



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal Homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Strategic Barriers Hindering the Effectiveness of Digital Marketing in Promoting Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) Tourism in Zanzibar

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ABSTRACT

The study focused on assessing strategic barriers influencing digital marketing effectiveness and evaluating the contribution of digital marketing to MICE tourism promotion. A quantitative research approach was adopted, using questionnaires administered to tourism stakeholders involved in MICE tourism activities in Zanzibar. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, standard deviation and mean scores. These barriers included the lack of clear digital marketing strategies, poor implementation of online marketing initiatives, limited strategic planning, inadequate use of market research and data analysis, and weak collaboration among tourism stakeholders. The findings indicate that these challenges can limit the ability of tourism stakeholders to effectively use digital platforms to reach target markets and promote Zanzibar as a MICE destination. The study concludes that enhancing digital marketing effectiveness requires strengthening digital infrastructure, developing clear marketing strategies, improving organizational capacity, promoting stakeholder collaboration and investing in digital skills. Addressing these barriers will enable Zanzibar to maximize the benefits of digital marketing and improve its competitiveness as a MICE tourism destination.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, MICE Tourism, Strategic Barriers, Zanzibar

1. Introduction

Digital marketing, refers to a technology driven marketing approach that uses Internet based Platforms and digital communication tools to Create awareness engagement and transactions between organisations and their target audience (Chaffey et al., 2019; Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2017) unlike a traditional marketing Channels such as print media, Television or radio digital marketing, enable real time interaction Personalize communication data tracking and performance measurement.

Internationally the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) tourism, has emerged as a significant contributor to tourism revenues (Rojas Bueno, Alarcon Urbistondo et al, 2020). Note that MICE tourism generates higher spending per visitor and helps reduce seasonality compared to leisure tourism, destinations such as Japan and Finland, have shown that effective digital marketing increases visibility attracts international meetings and drives growth in the MICE sector Kang, Lee, Kim and Jeong (2024). Argue that competitive MICE destinations use digital platforms to maintain international appeal

At the regional level within the East African Community (EAC), EAC member states have emphasized digital marketing as part of their tourism development strategies. It emphasizes that coordinated digital campaigns are essential to increase competitiveness and attract international meetings. The presence of digital marketing initiatives does not guarantee high online visibility, good content quality and strong coordination among tourism stakeholders for many regional tourism destinations (Hassan & Soliman, 2021). This is reflected in limited use of website and social media, ageing or poor tourism content and poor collaboration between hotels, event organizers, tour operators and tourism authorities in promoting tourism.

Tourism remains a significant contributor to economic growth in Tanzania and Zanzibar is known to be a major tourism destination. A strong digital marketing presence is essential to raising the profile of Zanzibar's tourism products and enhancing the ability of MICE stakeholders to target domestic and international clients. According to Lugata (2022), the tourism sector has the capacity to diversify tourism products and increase revenue generation. Digital marketing can tap this potential to market MICE products like conference venues, meeting facilities, incentive activities and exhibition services to wider markets. Digital marketing is a priority for enhancing competitiveness of the tourism sector according to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism (MNRT, 2021). The effectiveness of this priority depends on whether tourism organisations have adequate financial resources, digital skills, technological infrastructure and appropriate marketing strategies

The effective use of digital marketing in MICE tourism, although increasingly important, remains a challenge for many developing destinations. The main obstacles are the low level of digital proficiency, limitations of financial resources, inadequate technological infrastructure, lack of institutional

support and the limited ability of tourism stakeholders to implement digital marketing strategies (EAC, 2021; Abate, 2024; Hassan & Soliman, 2021). The limited adoption of online marketing tools by tourism businesses in Zanzibar, coupled with low digital proficiency and financial limitations, continues to affect the effectiveness of digital tourism promotion (Muhammed, 2024). While past research has explored the issues of digital marketing in Zanzibar, little research has been done on how these barriers impact the promotion of MICE tourism.

