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Original Research Article

Enhancing Destination Loyalty through Online Presence in the Tourism Industry in South-East Nigeria

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Abstract

This research explored the relationship between online presence and destination loyalty with the sole objective of enhancing destination loyalty, in selected tourist destinations in South East, Nigeria. Questionnaire was administered to 135 respondents out of which 122 were retrieved and utilized for the analysis. Data were analyzed in descriptive and inferential statistics using the SPSS (version 24.0), and the Spearman rank correlation (ρ) was used to test hypotheses. Positive significant relationships were found between dimensions of online presence and measures of destination loyalty. The study discovered that the most viable variable is the relationship that exists between the destination's website and service delivery, while the least is social media and service delivery. From the findings, it was recommended that tourist destinations should enhance their clientele base more through the destinations website.

Keywords: Destination loyalty, online presence, service delivery, tourism industry

JEL Classification Codes: L830

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's competitive e-market, otherwise referred to as the information age or the internet era, are the observed internet and new technologies that have taken over daily lifestyle and how online presence becomes more important to people and even more so to businesses. It has been studied severally that with better online presence, businesses can acquire more potential customers in addition to building their brands and reputation (Buhalis, 2003; Petti & Ndou, 2006). Consequent upon the intrusion and general acceptability of internet access, there is now a heightened influence of its presence in the general well-being of any organization. In contemporary tourism development, destination loyalty has become a necessity for hotels and tourist sites to thrive. To this end, Alexandris, Kouthouris & Meligdis (2006) reiterates the need for first-time and repeat visitors to develop loyalty differently and be inculcated as a major objective in hotels. Loyalty, which has been identified as a terminal status, consists of both behaviours of repurchase and attitudinal recognition of that particular brand (Bodet, 2008). Studies have enunciated the relationship amongst revisit motivation, destination image, satisfaction, perceived value, and loyalty (Huang & Chiu, 2008; Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Castro, Armario & Ruiz, 2007; Gallarza & Saura, 2006). The move to quantify destination loyalty depends on a longing to better comprehend client retention, which has an immediate connect to an organization's primary concern. Studies have reported that a 0.5% expansion in client maintenance can produce a benefit development of 25% – 95% over a scope of enterprises (Al-Rousan and Badaruddin, 2010; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990). Also, retaining existing clients generally has much lower related expenses than winning new ones (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987).

While the importance of destination loyalty is established, there is the need to identify

the factors that influence destination loyalty so that tourism organizations can achieve both short term and long term benefits. As a result, there is now an increasing need that necessitates the emergence of empirical validation on contributive forces that give rise to destination loyalty (Chi, 2012). While research that examines service delivery and destination loyalty in other service sectors is well developed, there is a dearth of research to elucidate the relationship between online presence and destination loyalty in the tourism industry, especially in South-East Nigeria.

Destination loyalty has always been considered an essential business goal because it was assumed that satisfied customers would always revisit the destination. However, many tourist destinations have started to notice an increase in customer defection despite high satisfaction ratings (Saif, 2012). Failure to meet or exceed the expectation of customers leads to low patronage, increase in negative word of mouth and low profit (Mahdavi, 2010; Gallarza, & Saura (2006) and these can hamper the growth of the organization, particularly the service organization. Also, many studies on destination loyalty have been limited in scope, and focused only on customer satisfaction in the restaurant and hotels, including assessment of satisfaction in the viewpoint of the employee (Corte, Sciarelli, Cascella & Gaudio, 2015; Chi, 2012; Sohail & Madila, 2011), and not that of the customers and the extent of conspicuousness of tourism resources and products are online. Furthermore, matching quality tourism product supply is a challenging and difficult balancing act for the Tourism Industry located in South-East Nigeria, where there is a dearth of empirical substantiation on online presence and its correlation with destination loyalty. We observe that this is likely to be traceable to the abysmal low visibility of these tourism products online. In view of this, the present study aims to empirically establish the relationship between online presence and

destination loyalty in tourist destinations in South East Nigeria.

Research Objectives

It is noteworthy that despite the numerous researches on destination loyalty, there is a dearth of research examining the link between online presence and destination loyalty, especially in the tourism industry in South-East Nigeria. To this end, this research empirically investigates the relationship between online presence and destination loyalty in selected tourist sites in South-East Nigeria. Specific objectives are: to identify the relationship between destination's website and customer satisfaction; to examine the relationship between destination's website and service delivery; to identify the relationship between the social media and service delivery in tourist destinations; and to examine the relationship between the social media and customer satisfaction in tourism destinations.

