

SOCIAL MEDIA AND TOURISM AWARENESS: A CASE OF HOMABAY COUNTY, KENYA

^{1*} **Rose Achieng Agalo**
achijebet@gmail.com

^{2**} **Florence Odera**
oderaflorence@yahoo.com

¹ Student, School of Information Communication & Media Studies, Rongo University, Kenya

² Professor, School of Education, Rongo University, Kenya

ABSTRACT

Kenya's Vision 2030 Economic Pillar identifies tourism as one of the key six pillars contributing to the 10% Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate per annum as from 2012. It is a major source of foreign exchange for the Country and plays a major role in employment in the private sector. This study therefore aims to explore ways through which social media can enhance the visibility of Homabay County as a tourist destination. This is as a result of curiosity on existing information flow to potential tourists in Homabay County. Regardless of Kenya's unique existence of tourist attractions spread throughout the Country, tourism activities in the Country have always been almost exclusively centered on two geographical regions: the coastal beaches and a handful of game reserves and national parks. This research therefore attempted to argue for the use of social media in enhancing the visibility of Homabay County as a tourist destination. The objectives of the study were: to identify the social media platforms used in creating tourism awareness for Homabay County and to establish how tourism destinations can exploit social media strategies in creating tourism awareness. Exploratory research design was adopted. Purposive sampling technique was used to arrive at a sample size of 80 participants. Use of social media platforms by tourism service providers in Homabay County proved to increase the visibility of Homabay County as a tourist destination.

Keywords: *Tourism, social media, tourism destination, user generated content*

INTRODUCTION

From the dawn of time, people have traveled for leisure, business, and religious purposes. United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) states that "tourism comprises of activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to an activity remunerated from within the place visited. The 2017 United Nations report, states that the global outlook for the Travel & Tourism sector will remain robust and will continue to be at the forefront of wealth and employment creation in the global economy. Regardless of continually being faced with unpredictable shocks from terrorism, political instability, health pandemic, natural disasters, ethnic, cultural and religious differences, tourism has remained resilient, contributing to 3.1% direct GDP growth and 6 million net additional jobs in 2016. Direct Travel & Tourism GDP growth recorded a stronger growth in 2016, than financial and business services, manufacturing, public services, retail and distribution, and transport sectors. (IPK International, 2016).

New destinations continue to emerge across the globe while existing ones are rebranding and introducing new products in order to keep up with the current trends and needs of tourists. To create awareness worldwide about their products and services, tourist destinations are putting in place strategies and reshaping the way they offer services to their clients, exploring and using various means of communication technology to keep abreast in the competitive industry. Of importance to this study, is the use of social media which is a form of new media. It is particularly useful in information search, decision-making behaviors, tourism promotion and in focusing on best practices for interacting with prospective customers. Utilization of social media to create tourism awareness has proven to be an excellent strategy for many destinations globally. Therefore, this study investigated social media for tourism awareness in Homabay County.

Kenya Vision 2030 is the country's development blueprint that covers the period from 2008 to 2030. Its main goal is to transform Kenya into an industrializing, middle-income country that provides a high-quality life to all its citizens by the year 2030. Vision 2030 is based on three pillars. The economic pillar, the political pillar and the social pillar. The economic pillar has identified tourism as one of the six key sectors based on its ability to contribute to the 10% GDP growth per annum. Its objective is to improve the prosperity of Kenyan citizens through an economic development programme, that covers all the Counties in Kenya. Tourism is also the second major foreign exchange earner (*Kenya Vision 2030*.)

Homabay County

Homabay County is located in the western Kenya tourism circuit. The western tourism circuit is one of the least known but the most un-spoilt and uncrowded circuit. The County is endowed with a number of attractions such as Lake Victoria, Ruma National Park, Lake Simbi Nyaima, Kanjera Archaeological Site, Rusinga and Mfangano Islands both set in Lake Victoria and the Tom Mboya mausoleum. The County also has a conducive weather and a good number of accommodation and amenities that are traveler friendly. In spite of these attractions, tourism activities in the Country have been concentrated in the coastal region and a handful of game reserves. Due to limited publicity through media and government bodies responsible for promoting tourist attractions, Homabay County remains less known as a tourist destination. This decreases its visibility thus making it less visible on online platforms.