Without addressing these barriers, Zanzibar will not obtain the full benefits of the growing opportunities in MICE tourism, including an increase in international events, investment, destination visibility and tourism revenue. Thus, this study aims to investigate the challenges faced by effective digital marketing to promote MICE tourism in Zanzibar with a view to providing pragmatic recommendations to improve digital marketing practices and enhance Zanzibar's competitiveness as a MICE tourism destination.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical review

This study adopted Technology, Organisation and Environment (TOE) theory that developed by Tornatzky and Fleischer (1990) in their book *Technology Innovation Processes* introduced the Technology, Organisation and Environment (TOE) framework the key concept is that the adoption and effectiveness of technological innovation depend on three contexts: the technological, organisational and environmental context. This framework explains why stakeholders struggle to attract and manage business events effectively. It also identifies areas for intervention, such as improving ICT skills, organisational planning, and collaboration. Overall, the TOE framework provides a solid theoretical foundation for understanding the barriers to digital marketing in the Zanzibar MICE industry

2.2 Empirical Literature Review

Kshetri et al. (2024) conceptualised strategic barriers as obstacles arising from inadequate strategic direction, planning, implementation, research, and coordination that hinder organisations from effectively using digital technologies to achieve their objectives. Based on this perspective, the present study considers strategic barriers as strategic-level constraints that limit the effective use of digital marketing in promoting MICE tourism in Zanzibar. The study focuses specifically on weaknesses in digital marketing strategy, implementation of online marketing initiatives, market research and data analysis, long-term strategic planning, and collaboration among tourism stakeholders.

Abate (2024) described the strategic barriers like weak digital infrastructure, limited technical expertise, and poor implementation of digital marketing strategies as obstacles to effective digital marketing in tourism. The study found that these barriers reduce marketing performance and limit destinations' ability to attract business events. The findings indicate that developing digital marketing strategies alone may not produce effective outcomes when tourism organisations lack the infrastructure, skills, and capacity required for implementation. Magdy and Abouelazm (2024) identified inadequate strategic planning, low technological investment, and limited digital skills as obstacles to digital marketing and digital transformation in the MICE sector. These barriers restrict the effective use of digital technologies for marketing and promotion and may consequently affect the online visibility and competitiveness of MICE destinations.

Mwalukasa (2024) mentioned the strategic constraints in their book such as inadequate ICT skills, poor management of websites and limited application of advanced technologies as obstacles to effective digital marketing implementation in tourism. These limitations were reducing online visibility and the ability of tourism organisations to engage potential customers and communicate tourism products effectively. Similarly to Lugata (2022) identified inadequate infrastructure and facilities, limited online promotional capabilities, and weak integration of digital marketing strategies among tourism stakeholders as obstacles to promoting MICE activities in Zanzibar. The study also showed that MICE tourism can contribute to destination image, reduce seasonality, and create economic opportunities. The finding on weak integration is particularly relevant because MICE tourism involves multiple stakeholders whose activities require coordination. Also, Davletova et al. (2024) examined innovative digital technologies and found that Internet-based promotion and virtual exhibition platforms can expand market reach, strengthen promotional activities, and improve competitiveness. Their findings demonstrate the potential of digital technologies to support the promotion of exhibitions and business events. However, effective use of these technologies still requires appropriate strategic planning, implementation, and market-oriented decision-making.

3. Methodology

3.1 Area of the Study

This study was conducted in Zanzibar, specifically on Unguja Island, which was selected as the main study area because of its high concentration of tourism facilities, MICE related stakeholders, hospitality establishments, communication infrastructure, and internet services. Unguja includes Zanzibar City, which serves as the political and commercial Centre of Zanzibar (NBS, 2022; RGoZ, 2021),

3.2 Research Approach and Design

This study used quantitative research method Quantitative research enabled the researcher to measure and examine the relationships between variables using numerical data and statistical analysis techniques (Creswell, & Creswell, 2018) This method was considered appropriate because the study aimed to measure the extent how strategic barriers affected the effectiveness of digital marketing in promoting MICE tourism.

3.3 Research design

This study used a descriptive research design a descriptive design was used to describe the actual extent of the barriers faced by MICE tourism stakeholders in Zanzibar. The design enabled the researcher to collect information about the perceptions experiences and practices of the respondents without intruding on their normal work environment.

3.4 The target population.

Thus, this study the target population included stakeholders involved in promoting MICE tourism in Zanzibar these stakeholders included hotel marketing managers, event and Conferences organizers, tour operators, tour guides and tourism officers, these groups were directly involved in planning promoting and facilitating MICE tourism activities and therefore provided valuable information on the barriers affecting the effectiveness of digital marketing in promoting tourism. Sampling refers to the procedures used to select respondents from a population to represent the entire population (Singh, et al., 2023). In this study stratified sampling, purposive sampling and simple random sampling techniques were used.