Theoretical Orientation

Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory (EDT)

EDT has stood as a substantial theory that can measure loyalty from perceived quality of products or services in order to measure the customer's satisfaction in e-commerce (Spreng & Jr, 2003). EDT was applied by many researchers in explaining how customers form positive judgments' after the reception of service from a websites quality, product and services (Bhattacharjee , 2001b) The primary phase involves customers pre-evaluation of the product or service. This is followed by the actual experience with the service or product (Patterson & Johnson. (1997). When the performance as perceived by the customer is less than customer's expectation, dissatisfaction occurs which then triggers a non-repeat decision. Furthermore, if the performance as perceived by the customer is equal to or exceeds the expectation, then satisfaction is triggered which leads to loyalty and hence repeat visit. The theory as

applicable to this study emphasizes that loyalty to a destination depends wholly on the positive expectation derived from knowledge and experience of the destination. High levels of satisfaction at the destination results in increased loyalty and future revisits. In other words, if perceived performance is equal to or greater than experience, then customer loyalty is a sine quo non.

When customer's perceived performance over the quality of specific product or service is higher than the customer's expectation or desire, the positive disconfirmation will occur. In the same way, when customers perceive the performance is worse than what they expected or desired about the quality of specific product or service, the negative disconfirmation will happen. According to Khalifa (2002), positive disconfirmation leads to the customer's satisfaction and negative disconfirmation means perceived performance of products or services couldn't attract the customer satisfaction.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The Concept of Online Presence

According to Petti (2005) online presence has become an interesting topic for researchers. He argues further that online presence plays an important role in the extent of patronage to any destination. According to Mahdavi (2010), organizations that are visible online support the actual act of tourism which would further enhance the economy of any nation. This is supported by Mousavi, Ward & Chua (2016) findings which highlight that a lack of visibility yields negative potentials for such organizations, which in turn triggers off a ripple effect on the revenue generation of any nation. Meanwhile, specifying data and describing the nature of their presence in the online world allows the tourists to maintain some form of passive interaction with the destination (Cavazza, 2012). This enables a bond develop between the client and the

organization. Furthermore, Buhalis (1997) reiterates that online presence enhances the customer relationship management chain and this enables the tourists select product, order product track product and make payments or bookings online.

Due to the developing idea of web use, a site alone isn't adequate to advance generally brands. To keep up a web nearness or presence and brand acknowledgment, associations need to utilize a blend of social devices, for example, Google Maps, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and Pinterest, and also developing a brand nearness on versatile applications and other online databases. The online presence process begins by deciding objectives that will characterize an online methodology. When this technique is set up, a progressing and consistent procedure of assessing and tweaking is important to drive accomplishment towards the distinguished objectives which, as a rule, is to enhance customer patronage (Petti, 2005 and Pickett, 2008).

An online nearness administration technique has a several vital parts. For the most part, these will incorporate internet searcher position, that is, ensuring the brand seems high in web crawler comes about when the end client has a significant question, observing on the web exchange around the brand, and breaking down the brand's general web nearness. A standout amongst other terms to depict online nearness is 'being there' and 'being as one' (Pickett, 2008). The measurements of online nearness utilized as a part of this study are company's website and social networking (media).

A website is a gathering of related pages, including sight and sound substance, normally related to a typical space name and distributed on, no less than, one web server. A site might be available by means of an open web convention (IP) arrange, for example, the web, or a private neighborhood (LAN), by referencing a uniform asset

locator (URL) that distinguishes the website. Sites have numerous capacities and can be utilized as a part of different styles; a site can be an individual site, a business site for an organization, an administration site or a non-benefit association site. Sites are commonly devoted to a specific point or reason, running from stimulation and person to person communication to giving news and training. All openly available sites all in all constitute the World Wide Web, while private sites, for example, an organization's site for its workers, are ordinarily a piece of an intranet.

