$102 billion (U.S.) on international travel. According to the UN World Tourism Organization, this figure for the first time ranks China top among spenders in international tourism—ahead of Germany and the United States. International tourists from each of these two countries spent about \$84 billion (U.S.) (Awake!, 2014).

In Nigeria, Tourism has significantly contributed to the nation's development in various ways such as generation of employment opportunities, enhanced brand image, income generation and solving the problem of balance of payment deficit, boosting Gross Domestic Products

and increasing the nation's per capita income (Egbaji, 2007). The World Development Indicators (2002) cited in Esu, Arrey, Basil and Eyo (2011) reports that Nigeria tourism demand growth will be \$3.30 million (U.S.), accounting for 7.70 percent of the world market share and its contribution to job creation, projected at 6.40 percent in the national economy per annum between 2006 and 2015. However, according to the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (2015), the World Economic Forum Opinion Survey rates the effectiveness of Nigeria's marketing to attract tourists at 3.3 out of a 7-point scale (1 being the worst score and 7 being the best score). It is also important to note that Nigeria is ranked 141th position in the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index. Hence, it is obvious that in as much as tourism has assumed an increasing growth potential and is important in the socio-cultural and economic development of Nigeria, there is need for improvement of the effectiveness of tourism marketing in the nation.

Nigeria, the giant of Africa, has enormous tourism potentials and marketable tourism products ranging from diverse species of wildlife and aquatic creatures, appealing sandy beaches, beautiful green vegetation of her mangrove forest, unique cultural dynamics, beautiful hotels and restaurants, enticing parks and very friendly and hospitable people (Egbaji, 2007). Most of these inexhaustible tourism products can be found across the three senatorial districts which comprise of the eighteen local governments in Cross River State. Little wonder it is referred to as the 'Tourism Hub of the Nation'. The state's tourism products consist of wildlife species, mountain climate, alluring hills, fascinating waterfalls, beautiful parks, rich cultural heritage, welcoming hotels, appetizing dishes, Africa's biggest street party- Calabar Carnival, the list is endless as some of these sites are yet to be discovered.

For a state like Cross River full of natural and inexhaustible tourism resources yet with limited industrial capability, it is undeniable that tourism remains a very important source of internally generated revenue (Egbaji, 2007). This gives indication that the tourism products of Cross River State would require effective and sustainable marketing strategy to boost its sales and consumption. It is to this end that this study is poised to assess the internet as a tool for tourism marketing in Cross River State.

Statement of the Problem

Cross River State though described as the tourism hub of the nation, has been experiencing a decline in the contribution of the sector towards the economy. This is not as a result of lack of tourism products such as the sites, festivals etc. Again, the price is affordably fixed such that any class of consumer can derive as much satisfaction as they want from their tourism experience. Also, in each of three senatorial districts of Cross River State, these tourism products are adequately distributed. However, the State's tourism potential has been underdeveloped as there are a relatively large number of sites which have not been visited due to inadequate or lack of promotion, as such, these sites are not generating sufficient revenue for the state. In as much as the products, price and distribution are in order, the promotional strategies pose a challenge, hence, the need for the appraisal of a promotional strategy whose reach extends to the international or global community, and that is internet marketing.

Research Objectives

The broad objective sought was to assess the extent internet could serve as a strategic tool for tourism marketing in Cross River State, Nigeria. The specific objectives were:

- i. To determine the impact of website in promoting tourism products awareness in Cross River State.
- ii. To ascertain the relationship between social media marketing and the level of tourism products patronage in Cross River State.

Research Hypotheses

The following null-hypotheses were tested:

- i. Ho: Website marketing has no significant impact in promoting tourism product awareness in Cross River State, Nigeria.
- ii. Ho: There is no significant relationship between social media marketing and level of patronage of tourism products in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Significance of the Study

This study will be of immense benefit to all the stakeholders of tourism development in Cross River State and Nigeria at large. It will help the Tourism Development Commission, the Tourism Bureau and the government of Cross River State to effectively strategize on the use of the internet to increase the state tourism market reach, enhance communication with existing and potential customers, provide accessible information and develop the state tourism brand image, thus, rejuvenating Cross River's tourism growth potentials and increase its contribution to the economy.