Table 1. Distribution of Sample by Study Area

Category of respondents	Regions in Unguja			Sample size
Department	North Nungwi	Mjini Magharib Stone town	South Paje	Total
Hotel marketing managers	5	5	5	15
Event and conference organizers	6	5	-	11
Tour operators	-	18	-	18
Tour guides	-	30	6	36
Tourism officers	-	23	-	23
Total				103

Source: researcher (2026)

3.5 Data collection

In this study primary data was used. Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire with closed-ended questions based on a five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was administered to hotel marketing managers, tourism officers, event and conference organizers, tour operators and tour guides in Zanzibar the data collected through a questionnaire were coded and entered into the statistical package for social sciences SPSS

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The strategic barriers that hinder the effectiveness of digital marketing

This section presents findings on strategic barriers to the effectiveness of digital marketing in the promotion of Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) tourism in Zanzibar. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements describing possible strategic barriers on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The results are presented in Table 2, which reports the mean scores and the percentages of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. The analysis takes into account the main strategic factors impacting the effectiveness of digital marketing. The mean scores and percentage distribution of the respondents' responses provide an insight into the extent of perception of these strategical factors as barriers influencing the successful implementation of digital marketing in the MICE tourism sector.

Table 2, Show Strategic Barriers Affecting Digital Marketing to Promote MICE Tourism

Statements	N	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation
The lack of clear digital marketing strategy is affecting the promotion of MICE tourism in Zanzibar.	103	4	3.86	.868
Weak collaboration among tourism stakeholders reduces the effectiveness of digital marketing for MICE tourism	103	4	3.60	.984
The poor implementation of online marketing initiatives hinders the effective promotion of MICE tourism.	103	4	3.82	1.109
The absence of long-term strategic planning negatively affects the effectiveness of digital marketing for MICE tourism.	103	4	3.67	1.042
Our organization lacks strategic digital marketing research and data analysis to effectively promote MICE tourism.	103	4	3.70	1.145
Valid N (listwise)	103			

Source: Field data (2026).

The findings in Table 2 indicate that strategic barriers affect the effectiveness of digital marketing in promoting MICE tourism in Zanzibar. All five strategic barriers recorded mean scores above the neutral point, ranging from 3.60 to 3.86, indicating that respondents generally perceived strategic factors as constraints to effective digital marketing.

Among the five strategic barriers, lack of a clear digital marketing strategy recorded the highest mean score of 3.86 (SD = 0.868). This indicates that respondents perceived the absence of clear strategic direction as the most prominent strategic constraint among the factors examined. A clear digital marketing strategy is important because it provides direction on target markets, appropriate digital platforms, promotional content, resource allocation, and the coordination of online marketing activities. This finding is consistent with Magdy and Abouelazm (2024), who identified inadequate strategic planning as a challenge to digital marketing and digital transformation in the MICE sector. It also supports Abate (2024), who found that poor implementation of digital marketing strategies can reduce marketing performance and the ability to attract business events.

The second-highest mean was recorded for the statement that poor implementation of online marketing initiatives hinders effective promotion of MICE tourism, with a mean of 3.82 (SD = 1.109). This result suggests that respondents considered the implementation gap to be an important challenge. In other words, the existence of a digital marketing plan does not necessarily result in effective promotion if the planned activities are not properly implemented. This finding corresponds with Mwalukasa (2024), who identified challenges in managing websites and social media platforms within tourism marketing.

The statement concerning inadequate strategic digital marketing research and data analysis recorded a mean of 3.70 (SD = 1.145). This finding indicates that respondents perceived weaknesses in research and the use of marketing data as another important strategic barrier. Without systematic analysis of audience behaviour, preferences, engagement, and campaign performance, tourism organisations may struggle to identify suitable markets and evaluate promotional effectiveness. This complements Mwalukasa (2024) and Davletova et al. (2024), who highlighted the importance of digital technologies and information in expanding tourism marketing reach.

