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The Relationship Between Internet Usage and the Search for Tourist Destinations: A Case of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The boom in technology and information technology has impacted the business world since the late '80s when the Internet began to penetrate the lives of millions of users around the globe. This research study investigates the relationship between internet usage and the search behavior of individuals when exploring and selecting tourist destinations. With the advent of the internet, individuals now have unprecedented access to information and resources that influence their decision-making process. Understanding how internet usage impacts the search behavior of individuals in the context of tourist destination selection is of great importance for tourism industry stakeholders and policymakers. Furthermore, the study explores the advantages and disadvantages of using the internet for destination search and compares the search behavior and destination preferences of individuals relying heavily on internet sources with those primarily utilizing offline sources.

The study employed a survey research design. A structured questionnaire was designed to gather quantitative data on internet usage patterns and search behavior related to tourist destinations. The questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 222 Redeemer's University, Nigeria, by randomly selecting both genders. Both the primary and secondary data were used for this study. A questionnaire was designed to collect primary data. The chi-square method was used to test the hypotheses and analyze the data gathered through the questionnaire. The findings provide valuable insights for tourism businesses and destination marketing organizations, enabling them to develop effective strategies that cater to modern travelers' evolving needs and preferences. Additionally, the research contributes to the existing literature on destination choice and offers practical recommendations for enhancing online destination marketing and information dissemination. By comprehending the relationship between internet usage and the search for tourist destinations, this study contributes to adapting to the changing landscape of the tourism industry. The findings have implications for destination marketing and management, allowing for more targeted and personalized approaches to meet the demands of contemporary travelers.

Keywords: Internet, Tourism, Destination, tourists

INTRODUCTION

The Internet's widespread availability has significantly transformed how individuals search for and select tourist destinations. Before the widespread use of tourism websites, individuals seeking travel information relied on various offline sources such as friends or relatives, highway welcome centers, automobile clubs, brochures, guidebooks, magazines, newspapers, local tourist offices, and travel agencies (Xian-Hao Xu et al., 2012). Fodness & Murray (1999) highlighted that factor such as the decision-making process, composition of the traveling party, purpose of the trip, mode of travel, and socio-economic status of the tourist influenced their information search strategies, which in turn impacted their length of stay, number of destinations and attractions visited, and travel-related expenditures.

With the advent of the internet, tourism websites have emerged as powerful information sources for travelers. Evidence shows that websites like www.arkansas.com successfully converted a significant portion of site visitors into actual visitors to the destination (McLemore & Mitchell, 2001). However, despite the increasing reliance on the Internet for information, many travelers remain hesitant to book online due to concerns about secure payment methods, a lack of confidence in technology, and a preference for personalized services and human interaction (Lang, 2000).

Tourism websites have become vital in promoting and marketing destinations in the era of Internet development (Doolin et al., 2002). It is commonly assumed that the more functional and informative a tourism website is, the greater the number of users it attracts, leading to increased intention to visit the destination. Skadberg, Skadberg, and Kimmel (2004, 2005) empirically demonstrated that visitors' positive flow experience while browsing a tourism website could influence their attitudes and behaviors, including seeking more information, revisiting the website, and ultimately visiting the destination. Exposure to an official tourism website can also help reduce perceived risks associated with the destination (Lepp et al., 2011).

However, conflicting findings exist in the literature. Luo, Feng, and Cai (2005) found no significant differences in destination perceptions between online tourists and those relying on other information sources. Kao, Louvieris, Powell-Perry, and Buhalis (2005) demonstrated that while satisfaction with a

destination website positively correlated with intentions to reuse and recommend the website, it did not influence the intention to visit the destination. Kaplanidou and Vogt (2006) even revealed that previous visits to a destination website negatively influenced intentions to travel to the destination, suggesting that in some cases, people may prefer visiting the virtual destination online rather than the actual destination.