Scope of the Study

The study encompassed the overview of tourism, the tourism potential of Cross River State, tourism products, internet marketing, social media tools, customers' patronage of tourism products, tourism product awareness and the implications on tourism business in general. The study frame consisted of local and international tourists as well as management, staff and indigenes of select destinations in Cross River State, Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study reviews the works of other scholars and relevant sources of information on tourism, the concept of tourism marketing, the concept of internet marketing, advertising, the role of internet in the marketing of tourism destinations and other variables surrounding the internet and tourism marketing.

The Concept of Tourism

The World Tourism Organization says tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal, business or professional purposes. These people are called visitors

(which may be either tourists or excursionists; residents or non-residents) and tourism has to do with their activities, some of which imply tourism expenditure (UNWTO, 2015). Tourism is travel for recreation, leisure, religious, family or business purposes, usually for a limited duration. Tourism is commonly associated with international travel, but may also refer to travel to another place within the same country (Wikipedia, 2015). The World Tourism Organization also defines tourists as people who travel to and stay in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year either for leisure, business and other purposes (UNWTO, 2015).

Tourism is today a very popular global leisure activity and can be domestic or internationalized. International tourism has significant impact and implications on a country's balance of payments. It is a major source of income for many countries, and affects the economy of both the source and host countries, in some cases being of vital importance (Wikipedia, 2015). Despite occasional shocks, tourism has shown virtually uninterrupted growth. International tourist arrivals have increased from 25 million globally in 1950, to 278 million in 1980, 527 million in 1995, and 1133 million in 2014. Likewise, international tourism receipts earned by destinations worldwide have surged from US\$2 billion in 1950 to US\$104 billion in 1980, US\$415 billion in 1995 and US\$1245 billion in 2014 (UNWTO, 2015). This reveals that tourism is a viable and major contributor to the growth of the world economy.

Tourism Marketing

As earlier stated, tourism takes place when an individual (or group) leaves his regular environs where he lives and work to go to another environment to engage in activities there, regardless of the proximity of the desired location. Many tourists choose their destinations based on marketing efforts. That is to say, these destinations must have been promoted to create some sort of awareness to the tourists. Individuals, firms and tourism organizations usually promote these destinations/activities through advertising, publicity, word-of-mouth or other forms of marketing (Johnson, 2015).

According to Johnson (2015) tourism marketing has distinct characteristics from other marketing plans. Since tourists are temporary, they are exposed to an area's goods and services in a short period of time. Due to the fact that tourists are counting on having a good time, it is important that tourism marketing should include marketing strategies that appeal to the emotions, such as treating kids to a memorable experience. Egbaji (2007) noted that tourism marketing employs strategic marketing which entails a process of analyzing market opportunities and choosing such programmes that could support viable business options of tourism stakeholders. To achieve the goal of successfully marketing the existing tourism products, methods of forecasting must be employed. For example, in forecasting the demand for tourist services, first, the existing demand would have to be measured, as well as the number of holiday visits embarked upon, the propensity for such travel and the level of pressure at the various tourist facilities provided at the destination. Next, these figures would have to be broken down in terms of geographical region or market sector also taking into cognizance the estimate of total market (tourists) and the proportion to expect in future (Egbaji, 2007).

Under the Donald Duke's administration in Cross River State of Nigeria, tourism marketing strategies were employed. They included public/private partnership with experts in hospitality business, direct marketing, print advertising (through a bi-monthly magazine known as MOFINEWS), and staff training on tour guiding and computer literacy (Egbaji, 2007). Just as Solimar International (2014) acknowledged, global international tourist arrivals keep rising to one billion each year, and such growth is only expected to keep increasing, hence, opportunities in the tourism industry are endless. Yet, many destinations and tourism businesses fail to achieve success despite existing in a climate that is ripe for tourism. Marketing poses a major part of the problem, but it is also an integral part of the solution.