Theoretical conceptualization

This research relied on Psychological Ownership Theory. It elaborates concepts for understanding travelers' behavior. Travelers who are satisfied or dissatisfied with a destination products and services tend to share their experiences with people close to them. Therefore, satisfied travelers are likely to develop complex and exclusive highly committed relationships with tourism businesses, making other competitors virtually excluded from the consideration set.

(Sigala, Christou, Sigala & Gretzel, 2016) observed that referrals from family and friends are frequently obtained and are influential source of information used by tourists in their travel decision making. Today, advances in technology has led to emergence of social media platforms where travelers not only access information from family and friends but also from a worldwide audience. These platforms enable travelers to search and review destinations they would like to visit. Traveler-to-traveler communication using electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on social media platforms is the basis of user generated content and has a strong influence on travelers buying decision processes of goods and services. (Fernando 2007) holds the view that user generated content is the polar opposite of traditional forms of media marketing since content is generated by the consumer rather than by the marketer.

eWOM usually takes place before, during and after the trip. It is viewed as an independent source of information since travelers are not paid by destinations to advertise on behalf of service providers, hence viewed as a credible source of information by potential tourists. Through this, potential travelers are able to form independent perceptions about a destination when searching for a destination to visit. eWOM is vital for travelers due to the intangibility nature of tourism products. They cannot be evaluated prior to purchase, (Lewis and Chambers, 2000) and are perceived as being highly risky. Potential travelers are likely to engage in eWOM conversations with the aim of gathering more information on sought after tourism products that reduces the risk and enables them to understand the service prior to consumption. Potential travelers therefore make enquiries before purchasing tourism products and as consumers, find user generated content from social media platforms as a useful strategy in reducing most types of risk. Consequently, potential travelers rely on the opinions of other consumers when forming expectations and evaluate these based on the opinions.

Social media and tourism awareness

Social media, is a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:61). It is greatly changing business-to-business communication, business- to- customer communication and customer-to-customer communication Further, (Sigala, Christou, & Gretzel, 2012) elaborates that social media is fundamentally changing ways in which tourist’s search, find, read and trust as well as collaboratively produce information about tourism destinations and stake holders.

Tourism is an ‘information intensive industry’ (Gretzel, Yuan, & Fesenmaier, 2000 Pg.147). Developments in information technology has developed today emergence of social media. This platform that has changed dissemination of information to travelers. It allows individuals to easily contribute their opinions, thoughts and creations (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013) and relies more on user generated content (UGC) which travelers consider as more credible and authentic.

As social media advances, travelers engage in it to satisfy any need, from functional, social, hedonic to psychological. It is therefore logical that tourism destinations must be prepared to engage tourists. (Ling 2010, Para-Lopez et al 2010). They ought to meet their travelers’ needs by providing value added information on their social networking platforms to differentiate themselves from competitors.

The power of the tourism product is more than ever consumer-driven. Consumers demand what they want from tourism destinations: their expectations are higher and subsequently they are much more difficult to impress (Buhalis Law, 2008). Advanced communication technologies enable tourism destinations to be efficient, flexible and collaborate more (Lange-Faria & Elliot 2012)

Social media has 2.3 billion active users. Currently, Facebook leads with 1.71 billion users, YouTube 1 billion users, WhatsApp 900 million users, and Instagram with 400 million users. (Smith, 2016). Trip advisor, a common travel site has 6.6 million businesses and properties in 135,000 destinations, and 255 new contributions are posted every minute. (Fact Sheet, 2016). These statistics proves that social media is indeed dominating the tourism industry.

Mobile devices use by travelers is on the rise. This ranges from smart phones to tablets. These devices have enabled applications for sharing content, photos, videos and blogging that make social networking easier for travelers. An estimated 40% of smart phone users obtain destination related information with these devices (IPK International, 2017). This enable travelers to document their travel experience process.