Given these contradictory results, further research is necessary to explore the underlying mechanisms of how tourism websites influence individuals' travel intentions (Xian-Hao Xu et al., 2012). Understanding the dynamics between tourism websites and travelers' decision-making processes is crucial for destination marketers and researchers to develop effective strategies that cater to the needs and preferences of modern travelers. This research aims to investigate the relationship between internet usage and the search behavior of individuals when seeking information about potential tourist destinations. This study seeks valuable insights for tourism industry stakeholders and policymakers by examining how internet usage influences decision-making.

THE INTERNET

The internet is a transformative innovation that has revolutionized business operations across industries. Businesses are leveraging their power to communicate with customers, suppliers, and partners, share product information, conduct transactions, and perform various daily functions (Chitu Okoli, 2007). The emergence of the internet, coupled with advanced computer and telecommunication technology, has effectively connected the world, creating a global village (Kent, 1994). This vast network of computer systems, known as the Internet, enables users to access a wealth of information and engage in direct communication on a global scale (Gates, 1999).

The utilization of the Internet is rapidly increasing, with the International Telecommunication Union predicting that 2 billion people will be online by the end of 2010 (2009). The travel and tourism industry has quickly recognized the Internet's potential as a powerful tool for promoting and expanding opportunities through e-commerce (Bishal, 2010). The advantages of using the Internet in the tourism sector are numerous, including easy access to destinations, price comparisons, search capabilities for popular destinations, and information that generates income for individuals worldwide (Bishal, 2010). Moreover, the Internet provides organizations unparalleled visibility and promotional opportunities (Senn, 2000).

In travel decision-making, the Internet is crucial in reducing the risks associated with holiday purchases by providing travelers with extensive information (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005). Access to accurate destination information enhances travelers' confidence and facilitates informed decision-making, ultimately enhancing the quality of their trips (Gretzel et al., 2007). The Internet, information, and communication technologies have democratized access to information and purchasing opportunities, eliminating the need for intermediaries (Buhalis and Jun, 2007).

For tourism organizations, the Internet presents many opportunities to develop and offer new services and products at a reduced cost (Pierpaolo Singer et al., 2010). It also enhances tourist services, enabling seamless access to information, bookings, and communication with service providers (Saleh Alqatan et al., 2011). The Internet has become integral to critical functions within the tourism and hospitality industry, bringing about significant changes and enabling the expansion, rapid data transfer, and flexibility (Raza, 2006).

In the tourism business, integrating various booking systems into travel agencies, hotel chains, airlines, and other entities has streamlined operations and reduced organizational and distribution costs (Dobre, 2005). Furthermore, the Internet has facilitated high-quality market research and competitive analysis, allowing businesses to stay abreast of industry trends and developments (Ivica Batinić, 2013).

TOURISM IN NIGERIA

Tourism encompasses the interactions and relationships among tourists, tourism suppliers, host governments, local communities, and other stakeholders involved in attracting and accommodating visitors. It comprises a range of activities, services, and businesses that contribute to the overall travel experience, including transportation, accommodation, dining, shopping, entertainment, and other hospitality services for individuals or groups away from their usual environment (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2003). The World Tourism Organization (WTO, 1991) defines tourism as the activities of individuals traveling and staying outside their usual surroundings for a period not exceeding one year, for purposes such as recreation, business, and other reasons. In response to the decline in oil revenue and the impact of the global financial crisis, the Nigerian government has identified the tourism sector as a priority for economic diversification and growth. It is considered a crucial sector for the country's economic survival, as outlined in the government's seven-point economic growth agenda and its 2020 program for sustainable economic development (NTDC, 2010). The government aims to position the tourism sector as a significant source of revenue generation (NTDC, 2010).

