

Significance of Social Media in the Kenya Tourism industry

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ABSTRACT

The emerging significance of Social media in the tourism industry are increasing. Social media have changed the way tourists explore, search, book and experience travel. Most operations and transactions are currently carried online. With the increasing number of users, social media platforms are seen to have a significant influence in the tourism industry. This paper examines the significant role social media plays and how service providers in the Kenyan tourism industry can utilize them to their advantage. Kenya is ranked among the top tourism destinations in Africa. It is an income generating sector and for example, contributed to 9.7% of the Country's GDP in 2017. It is also one of the key sectors in the Kenyan economic pillar of vision 2030. In the financial year 2017/2018, Kenyan tourism arrivals grew by 6.8 % while tourism receipts posted a 9.9% growth of Ksh 117.6 Billion. Hence social media in the Kenyan tourism industry is envisioned as a means of reaching prospective tourists, showcasing emerging destinations within the Country, and newly improved tourism products. Such use will further improve Kenya's tourism global visibility as well as create increase in tourism arrivals.

Keywords: *Social media, tourism, tourism destination*

Introduction

Tourism is the world's largest industry with over a billion travelers generating \$1.4 trillion dollars export earnings in 2013 worldwide (WTO, 2018). This is due to the establishment of a more affordable and democratic global tourist industry particularly in terms of transport and accommodation. Development of infrastructures that attract tourists has proven to be a catalyst for economic development especially employment. Other than employment, other benefits of tourism include increased standards of living for local residents, increased incomes, development of infrastructure and preservation of heritage sites. Majority of tourists (52%) travel to enjoy leisure time, the other (27%) travel for business purposes, visiting family and friends, religious pilgrimage or to receive health treatments (WTO, 2014). The utilization of social media in the tourism industry prompted this study to analyze the significance of social media in the world's largest industry.

Social media, is a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:61). (O'Reilly, 2005) lists radical decentralization, radical trust, participation instead of publishing, rich user experience, the web as a platform, users as contributors, collective intelligence, remixing data, attitudes, better softwares by more users and undetermined user behavior as the main Characteristics of Web 2.0. Today, the use of social media in the tourism industry is on the rise. It has enhanced communication role in many aspects of tourism. It is particularly useful in information search, decision-making behaviors, tourism promotion and in focusing on best practices for interacting with prospective tourists.

Social media is a new phenomenon globally and, the increasing use of social media platforms by tourists leaves little option for tourism stakeholders in Kenya for not using social media platforms for creating tourism awareness. Surprisingly, the power of social media networks as a tool for creating tourism awareness remains to be fully harnessed by the tourism industry in Kenya despite the abundance of opportunities presented by social media.

Certainly 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).with this view, we see

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advanced communication technologies enabling tourism destinations to be efficient, flexible and collaborate more in providing for consumer demands (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012)

Social media has 3.196 billion, active users. Facebook leads with 2.234 billion users, YouTube 1.9 billion users, and WhatsApp 1.5 billion users (Chaffey, 2018). Trip advisor, one of the largest social media reviewing platform for tourism, travel and hospitality businesses and establishments has 6.6 million businesses and properties in 135,000 destinations, and 255 new contributions are posted every minute worldwide. (Fact Sheet, 2016). These statistics prove that social media is indeed in dominant use in the tourism industry.

Kenya has been divided into various different sections that represent different tourism circuits. A tourist circuit is defined as a route on which at least three major destinations are located such that none of these are in one town, village or city. At the same time, they are not separated by a long distance and should have defined entry and exit points (Cullinan, et al in Chowdhary, 2014). Destination Kenya is a combination of all the tourism circuits all of which have unique attractions. The tourism circuits include Nairobi circuit, Central Kenya circuit, Coastline circuit, Eastern circuit, Southern circuit, North Rift circuit, South Rift circuit and the Western circuit. (Ktb.go.ke, 2019)

Concept of social media in the tourism industry.

Based on social theory (Fuchs, 2015) social media communication has key constitutive features in the modern society which include: integrated sociality, integrated roles and converging communication on social media.

Social media enable the convergence of the three modes of sociality (cognition, communication and cooperation) in an integrated sociality. One step does not necessarily lead to another level of step. However digital technology has the potential to combine all the three activities on a social media platform. For example, a tourist on cognitive level may post a video on facebook, others then comment (communicative level) and can go further to manipulate and remix the content to give rise to a new content with multiple authorship from the original author.

Tourists have different social roles such as employees, consumers, family members, and citizens. However on social media, all these roles become mapped onto a single profile observed by different people who are associated with the different social roles. Certain social media platforms

such as facebook, instagram and twitter are based on creation of personal profiles that describe one's various roles of life. This makes social media platforms social places in which social roles tend to converge and become integrated in single profiles (Fuchs, 2017).