The Internet and Tourism Marketing

Nyheim, McFadden, and Connolly (2005) defined the Internet as a network which links multiple networks and users around the globe and a network that no one owns outright. The terms, the Web and the Internet, have often been used interchangeably; however, the Web is part of the Internet as a communication tool on the Internet (Nyheim et al., 2005). Additionally, the terms, the Internet and ICTs, are often utilized in parallel; however, rigorously speaking, the Internet is part of ICTs (Buhalis and Jun, 2011). Today's traveller can virtually tour destinations at the touch of a finger, communicate with distant islands on their way to the office and plan customized adventures through simple online platforms. By failing to connect with and captivate this virtual audience, many tourism enterprises are fighting an uphill battle (Solimar International, 2015). Internet marketing – often called online marketing or e-marketing – is essentially any marketing activity that is conducted online through the use of internet technologies. It comprises not only advertising that is shown on websites, but also other kinds of online activities like email and social networking. Every aspect of internet marketing is digital, meaning that it is electronic information that is transmitted on a computer or similar device, though naturally it can tie in with traditional offline advertising and sales too (Jones, Malczyk and Beneke, 2011). Being that tourism is such a big catalyst for growth, it is pertinent that the tourism hub of Nigeria- Cross River State should be constantly imprinted on the minds of potential and existing tourists through internet marketing.

It is true that before consumers of tourism product choose their destinations, the festival to visit or any other tourist attractions, they seek opinions from people and they may find it really helpful to get information from the state's tourism bureau. However, not all tourists (especially non-residents of Cross River State) can readily access the bureau to obtain information or to give feedbacks and this may create a gap between the destinations and the potential tourist (Ufot, 2013). Without the correct combination of tourism marketing strategies, tools, and technology, travel and tourism businesses will not be able to find potential clients, and even more importantly, those potential clients will not be able to find them. Hence, a successful tourism business requires a brand that speaks to its target markets, content that successfully generates potential clients and a level of service that listens to customers' demands, all within ever diminishing budget constraints (Solimar International, 2015).

Today the Internet is one of the most effective communication, information and promotion tools. This promotional channel is designed to inform potential visitors about the tourism products offered, sharing with them the most attractive and innovative attributes. As such it is usually integrated with distribution and implies communication activities, including advertising. Along with the loyalty of customers, the “unstructured” means are the most

affordable, offering higher yields for small businesses at a lower cost. Therefore “invest in quality and save on advertising” is definitely the motto (International Labour Office, 2012). This e-word-of-mouth strategy can be done through the internet using various social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, websites, blogposts and so on. On the other hand, it is important to remember that a greater percentage of new tourists plan and organize their own trips, thanks to the wide availability of information via the internet. Through internet marketing, the State can create awareness for its tourism products, increase its market base, gain traffic from niche conversations held through social networking websites, online discussions, groups and blog comments, and consequently enhance its tourism brand. Additionally, internet marketing serves as a relatively inexpensive platform for the State to implement its tourism marketing campaigns as it is accessible to anyone with internet access (Ufot, 2013). Hence, the internet is a veritable tool for tourism product awareness and patronage.