Social networking depends very much on the concept of wordmouth (WOM) or in this case, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) which: "...involves consumers' comments about products and services posted on the Internet ...the big difference between WOM and eWOM is that in eWOM, recommendations are typically from unknown individuals with whom strong ties are lacking, so 'online' consumers have difficulty in using source similarity to determine the credibility of information" (Bronner & de Hoog, 2011 pg 15). Furthermore, eWOM may in fact be even more influential than WOM given its characteristics of global reach, speed with which it travels, ease of use, anonymity, and absent of direct face to face pressure. (Bronner & de Hoog, 2011)

When travelers begin to refer back to a destination and hold online conversations about it, they are establishing "social proof,". A trust that extends throughout their network of family and friends. Based on (Ektron, 2016) online social network users are three times more likely to trust their peers' opinions over advertising when making purchase decisions and less than 20% trust advertising when it comes to making decisions. Influencers, including friends, friends-of-friends, colleagues and recognized experts, exist everywhere on the social Web. They are the people within peer groups that others go to for recommendations, advice and trusted opinions. By engaging them, a destination harnesses the power of word-of-mouth marketing, resulting to expansion of their audience from them to their friends to their friend-of-a-friend-of-a-friend. While it is impossible for a tourism destination to be on every social network, satisfied consumers will be ambassadors who will carry a destination brand messages, spread it to other social networks and defend the brand if necessary.

Social media presents a perfect opportunity for tourism destinations to listen to current customers, industry experts, prospects and other influencers and use the information to improve their destinations (Ektron, 2016)

A destination risks losing opportunities by ignoring the value social media presents, whether the benefit is directly quantifiable or not. Currently, travelers communicate more on social media and spend much of their online time browsing different social networks. If a destination does not take an active front, competitors are bound to reach out to their target market. Gaining the public trust is critical to gaining business. (Ektron, 2016)

In Africa, social media rankings does not have a direct correlation to a flourishing tourism sector due to the sensitive nature of the tourism industry. Tourism is affected by geography, social, economic and political factors that are complex and have a direct effect on tourism making social media a distant variable, (O'tole 2016).

The adoption of social media by tourism service providers in Kenya is envisioned as a means of reaching new audiences and a way of improving Homabay County as tourist destination by showcasing its emerging destinations and new tourism products.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed research method which seeks to build on the strengths of quantitative and qualitative data providing a better understanding of the research problem. Case study and exploratory research design was used to investigate how social media positively enhances tourism awareness. Purposive sampling was used to select a sample size of 80 respondents who were identified by the researcher to give beneficial information for the purpose of this research. The researcher used data triangulation which involves using different sources of information in order to increase the validity of the study and achieve credible and defensible results by searching for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study, (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The researcher used open ended questioners, and recorded interviews for data collection. These instruments enabled the researcher to probe for deeper

understanding of the tourism phenomenon. The researcher ensured content validity by undertaking an extensive literature review to identify relevant content areas and ensure questioner questions revolve around the research questions.

DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was used by the researcher to analyse data from emerging themes and subthemes

The research had a sample population of 80 respondents. During the research, a total of 66 respondents (82%) participated while 14(18%) did not. Out of the total participants, 59% were male and 41% female. Hospitality service providers, in Homabay County receive different types of guests.

Hospitality service providers, in Homabay County receive different types of guest. The guests vary from tourists visiting for pleasure, corporates, educational institutions, government officials and Non -Governmental Organizations(NGO’s). Based on the findings, it was evident that NGO’s comprise the largest segment of guests in hospitality establishments. Many NGO’s have set up base in Homabay County engaging in HIV/AIDs programme awareness programmes. Homabay County is ranked top as the County with the highest number of HIV infections Countrywide. HIV prevalence in Homabay County is 26.0% 4.5 times higher than the national prevalence (Kenya HIV Estimates 2015).

As one Hotel Manager asserted:

“Tourism in this region depends mostly on conferences. Majority of our guests are from NGO’s. A good number of NGO’s have set up base in the greater Nyanza region. Most of them get to know about our hotel through word of mouth referrals by other guests who have had a prior experience with us”. (Hotel Manager, 2016).

