

Improving the Tourists' Destination Choice through Web Based Technology use in Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya

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Abstract

The study investigated the effects of web based technology on tourists' destination choice of Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya. It was informed by the classic line of thought and the alternative line of thought models which focuses on Tourist Destination Choice. The research design used was descriptive survey and explanatory which enabled the researcher to gather data from the population. The target population was tourists visiting Maasai Mara National Reserve for the first six months of 2015. The simple random sampling techniques were used to select a sample of 232 tourists. Questionnaires were used to collect the relevant quantitative data, with cronbach alpha being used to determine the reliability of the scales used. The data collected was analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques such as frequencies, mean, and standard deviation and presented using tables and charts. The researcher also used inferential statistics (t-test) and employed a Pearson correlation to show the relationships that exist between the variables. Multiple regressions analysis was also performed to show the causal effect. The coefficients of estimate analysis indicated that Web based technology ($\beta_3 = 0.436$) with a p-value = 0.000 had a significant and positive effect on tourist destination choice. This infers that the use of web based technology enhances the destination choice; for each unit increase in web based technologies, there is up to 0.436 units increase in destination choice. The study will be of great value because it will help the management of Maasai Mara National reserve to improve their destinations by the use of an appropriate Web based technology, besides it will form a base of study for other researchers who may be interested in the same field of study. Again it will help other management of tourism sites to develop an image and engage in marketing strategies in order to create a positive attitude on its customers/tourists to ensure that their destinations are chosen. Also the customers/tourists will be enlightened on various tourists' destination choices by use of an appropriate Web based technology. The study was restricted to Maasai Mara National Reserve, because of the accessibility of the area, lack of enough financial resources and also the limited time. The author recommends the management of the Maasai Mara National Reserve to put more emphasis on tourists' destination choices in order to enhance customer satisfaction. This study would be of significance to service industries as it will point how tourists' destination choice can impact on their tourism site performance.

Keywords: Tourists' destination choice, Web based technology, customer satisfaction, Marketing strategies

Introduction

The global choice of destination according to Henderson (2007) is growing and certain of these destinations have similar characteristics. This gives rise to a situation where one can be replaced by another as the notion of destination choice set implies. The destination is commonly referred to as a place in tourism parlance. Tourist destination choice has been defined as a transformation of motivation in purchasing action (Buhalis, 2000). The destination choice is made by an alternative evaluation based on individual preferences and goals, while the evaluation of tourist product is based on individual evaluative criteria. Factors that influence consumer behavior can be internal and external to the individual. Among the internal determinants are social and personal, while the external ones include confidence in the travel agency, the overall image of alternatives, previous travel experience, travel constraints (time, cost, etc.), degree of perceived risk, etc. Among the major influences of

individual travel behavior are family, reference groups, social classes, culture and subculture that determine an individual's personality, learning, motivation, perception (of alternatives) and attitudes.

Eilat and Einav (2004) add marketing strategy to be one of the factors that influence destination choice, which, according to him, is important for both developed and less-developed countries, while fashion, common border, common language, and distance are also important determinants especially in less-developed countries (Eilat & Einav, 2004).

To understand consumer behavior, it is necessary to examine the complex interaction of many influencing internal and external factors. Moutinho's (1987) study deals with determinants of behaviour, culture and reference group influences, the relationships between individuals and their environments, perceived risks, and family decision processes (Eilat, 2004). Numerous literature studies identify social, cultural, personal, and psychological factors that influence destination choice.

Among the social factors are reference groups, family, roles and status. Reference groups - family, religion, ethnic groups, trade union, neighborhood etc. - can be classified by primary personal contact with a group and secondary occasionally, formal trade union and informal neighborhood. Personal factors include age, life cycle stage, occupation, economic circumstances, lifestyle and personality (Bonn *et al.*, 2005).

Psychological factors are perhaps the most complex and difficult to understand and consist of motivation (theories of human motivation: Marshall, Freud, Veblen, Herzberg, Maslow), perception, learning, beliefs and attitudes. Another important determinant of tourist's behaviour towards destinations and services is the tourist's self-image – what a person thinks he or she is and what a person wants to be. There is a relationship between self-image and product image that determines tourist's behavior towards destinations and services. Perception and cognition influence the evaluation and judgmental process. Attitude and intention, created by learning and experience are other important concepts in tourists' behavior discussions (Bonn *et al.*, 2005).