Empirical Review

Since the emergence of the Internet, travel planning (e.g., travel information search and booking) has always been one of the main reasons that people use the Internet. The top five most popular online purchases were books (66%), clothes (57%), travel arrangements (57%), gifts (51%) and CDs (45%) in the US in 2007 (Center for the Digital Future, 2008). A study conducted in Britain (Dutton & Helsper, 2007) also found that respondents’ most search activity conducted online was making travel plans (84%), followed by getting information about local events (77%), looking for news (69%) and finding information about health or medical care (68%) in 2007. The revolution of the Internet and information and communication technologies (ICTs) has had already profound implications for the tourism industry. A whole system of ICTs and the Internet has been rapidly diffused throughout tourism sectors (Buhalis, 2004; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Poon, 1993; Werthner & Klein, 1999). Subsequently, online travel bookings and associated travel services are recognized as one of the most successful e-commerce implementations, with estimates of sales of \$73.4 billion in 2006 (Turban, King, McKay, Marshall, Lee, and Viehland, 2008). It is evident that e-business is an essential prerequisites for successful organizations in the emerging, globally networked, internet-empowered business environment, especially for the tourism industry. Many tourism-related organizations had to go through a major business processes re-engineering to take advantage of the emerging technologies in order to transform their processes and data handling as well as their ability to operate and to compete in the emerging global marketplace (Laudon & Laudon, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

This work is supported by the Technology Acceptance Model which was developed by Davis (1986). The Technology Acceptance Model postulates that the use of an information system is determined by the behavioral intention, but on the other hand, that the behavioral intention is determined by the person’s attitude towards the use of the system and also by his perception of its utility.

According to Davis, the attitude of an individual is not the only factor that determines his use of a system, but is also based on the impact which it may have on his performance. For example, if an international tourist has heard about the Agbokim Waterfalls and intends to have direct information about the waterfall, it would make more impact if the tourist is able to get clear information about the location, uniqueness as well as pictures of the site. He

would be motivated to visit the destination if he can receive these information at his fingertip or the comfort of his home. The internet can grant the tourist such utility. Therefore, even if the tourist does not welcome an information system, the probability that he will use it is high if he perceives that the system will improve his tourism satisfaction. Besides, the Technology Acceptance Model hypothesizes a direct link between perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. With two systems offering the same features, a user will find more useful the one that he finds easier to use (Dillon and Morris, 1996).

METHODOLOGY

The study employed survey research design. The area of study was Cross River State, Nigeria. Various tourism sites especially major sites can be found in Calabar. The population of the study comprised of tourism stakeholders, tourism managers/staff and tourists (both local and international) in the twelve (12) major tourism destinations in Cross River State. They include Ikom monoliths, the last of the drill monkeys (Afi mountain sanctuary), the Agbokim waterfalls, Kwa falls, Calabar Museum, Brickfield prison wall, Calabar Carnival, Leboku Festival, Marina Resort, Mary Slessor Home Akpap-okoyong, Tinapa and Obudu Mountain Resorts. Ten respondents from each of these sites will form the sample size for this study totaling one-hundred and twenty (120) respondents. The main instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire consisting of four-point likert scale. Simple random sampling was the procedure used to distribute the questionnaire. Content-validation was used for the validity, while Cronbach Alpha coefficient was used to confirm the reliability. Data analysis employed was the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis which was computed electronically by the use of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 21.

Data Analysis

Out of the 120 questionnaires distributed, 102 were accurately completed and returned, while 18 were discarded because they were either not returned or were inaccurately completed. Thus, the response rate of 85% with an error margin of 0.05%. The following are the analysis and interpretation of the field survey for this study:

Reliability Test

Table 1 Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha reliability estimate for the study instrument (n=20)

S/n	Variables	No of items	x	SD	Reliability
1.	Internet marketing	3	4.20	1.15	0.72
2.	Tourism product	3	4.90	1.48	0.83
3.	Level of patronage	3	5.95	1.57	0.89

Test of hypotheses

Ho₁ : Website marketing has no significant impact in promoting tourism product awareness in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Table 2 Pearson Product Moment Correlation for website and tourism product awareness in Cross River State.

		Website_Marketing	Tourism_Product Awareness
Website_Marketing	Pearson Correlation	1	.119
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.233
	N	102	102
Tourism_Product Awareness	Pearson Correlation	.119	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.233	
	N	102	102

Source: Fieldwork, 2016.