Table 1. Types of Tourists in Homabay County

Types of Tourists	Frequency	Percentage
Educational	7	14
Leisure	8	17
Corporates	4	9
Government	5	10
NGO’s	21	43
Others	3	7
Total	48	100

Majority of tourism and hospitality service providers in Homabay County use both traditional media and social media complementarily for creating tourism awareness.

Yes.....we use a number of communication channels for creating awareness about our hotel. We use posters, flyers, social media, billboards, websites and word of mouth referrals to attract guests. Regarding social media platforms, we are active on facebook. We have a facebook page that is quite active I can say. Other than facebook, we are also present on trip advisor, and booking.com. (Front Office Manager, 2017)

All the tourism and hospitality service providers were active on at least one or more social media platform. Facebook (36%) and trip advisor (43%) were the most utilized social media platforms by tourism and hospitality service providers. This research found out that facebook was popular and distinct due to its integrated platform that combines many media and information communication technologies such as web mail,

web pages, digital image, digital video, guest book, discussion group, live streaming and search engines. (Fuchs,2017). Trip advisor has an international audience and reviews majority of hospitality and tourist attractions worldwide.

Other social media platforms such as trip advisor, jumia, and booking.com were used as review sites as well as platforms for creating tourism awareness by the service providers.

More service providers in the tourism industry are linking their websites to their social media pages. This enhances the visibility of websites as well as increasing traffic. Based on the findings of this study, 10 (71%) had active websites while 4(29%) had inactive websites. 16% had linked their social media pages to their websites while 84% had not.

Trip advisor allows potential travelers and tourists to review hotels and restaurants, accommodation bookings and other travel-related content. It also facilitates interactive travel forums. These features made it the most utilized social media platforms by the respondents of this study for planning purposes.

Table 2. Utilized social media platforms for planning

Most utilized Social media platform for planning	Frequency	Percentage
Trip advisor	20	42
Booking.com	16	33
Facebook	4	8
Total	48	100

Tourists used various social media platforms depending on the stage they are in the travel planning process – the pre-trip, during the trip and post-trip to minimize the risk of making a poor destination decision. Tourists who were visiting Homabay County used different popular social media platforms including facebook, trip advisor, instagram, booking.com, whatsapp and goggle search engine to search for information regarding their visit.

A social media strategy is essential for guiding service providers who are active on social media platforms. Key aspects of a good social media strategy entail quality content, competent social media team and regular interaction with clients. Tourism and hospitality service providers in Homabay County who took part in this research had a basic framework guiding their online operations but neither had a concrete social media strategy.

The hotel does not have a social media policy to guide daily operations on social media platforms as at now. However, we have contracted a number of marketing firms, jumia and booking.com that does marketing on our behalf. We are also yet to utilize search engine optimization to our advantage but we are exploring on ways to do so. Overall, the hotel manager is in charge of social media operations though, the front office personnel have been tasked with daily operation of our social media platforms. Generally, the manager supervises and handles issues that are beyond the front office personnel. (Front Office Manager, 2017)

Content is a key aspect of a social media strategy. Good content enhances visibility of service providers on social media platforms. This study sought to investigate the type of content service providers post on their social media platforms, frequency of posting content on their social media platforms and the timeframe of reply to clients.

Service providers who participated in the research indicated that they posted content regarding their products and services on social media platforms. The type of content varied from promoting a new product or service, to promoting products on offer for a duration of time, creating awareness about certain products and services and to highlight certain key events.

From the study, out of the service providers who participated, 29% indicated that they posted content on their social media platforms regularly to update their clients on various engagements and activities while 71% posted content on social media on a need basis. This depended on whether the service provider had vital information to update their clients. Based on these results, the study established that the service providers who posted content on a regular basis had vibrant social media platform(s) compared to those who posted content on a need basis.