The history of tourist attractions in Nigeria can be traced back to the 1920s when foreign geologists and archaeologists discovered ancient terra-cotta artifacts related to the Nok culture (Esuola, 2009). However, organized tourism in the country began in 1962 with the establishment of the Nigerian Tourist Association by a group of tourism practitioners (NBS, 2010). This led to Nigeria's admission into the International Union of Official Travel Organizations (IUOTO), now known as the World Tourism Organization (WTO), in 1964 (Esuola, 2009). The Nigerian government subsequently placed tourism under the purview of the Federal Ministry of Commerce and Tourism. The Department of Tourism was established through statutory acts and amendments in 1989 (FMI, 1999), and in 1976, the Nigerian Tourist Board was created under decree 54 of August 8, 1976, by then Head of State General Olusegun Obasanjo (FMI, 1999).

ONLINE TOURISM REVIEWS AND TOURIST DECISION

Consumers voluntarily write online tourism reviews on various online platforms such as travel blogs, review websites, and online communities. These reviews serve as consumer-generated content and play a significant role in electronic word-of-mouth (WOM). They provide valuable insights into tourists' experiences, perceptions, and evaluations of tourist destinations, companies, and services. As Crotts, Mason, and Davis (2009) suggest, online tourism reviews reflect a firm's competitive position in satisfying guests.

Due to the intangible nature of tourism products and the challenge of evaluating them before consumption, word-of-mouth strongly influences travel decisions (Doong, Law, & Wang, 2009; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Online travel reviews have become increasingly accessible and are commonly used to inform travel-related decisions, especially regarding accommodation choices (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). These reviews significantly impact hotel sales, with studies showing that they can vary based on factors such as gender and age (Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009; Gretzel et al., 2008). Consumers are often more influenced by early negative information, mainly when the overall reviews are negative. However, positively framed information accompanied by specific numerical ratings enhances booking intentions and consumer trust (Sparks & Browning, 2011). The process of WOM communication involves motivations for contribution, the source of WOM, mediating variables of the originators, mediating variables of the listeners, and the outcomes of WOM. Each of these aspects calls for further research in the context of the hospitality and tourism industry (Litvin et al., 2008).

METHOD

For this study, both primary and secondary data were collected. The primary data was gathered through a questionnaire designed specifically for this research, while the secondary data was obtained from various sources such as journals, textbooks, reviews, and articles. The questionnaire consisted of two types of questions: open-ended and close-ended. Open-ended questions allowed respondents to express themselves and provide their own answers freely. On the other hand, close-ended questions provided respondents with predefined options to choose from when answering.

To ensure the reliability of the data, the questionnaires were personally administered and collected by the researcher. This approach aimed to obtain honest and well-considered responses from the participants. Convenience sampling was employed to distribute the 222 questionnaires among Redeemer's University students in Ede, Osun State, Nigeria. This sampling method was chosen for its practicality and accessibility. The chi-square statistical analysis method was utilized to test the hypotheses and address the research questions. This method helped assess the effects of online travel booking on tourism development in Nigeria. The chi-square was calculated using the appropriate formula, which was not explicitly provided in the given text.

$$X^2 = \sum \frac{(o - e)^2}{e}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Df} = \text{Degree of Freedom} &= (R - 1) (C - 1) \\ &= (5 - 1) (2 - 1) \\ &= (4) (1) \\ &= 4 \end{aligned}$$

Where:

X² = Chi – Square

O = Observed Frequency

Df = Degree of Freedom

H₀ = Null Hypothesis

H₁ = Alternative Hypothesis

R = Rows

C = Columns

RESULTS

A total of 222 questionnaires were distributed, and 200 were retrieved. The objective was to investigate how the use of mobile devices impacts travel bookings in Nigeria. To begin, respondents were asked about their frequency of internet usage for travel. Out of the total respondents, 90 individuals (45%) reported always using the internet, 60 (30%) indicated most times, 10 (5%) said sometimes, 30 (15%) replied rarely, and 10 (5%) stated never. It can be inferred that the majority of respondents, comprising 150 individuals (75%), use the internet frequently for travel-related purposes, whether always, most times, or sometimes.