The result in Table 2 shows the Pearson Product Moment Correlation of website marketing on tourism product awareness in Cross River State. With r-value of 0.119 and a probability value (0.233) greater than 0.05 significance level, it reveals that there is no significant relationship between website marketing and tourism product awareness in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Ho₂ : There is no significant relationship between social media marketing and level of patronage of tourism products in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Table 3 Pearson Product Moment Correlation for social media marketing and level of patronage of tourism products in Cross River State, Nigeria.

		Internet_Marketing	SNS_Marketing
Internet_Marketing	Pearson Correlation	1	.044
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.658
	N	102	102
SNS_Marketing	Pearson Correlation	.044	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.658	
	N	102	102

Source: Fieldwork, 2015

The result in Table 3 shows the Pearson Product Moment Correlation of social media marketing on level of patronage of tourism products in Cross River State. With r-value of 0.044 and a probability value (0.658) greater than 0.05 significance level, it reveals that there is no significant relationship between social media marketing and level of patronage of tourism products in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

As mentioned above, the study reveals that there is currently no significant relationship between internet marketing (website and social media sites) and tourism product awareness nor on patronage of tourism products in destinations in Cross River State. This is true because

in the course of the research, most of the respondents interviewed confirmed that they learned about the tourist site by word-of-mouth recommendations from friends and got specific information about the tourism products from the locals in the territory rather than from websites. A greater number further stated that they did not join any social network groups on Cross River Tourism. Some who joined the social network group (Facebook fan page) created by Cross River Tourism Bureau explained that they were not motivated to patronize these tourist sites due to irregular updates and delay in responding to messages sent/questions asked about the destinations through the social networking sites such as the Cross River Tourism Facebook fan page. This confirms the result of the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (2015) that the tourism marketing skills of Nigeria is below average, thus, resulting in under-development and slow level of patronage of tourism products. This is largely due to the fact that in addition to the fact that most of the tourism sites are under-developed, the internet is also not adequately utilized in creating awareness and the desired level of interest in the available sites. Laudon & Laudon (2007), noted that many tourism-related organizations will have to go through major business processes re-engineering to take advantage of the emerging technologies in order to transform their processes and data handling as well as their ability to operate and to compete in the emerging global marketplace. This situation is true of tourism organizations in Cross River State.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Tourism in Cross River State has a potential to grow just like any destination in other parts of the world. However, the growth pace of tourism has been painstakingly slow as observed by the World Tourism Organization (2015). The advent of the internet and its application to tourism has proven successful in the marketing of destinations in the developed countries of the world such as USA and even South Africa. This can also prove to be the case in Cross River State, Nigeria. The following recommendations are put forth to ensure that the internet is maximally utilized to unleash the great tourism potentials embedded in Cross River State, the unique tourism zone of Nigeria:

- i. The Government should create an active website and a tourism page/accounts on major social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Whatsapp and so on, and ensure that the page is regularly updated and potential consumers' questions and complaints are quickly and aptly responded to so as to generate and maintain interest.
- ii. Depending on accessibility and knowledge, the state's tourism bureau should explore and use different options (web sites, emails, web advertising) to contact former clients to keep them updated, communicate with travel agencies and publicize on different web pages, among other things.
- iii. The tourism bureau should employ the services of a social media expert who is very knowledgeable and skilled in Search Engine Optimization and able to understand internet statistics which reveals the progress of consumers' interest and helps to generate a database of tourists.
- iv. A periodic report should be sent to the Tourism Bureau on the trend of site visitation as this would help the Marketing Manager to strategize on how to make the

- experience of the tourists a memorable and pleasurable one (that is, consumer satisfaction).
- v. Tourism organizations should offer tourism incentives such as free lunch or discounts on lodging/hotel accommodations rates at the destinations.
 - vi. Finally, the bureau's research department should ensure that progress are regularly monitored and evaluated and try to keep abreast of recent developments in emerging technologies so that existing and potential tourists' interests/patronage can be maintained.

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