The importance of previous travel experience in the destination choice has got wide discussions between the researchers. Many of them consider previous experience on the destination to be a significant factor in the destination choice process. The relationship between tourists' choice of behavioral attributes and destination loyalty has been investigated by a more recent study of Chen and Gursoy (2001). According to them the influence of past travel behaviour on destination choice and destination loyalty are not significant, however tourists with more travel experiences tend to be more confident about the destination they selected (Ghen and Gursoy, 2001).

Web based technologies and tourist destination choice.

The internet contains market data in the form of advertising messages associated with search, entertainment, and general information sites and Internet Presence Sites (IPS) also called home pages. A home page is a Web site created and maintained by organizations (enterprises, government agencies, altruist organizations, cultural organizations, etc.) or individuals that provide detailed product and organizational data. The presence of a Web address in an advertisement enhances a variety of aspects of the firm's image, including being customer-oriented, responsive, sophisticated, and successful (Mothersbaugh & Best, 2010).

Also, into the Web pages, banner ads are a very important promotion tool. Banner ads represent today a powerful mean to lead consumers to the company or product home page. In the tourism industry, the banners ads play a very important role connecting travelers with thousands of websites of travel agencies, hotels,

transportation companies, restaurants, car rental companies, etc. and, maybe more important, with thousands of tourist destination sites available to be chosen (Hawkins, 2010).

In this context, tourist destination managers must visualize major decisions concerning the use of the internet. In effect, they must decide to create or not a Web site to promote their travel destination. Having a destination Web site, they need to decide if the site should be active or passive. A passive Web site focused on providing only specific information about a tourist destination whereas an active Web site allows the destination managers to develop a relationship with visitors over time and provide them with additional information related to the site facilities and other tourist attractions and services. However, no matter if a Web site is active or passive; it needs to be easy to access, up-to-date, logical and oriented to travel needs. The more complete and interactive the Web site, the more effective and useful it will be for marketing and commercial purposes (Choi, 2007).

The term Web 2.0 refers to the second generation of web-based services that allow people to collaborate and share information online in previously unavailable ways. Thus, Web 2.0 enables any traveler to post their own content, opinions, videos, audio, or imagery to the web for other travelers to see and respond to. Web 2.0 includes the ability to integrate information in new forms, the desire to harness distributed knowledge, and the need to engage users as co-developers (Cox, Burges, Sellitto & Buultjens, 2009).

In a study realized by Gretzel (2007) about the impact of on-line travel reviews on consumers, results reveal that looking at other consumers' comments/materials on online travel review sites' was the most frequently used source of information. Indeed, Hyung-Park, Lee & Hang (2007) establish that online consumer reviews are often considered more trustworthy and credible than information which is provided by suppliers of products and services, presumably because consumers provide more trustworthy information.

As potential travelers increasingly visit tourist websites, their expectations for easily accessed and useful information shown in an entertaining format will increase. Consumer characteristics of travelers affect perceptions about the benefits and search costs of use websites. A satisfying experience with a particular destination increases the probability of a repeat choice of this destination. In contrast, a negative travel experience decreases the likelihood of travel to the same place and/or choice a similar destination. Travelers who are highly involved with a destination category normally seek information relevant to the destination category on an ongoing basis. This ongoing search reduces the need for another kind of search before a choice. Research has demonstrated that tourists use different types of online information sources depending on where they are in the travel planning process—that is the pre-trip, during the trip and post-trip stages (Choi, Letho & O'Leary, 2007; Seabra, Abrantes & Lages, 2007).

However, other studies have found that consumer purchase behavior is occasionally impulsive. Regarding how travelers make destinations choices, they can follow a sequential process based on attributes or on attitudes about alternative places to be considered. Attribute-based choice required the knowledge of specific and distinctive attributes of each place and attribute-by-attribute comparison across places. On the other hand, the attitude-based choice involves only the use of general attitudes, impressions and intuitions about places without making comparisons.

In the field of tourism, it is extremely important for destination managers to understand how travelers search for and review information at the various stages of their travel decision making process (Letho & O'Leary, 2007). Research has demonstrated that the meaning of the product is one of the variables that predict searching and buying behavior. Meaning is derived from the practical utility of the product and is intrinsically linked to its convenience, efficiency, and the exchange value perse (Vaz & Pérez-Nebra, 2007).

The symbolic meaning is the result of social experiences, which lead to the subjective categorization of the product, by means of social institutions, communication systems, and the culture of a society. Basic human values have a direct influence on consumer choice when individuals evaluate the symbolic meaning of service, and therefore make an affective judgment about it. In the field of tourism, research has found that tangible and abstract attributes of tourist sites influence destination choice behavior. These attributes can be considered by tourists as symbolic meanings of places affecting their destination choice process (Klenoski, 2002).