Subsequently, participants were queried about their usage of mobile devices for internet activities, particularly for travel. The collected data revealed that 140 respondents (70%) always use mobile devices for travel plans and bookings, 20 (10%) do so most times, 20 (10%) use them sometimes, 10 (5%) rarely utilize mobile devices, and 10 (5%) never use them. Consequently, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents rely on their mobile devices for making travel plans and bookings, encompassing both information sourcing and actual booking of travel services.

Moreover, the data analysis indicated that a significant number of people depend on information obtained from social media, including travel-related information. The results showed that 100 respondents (50%) strongly agree, 40 (10%) agree, 20 (10%) are undecided, 10 (5%) disagree, and 30 (15%) strongly disagree with the statement that travel-related information provided on social media is more trustworthy than mass media advertising (such as TV, radio, and billboards) and travel agents.

Furthermore, a test was conducted to examine the significant relationship between the usage of mobile devices and travel bookings, as well as the relationship between social media and tourists' behavior. The following tables present the analysis and interpretation of these findings.

Table 1 Relationship Between the usage of internet and search for tourist destination

	Observed (O)	Expected (E)	Residual (O - E)	(O - E) ²	X ² = (O - E) ² / E
Strongly Agree	110	40.0	70.0	4900	122.5
Agree	70	40.0	30.0	400	10.0
Undecided	10	40.0	-30.0	900	22.5
Disagree	10	40.0	-30.0	900	22.5
Strongly Disagree	10	40.0	-30.0	900	22.5
TOTAL	200				200.00

Source: Chi square Analysis of Responses from 4.1

X² (Chi-Square) = 200

Df = Degree of Freedom = (R - 1) (C - 1)

R = Rows

C = Columns

Df = Degree of Freedom = (R - 1) (C - 1)

$$= (5 - 1) (2 - 1)$$

$$= (4) (1)$$

$$= 4$$

The table provided includes information about views recorded for different categories, such as SA (Strongly Agree), A (Agree), U (Undecided), D (Disagree), and SD (Strongly Disagree). The "Observed" column displays the actual number of views for each category, while the "Expected" column shows the expected number of views assuming an equal distribution among the categories. The "Residual" column represents the difference between the observed and expected values (O - E), and the "(O - E)²" column displays the squared value of the residuals. The "X² = (O - E)²/E" column shows the chi-square value calculated for each category.

In the SA category (Strongly Agree), there were 110 observed views, significantly higher than the expected value of 40. This indicates a strong preference for the SA category, with a residual of 70, signifying a substantial deviation from the expected value. For the A category (Agree), there were 70 observed views, which aligns with the expected value of 40. This suggests that the actual number of views corresponds to the expected distribution, with a residual of 30 indicating a slight deviation. In the U category (Undecided), only 10 views were observed, much lower than the expected value of 40. This implies a lower preference for the Undecided category, with a residual of -30 representing a significant deviation from the expected value. Both the D (Disagree) and SD (Strongly Disagree) categories had 10 observed views each, reflecting an equal distribution between the two. The residuals for both categories are -30, indicating a significant deviation from the expected values.

The overall chi-square value (X²) calculated is 200.00, indicating a significant deviation from the expected distribution across all categories. This suggests a relationship between the views and the analyzed categories. Furthermore, by comparing the calculated chi-square value with the theoretical value for a degree of freedom of 4 at a 95% significance level (reading 9.488 against 4), which is 9.488, we can make a conclusion. Since the calculated chi-square value is greater than the theoretical value (9.488), the alternative hypothesis (There is a significant relationship between internet penetration and the search for tourist destinations) is accepted, and the null hypothesis is rejected.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the relationship between internet usage and the search for tourist destinations is crucial for adapting to the changing landscape of the tourism industry. This research aims to shed light on the impact of internet usage on individuals' search behavior, ultimately contributing to the development of more targeted and personalized approaches in destination marketing and management.

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BIOGRAPHY

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