Social media platforms enable integration of different forms of sociality and social roles to serve a myriad of possible social purposes that a single social media platform can serve. Tourists use social media platforms for searching and communicating information relevant to their travel while tourism destinations use it for creating awareness.

Discussion

Social media provides tourism destinations a platform for promoting their products and services. It also presents various avenues for service providers in the tourism industry to grow their market share and build relationships with their consumers. This study argues for the incorporation of social media into the daily media communication routine of service providers in the Kenyan tourism industry. Constant online interaction between service providers and their prospective consumers boosts their visibility on various social media platforms across the globe. Similarly, the study also emphasizes on the integration of social media strategies in communication operations of service providers as a means of enabling them derive value from social media. The approach makes social media is a valuable tool for tourism promotion but ofcourse with potential consequences. Having online presence on multiple social media platforms without a clear strategic approach poses a number of challenges making it difficult to effectively measure social media returns on investments .(Lardi & Fuchs, n.d.) Social media strategy will guide actions of service providers in tourism industry and also act as a measure to determine whether it bears success or failure in social media usage.

Increase in tourism arrivals, both international and domestic as a result of promotion of various destinations via social media promises to lead to economic empowerment of Kenya citizens at large. In the financial year 2017/2018 in Kenya, tourism arrivals grew by 6.8 % while tourism receipts posted a 9.9% growth of Ksh 117.6 billion. Revitalized marketing efforts which included digital marketing was among the key drivers for Kenyan tourism growth in 2018. (Ktb.go.ke, 2018).The first Millennium development goal (MDG) advocates for poverty eradication yet travel and tourism industry stands to play a major role in poverty eradication through job creation and other economic opportunities. Tourism is a labor-intensive industry compared to other industries.

It has low employment barriers to entry for and usually includes a wide range of enterprises that provide development opportunities to the local community economy. Its workforce majorly comprises of high ratios of youth and female, hence promoting women empowerment and youth employment. This is in line with the third MDG goal which emphasizes on the need to empower women.

Social media platforms are therefore processual frameworks for transmitting information to large audiences. It does this in partially new ways such as uploading videos and posting photos on social media platforms increasing online presence of service providers in the Kenya tourism industry. This improves the visibility of destination Kenya. Globally, there are 3.397 billion active social media users. Facebook leads by 2.271 billion users, youtube, 1.5 billion users and WhatsApp 900 million users (Brandwatch, 2018). Social media in Kenya has recorded an impressive number of active users. Facebook, has 7.1 million active users, YouTube 8 million, Instagram 4 million, Twitter and LinkedIn have 1 million each (BAKE, 2017). These are common social media platforms out of many others making social media platforms a promising audience for service providers in the Kenya's Tourism industry. Owing to the fact that it is free to create social media accounts since none of the largest platforms have any sign-up fees for a service provider to open accounts. Social media has become a cheaper option for enhancing visibility among tourism service providers unlike traditional advertising.

Again customer feedback plays a vital part in customer management. Through social media, service providers in the tourism industry are able to listen to the market and monitor customer impressions. This leads to co-creating new products and services with tourists, engaging tourists using various social media platforms as well as servicing tourists through social media.

Currently, the way tourists search for and evaluate travel information is changing. Information regarding destinations and service providers is available at the touch of a button. Social media platforms allow for collaboration and online sharing of information. User generated content (UGC) enables tourists to submit , review, and respond to online content (Gretzel, 2007). It is an effective form of consumer to consumer e-marketing. Due to the intangible nature of the tourism industry a prospective traveler tends to rely more on information supplied by other people through UGC on social media platforms. The rising popularity of social media sites has made more tourists

to rely on social media platforms for information search to make informed decisions about destinations to visit and service providers.

Conclusion

Service providers in the tourism industry should take advantage of using social media platforms to promote their products and services globally. They should also have meaningful content on their social media sites to enable tourists acquire rich information while searching for information and making decisions regarding destinations to visit

A social media strategy is also vital for service providers in the tourism industry. It lays out the basic framework of operations and engagements on social media platforms. . A good formulated strategy is what makes a service provider unique and well positioned in the target market in order to attract prospective tourists and leverage off competitors.

The Ministry of Tourism is mandated with creating effective policies that promote the Country's tourism industry, creating a conducive environment for tourism businesses to operate in and to lobby investors to invest in capital projects designed to attract tourists and green investments in the tourism industry that promote sustainable tourism. Through the use of social media, the Ministry of tourism will be able to promote tourist attraction sites in Kenya as well as service providers in the tourism industry. The ministry of tourism should also put in place a social media framework that guides tourism within the Country while giving current updates of tourism activities enjoyed in the Country.

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