The absence of long-term strategic planning recorded a mean of 3.67 (SD = 1.042). The result suggests that respondents perceived long-term planning as a relevant constraint on the effectiveness of digital marketing for MICE tourism. MICE tourism requires continuous destination promotion because event organisers, conference planners, corporate organisations, and potential delegates may engage with a destination long before an event takes place. This finding is consistent with Magdy and Abouelazm (2024) and relates to Lugata (2022), who highlighted the importance of MICE tourism to Zanzibar's destination image and tourism development.

Although stakeholder collaboration recorded Weak collaboration among tourism stakeholders recorded the lowest mean score among the five barriers, at 3.60 (SD = 0.984). Although it had the lowest mean, the score remained above the neutral point, indicating that respondents still perceived stakeholder collaboration as a relevant strategic issue. Weak coordination may result in fragmented promotional activities. This supports Lugata (2022) regarding stakeholder integration in Zanzibar's MICE sector.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that effective digital marketing requires more than technological access. It depends on clear strategic direction, effective implementation, research and data use, long-term planning, and stakeholder coordination. Therefore, strengthening these areas could improve the effectiveness and sustainability of digital marketing in promoting Zanzibar as a MICE destination.

Conclusion

The study reveals that strategic barriers greatly impact the effectiveness of digital marketing in promoting MICE tourism in Zanzibar. The results reveal that the obstacle to establishing and maintaining effective digital marketing practices by tourism organisations is lack of well-defined digital marketing strategies, weak stakeholder coordination, ineffective implementation of online marketing campaigns, limited long-term planning, and insufficient use of market research and data analysis. Such strategic limitations affect consistency, direction and sustainability of digital marketing efforts and make it difficult for organisations to harness digital platforms effectively for destination branding, market expansion and recruiting international MICE visitors. Moreover, the results indicate that without well-defined plans and concerted actions among important tourism stakeholders, digital marketing initiatives may be unconnected and fail to reach their goals. Too little reliance on research and data analysis causes organisations to lose the ability to understand target markets, identify consumer preferences, evaluate campaign effectiveness and make informed marketing decisions. This means that Zanzibar may not be able to fully capitalise on digital opportunities to effectively compete in the regional and international MICE tourism markets.

Thus, removing strategic barriers is important in improving the effectiveness of digital marketing in the MICE tourism industry in Zanzibar. Clear and comprehensive digital marketing strategies, improved collaboration between stakeholders of tourism, improved implementation mechanisms, promoting long-term planning and adopting research-based marketing approaches will enable organisations to realise the potential of digital platforms and enhance Zanzibar's competitiveness as a MICE tourism destination.

Recommendations of the Study

A comprehensive digital marketing strategy should be developed by the Zanzibar Commission for Tourism (ZCT), the Ministry of Tourism, and other MICE stakeholders. The strategy should clearly define marketing objectives, target markets, appropriate digital channels, required resources, and measurable performance indicators. Such a coordinated approach would reduce fragmented promotional activities and ensure greater consistency and effectiveness in promoting Zanzibar as a MICE destination. This will bring an end to fragmented promotions and make Zanzibar's MICE marketing more consistent and effective. Strong management commitment and adequate resources will improve staff responsibility, innovation and sustainability of digital marketing activities. Stakeholder Collaboration, MICE operators, government authorities, hotels, conference venues, travel agencies should work together and coordinate digital marketing campaigns. This will help in sharing resources, consistent messaging of the destination and promotion of Zanzibar in international MICE markets.

The Zanzibar Commission for Tourism (ZCT), tourism associations, universities and research institutions should develop systems for regular monitoring of digital marketing performance, visitor behaviour, market trends and campaign outcomes through research and monitoring. It will provide reliable information to improve marketing strategies, resource allocation and response to changes in the MICE market. Support & Maintenance (Technical) This means that tourism organisations need to offer strong technical support through regular system maintenance, software updates, cybersecurity and professional management of digital platforms. Reliable technical support will minimise system failure to improve user experience and ensure continuous engagement with potential MICE clients.

Recommendation for Further Research

Future research should focus on the use of artificial intelligence in MICE tourism marketing, such as predictive analytics, customer segmentation, and automated campaigns. The research should also assess the training in digital skills, compare Zanzibar with other MICE destinations in East Africa, and investigate the impact of social media influencers on the promotion of MICE tourism.

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