Service providers who participated in this study also considered various factors in relation to guest feedback time frame. 14% indicated that they reply to clients instantly, 50% before 24 hours lapses and 36% replied to clients based on the availability of personnel. Instant replies by service providers proved to be more efficient as most clients got instant information and clarification from service providers. More clients are turning to social media as a source for customer service. Positive customer service experiences on social media tend to increase sales and brand recommendations. However, service providers who took long to reply to clients often lost business opportunities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It was established that most guests in hospitality establishments in Homabay county were 59% male compared to their 41% female counterparts. Similarly, most of the employees were also male especially at mid and managerial levels. This shows that gender inequality exists and therefore there is the need to empower women. out of the 66 respondents, 78% of guests at various hospitality and attraction sites were Kenyan while 22% were non-Kenya, indicating that domestic tourism is core of the tourism industry of Homabay County.

57% of tourism and hospitality establishments in Homabay county use social media platforms to create awareness 43% still use traditional media e.g radio, bill boards, posters and flyers. This confirms that traditional media are still essential for service providers in targeting their clients who as confirmed by the finding are domestic tourists mostly from surrounding communities. NGO's form the largest portfolio of guests for hospitality establishments and from the findings, they are informed through word of mouth referrals However leisure tourists, search for online information regarding an attraction or hospitality establishment before an actual visit.

With technological advances and the emergence of web 2.0, guests and other stakeholders who may utilize traditional media still search for online information regarding tourism and hospitality service providers. This mandates the service providers to be active on social media platforms. From the findings, out of the 14 tourism service providers in Homabay County that participated, the most utilized social media platform was trip advisor with 43%, followed by facebook at 36% and other social media platforms at 21%. Out of the service providers that participated, 71% had active websites compared to 29% whose websites were inactive.

Tourism service providers in Homabay who participated in this research did not have a social media strategy to guide their online operations. Personnel who updated content on social media were not competent in social media. There were no social media teams or a division charged with overseeing operations on social media platforms. Content posted was on a need basis, for example when there is an event, or a new product.

CONCLUSIONS

Communication media plays a vital role in enhancing the visibility of a destination. Without any communication media, it is difficult for service providers in the tourism industry to create awareness to the public about their products and services. This study explored ways in which social media, if well exploited by tourism destinations, can positively contribute to a destination communication goals as well as enhance the visibility of Homabay County as a tourist destination.

Technological advances have led to the emergence of Web 2.0 which allows the creation and exchange of user generated content. This is the basis foundation of social media. It facilitates a two-way communication between the service provider and the customer, communication between customers and allows for online discussion among various stakeholders. The findings of the study revolved around themes arising from the research questions.

Based on the findings of this study, it was evident that tourism and hospitality service providers in Homabay County use both traditional and social media for communication. The communication media used include the use of banners, radio, flyers, billboards, word of mouth and social media sites.

Tourism and hospitality service providers in Homabay County did not have a social media strategy to guide their online operations. There were no skilled personnel/teams in social media to operate their social media platforms. Posting of content and the timing was mostly on a need basis. As a result, there was minimal activity on their social media platforms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Through this paper, the researcher recommended ways that social media can positively contribute to a destination communication goals as well as enhance the visibility of Homabay County as a tourist destination.

Tourism and hospitality service providers in Homabay, should take the opportunity that social media presents and improve their online presence by being active on social media platforms, having active websites, and positioning themselves rightfully to capture their desired target market. Similarly, they also need to improve their physical evidence, services and products in order to attract international tourists.

Homabay tourism and hospitality service providers, should develop and implement social media strategies. This will enable enhancement of communication goals, objectives and employment of qualified personnel to be in charge of social media platforms. This will facilitate social media teams to have the capacity to identify ideal customers on social networks, keep abreast with competitors and categorize primary and secondary social media platforms according to traffic.

Employees of the various tourism establishments in Homabay should be trained to be familiar with online related information processes so as to improve service delivery and quality services, enhance customer satisfaction and improve communication processes in order to achieve operational efficiency of the establishments

The researcher also recommended that the County government should step up its efforts in creating policies that will improve the tourism industry, create a conducive environment for tourism businesses to operate, improve infrastructure which is key in enhancing operations of the various stakeholders and lobby investors to invest in the industry.

Finally, gender inequality and representation which is experienced in various tourism and hospitality establishments in Homabay need to be dealt with by ensuring there is equal recruitment opportunities for both males and females especially at managerial levels.

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