Jeng & Fesenmaier (2002) note that travelers generally collect and review various forms of travel information early in the travel decision making process in order to minimize the risk of making a poor destination decision. Pan and Fesenmaier (2006) note that travel consumers tend to seek information related to 10 key sub decisions regarding the trip-travel partners: the destination; expenditure required; activities; travel dates; attractions to visit; transportation providers; length of the trip; rest stops; and food stops. The central role that individual consumers have in submitting, reviewing, and responding to online content is reflected in terms such as user-generated content (UGC) or consumer-generated media (CGM) that are commonly used for Web 2.0 (Gretzel, 2006, 2007). In marketing terms, UGC sites are effectively a form of the consumer to consumer e-marketing. They equate to electronic word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing, whereby somebody who has an opinion about a product or service shares their views, beliefs, and experiences with other people (Ahuja, Michels, Walker & Weissbuch, 2007).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted at Maasai Mara National Reserve in Narok County. The research design used was descriptive survey and explanatory which enabled the researcher to gather data from the population. The target population was tourists visiting Maasai Mara National Reserve for the first six months of 2015. The simple random sampling techniques were used to select a sample of 206 tourists. The respondents were randomly selected after considering factors such as accessibility and the significance of the study information to the researcher. Therefore, the target population provided the required sample size for the study. Questionnaires were used to collect the relevant quantitative data, with cronbach alpha being used to determine the reliability of the scales used. The data collected was analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques such as frequencies, mean, and standard deviation and presented using tables and charts. The researcher also used inferential statistics (t-test) and employed a Pearson correlation to show the relationships that exist between the variables. Multiple regressions analysis was also performed to show the causal effect.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Web Based Technologies and Tourist Destination Choice

Items related to web based technology with tourist destination choice, in both strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree incidents, were eventually arranged into four categories: (1) use of web based tourism marketing because of its online booking options; (2) use of web based technologies because it displays destination photos on the web; (3) use of web based tourism marketing since they are able to share files with others online, and (4) search tourism sites using web based technology because they provide price ratings and reviews. The number of respondents in which a particular item on customer satisfaction was involved is as reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Web based technologies at Maasai Mara National Reserve

		SD	D	U	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev.
I use web based tourism marketing because of its online booking options	Freq.	0	1	17	109	79	4.29	0.634
	%	0	0.5	8.3	52.9	38.3		
I use we based technologies because it displays destination photos on the web	Freq.	7	9	126	28	36	3.37	0.938
	%	3.4	4.4	61.2	13.6	17.5		
I prefer web based tourism marketing since they are able to share files with others online	Freq.	0	1	79	95	31	3.76	0.705
	%	0	0.5	38.3	46.1	15		
I search for tourism sites using web based technology because they provide price ratings and reviews	Freq.	4	0	116	39	47	3.61	0.903
	%	1.9	0	56.3	18.9	22.8		
Web based technologies							3.76	0.526

Source: Survey Data, 2017

In relation to whether the tourists use web based tourism marketing because of its online booking options, the results were positive with 38.3% (79) of the respondents in strong agreement, 52.9% (109) in agreement, 0.5% (1) disagreement while 8.3% (17) of them were neutral. The item realized a mean of 4.29 and a standard deviation of 0.634. From the foregoing, it can be deduced that tourists use web based tourism marketing because of its online booking options.

In a bid to establish if the respondents use web based technologies because it displays destination photos on the web, the respondents were asked to respond accordingly and the results were such that 17.5% (36) of the respondents strongly agreed, 13.6% (28) agreed, 4.4% (9) disagreed, 3.4% (7) strongly disagreed and 61.2% (126) of the respondents were neutral. The item realized a mean of 3.37 and a standard deviation of 0.938. The results indicate that the respondents are not sure whether the presence of destination photos on the web is the reason as to why they use web based technologies.

To establish whether the respondents prefer web based tourism marketing since they are able to share files with others online, respondents were requested for their opinion and the results were such that, 15% (31) of the respondents strongly agreed, 46.1% (95) agreed, 0.5% (1) disagreed while 38.3% (79) of the respondents were neutral. The results summed up to a mean of 3.76 and a standard deviation of 0.705 meaning that there is a preference towards web based tourism marketing because of the ability to share files with others online.

In order to ascertain whether the respondents search tourism sites using web based technology because they provide price ratings and reviews, results revealed that, 22.8% (47) of them strongly agreed, 18.9% (39) of them agreed, 1.9% (4) of them strongly disagreed and 56.3% (116) of the respondents were neutral. This summed up to a mean of 3.61 and a standard deviation of 0.903. However, the majority of the respondents were not sure if they use web based technologies since it gives them a platform whereby they can check price ratings and reviews. This indicates that tourists have not fully utilized web based technologies.

The results on web based technologies summed up to a mean of 3.76 and a standard deviation of 0.526. This infers that the respondents were agreeable on the items in web based technologies. Besides, the standard deviation was indicative of less variation in the responses.

Tourist Destination Choice

Tourist destination choice as a result of using web based technology was captured through three items namely: (1) it was easier for me to choose Maasai Mara; (2) am satisfied with the choice I made to come here, and (3) I intend to visit the national reserve again. Table 2 presents the customers' responses.

Table 2: Tourist destination choice as a result of WBT at Maasai Mara National Reserve.

		SD	D	U	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev.
It was easier for me to choose Maasai Mara	Freq.	1	1	55	79	70	4.05	0.819
	%	0.5	0.5	26.7	38.3	34		
Am satisfied with the choice I made to come here	Freq.	0	2	102	54	48	3.72	0.831
	%	0	1	49.5	26.2	23.3		
I intend to visit the national reserve again	Freq.	6	109	91			4.41	0.55
	%	2.9	52.9	44.2				
Tourist destination choice							4.0599	0.56662

Source: Survey Data, 2017

The study sought to find out if it was easier for the tourists to choose Maasai Mara. Results indicated that 34% (70) of the respondents strongly agreed, 38.3% (79) of them agreed, 0.5% (1) disagreed, 0.5% (1) strongly disagreed while 26.7% (55) of the respondents were neutral. The results summed up to a mean of 4.05 and a standard deviation of 0.819. This means that it was easier for the tourist to choose Maasai. This could be because there was sufficient information on the destination choice in web based technologies and that the tourism marketing campaigns were also effective in marketing the destination.

In a bid to establish whether the respondents were satisfied with the choice they made on visiting Maasai Mara, the respondents' were asked to respond accordingly. 23.3% (48) of the respondents strongly agreed, 26.2% (54) of them agreed, 1% (2) disagreed and 49.5% (102) of the respondents were neutral. The item realized a mean of 3.72 and a standard deviation of 0.831. The results imply that most (49.5%) of the respondents were satisfied with the choice of visiting Maasai Mara. It could be that their expectations of the destination choice were met.

In order to find out if the respondents intend to visit the national reserve again, the respondents were asked for their views on this and the results showed that the item realized a mean of 4.41 and a standard deviation of 0.55. This means that the tourists enjoy their visit to Maasai Mara and they intend to visit the national reserve again.

In general, the results on the destination choice summed up to a mean of 4.0599 and a standard deviation of 0.56662 indicating that the respondents were agreeable. The standard is less than 1 hence there were fewer variations in the responses.

The study exhibited a medium relationship between web based technologies and destination choice ($r = 0.456$, $p\text{-value} < .01$). Web based technologies had coefficients of estimate which was significant basing on $\beta_3 = 0.436$ ($p\text{-value} = 0.000$) and $t\text{-test value} = 8.737$. This means that there was significance between tourist destination choice through web based technologies.

Discussion

Most findings revealed that web based technology has a positive and significant effect on destination choice ($\beta_3 = 0.436$). Consistently, Hawkins (2010) elucidated that banner ad in web pages is an important promotional tool since they connect travelers with thousands of websites of travel agencies, hotels, transportation companies among others. Also, Mothersbaugh & Best (2010) espoused that the presence of a web address in an

advertisement enhances a variety of aspects of the firm's which include being customer-oriented, responsive, sophisticated, and successful. Furthermore, Jeng & Fesenmaier (2002) note that travelers make use of web based technology to collect and review various forms of travel information early in the travel decision making process in order to reduce the risk of making poor destination choices. From the foregoing, it is evident that web based technologies are effective in relaying information on the destination. From such information, tourists can make the decision about whether to visit or not visit a particular destination.

Conclusion

Through the websites, tourists are able to get most of their destination information. This has been made possible by web based technologies that display destination photos on the web. Web based technologies provide online booking options for tourists. However, web based technologies have not been fully utilized in terms of checking price ratings and reviews. In light of this, tourists need to be made aware of the array of benefits that web technology can offer.

Recommendation

Web based technologies are effective in providing tourists with the information they require, be it the pricing or even images of the destination. The tourists therefore need to make full use of web based technologies for booking options, price ratings and reviews as well as to check the photos of the destination. Moreover, the web based technologies need to be easy to access, up-to-date, logical and oriented to travel needs.

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- ## Appendix

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Source; Google maps (2017)