Social media has severally been utilized to portray the methods for associations among individuals and organizations in which they make, share, as well as trade data and thoughts in virtual networks and systems (Mahdavi, 2010; Cavazza, 2012). With the coming of client created substance and sharing highlights, social stages are the new lords of the web. Within the recent seven years, the worldwide network has experienced three rushes of social mastery: The distributing wave (with web journals), the sharing wave (with Facebook and Twitter), and the curating wave (with Quora, Pinterest and the preferences). The principle purpose behind this move in clients' conduct is the evolution of users' expectations: the more they use social media, the more sophisticated their needs are (Buhalis, 2003).

The Concept of Destination Loyalty

Oliver (1999), Yuksel, Yuksel and Bilis (2010) depicted three periods of loyalty – intellectual (cognitive), full of feeling (affective) and conative - that finishes in the client's active dependability on the destination. Intellectual loyalty centers around the brand's execution perspectives, and loyalty at this stage depends on mark or brand conviction only, along these lines is of a shallow sort. Full of feeling or affective dedication is coordinated toward the brand's likeableness – customers have built up a loving or state of mind toward the brand.

Conative (social goal) devotion is created after customers encounter arrangement of positive effect toward the brand, so they need to repurchase the brand. Activity dependability is the place the roused intentions in the conative dedication stage are changed into status to act. At this stage, clients are focused on the demonstration of repurchasing, disregarding or avoiding deterrents that may keep the demonstration. Thus, destination loyalty is the readiness and willingness to return to and suggest to others the destination. The measures used in this study for destination loyalty are service delivery and consumer loyalty

Service delivery stands out amongst the most vital gateways that establishments need to acquaint with in order to accomplish the fulfillment of these customers. This gives these organizations an upper hand and the capacity to continue to remain viable and reach organizational short and long term objectives. Quality is a long haul duty by the establishments that offer service to fulfill the requirements and wants of clients ceaselessly; that obligation falls on both the management and the employee. To accomplish these necessities and want, it is imperative to accomplish a high state of value in the variety of advantages. The possibility of the general quality means perfection, clear norms and superior. Quality as a factor can be estimated. It falls in the eyes and psyches of clients who have different necessities and who assess them when they utilize the administration as an examination between the qualities they get and the costs spent (Abbasi, Khalid, Azam, & Riaz (2010). Administration characterizes a product as impalpable and it incorporates the execution of certain work or exertion, yet can't be possessed; and typically benefits are offered through the exertion of people or through a mechanical exertion towards specific individuals (Haghkhah, Nostratpur, Ebrahimpuor & Hamid, 2011; Chen&Tsai, 2007).

Consumer loyalty is estimated at the individual level, however is quite often detailed at a total level (Asubanteng & Ngahu, 1996). It can be, and frequently is, estimated along different measurements. A visitor site, for instance, may request that clients rate their involvement with its gathering and registration benefit, visiting procedure, offices and comforts. Consumer loyalty is an equivocal and theoretical idea (Chen & Tsai, 2007) and the genuine indication of the condition of fulfillment will change from individual to individual and item/administration to item/benefit. The condition of fulfillment relies upon both mental and physical factors which associate with fulfillment conduct, for example, return and prescribe rate (Corte, 2015). The level of fulfillment can likewise shift, contingent upon different alternatives the client may have and different items against which the client can think about the association's item (Asubanteng &Ngahu, 1996; Magatef & Tomalieh, 2015; Obiora and Okpu, 2018).

The significance of clients is shallow when it is understood that without clients, there is no business. A solitary disappointed client can move business away; in this manner it is basic to fulfill clients. The more spotlight on client maintenance and client bolster, the more practical a business is. It is beneficial to center around consumer loyalty systems, regardless of how expansive or little an organization is (Chen &Tsai, 2007; Huang &Chiu, 2008.). Understanding the requirements of clients is basic. A business relationship, much the same as some other relationship, depends on the two individuals getting their requirements met.

Against the backdrop of the above, Four null hypotheses were formulated for the study as follows:

Ho₁: There is no significant relationship between destination's website and customer satisfaction.

Ho₂: There is no significant relationship between destination's website and service delivery.

Ho₃: There is no significant relationship between social media and service delivery in tourism destinations.

Ho₄: There is no significant relationship between social media and customer satisfaction in tourism destinations.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design adopted for this study is the cross sectional quasi-experimental research design. The estimated target population for this study comprises six (6) recognized and highly patronized tourist sites in South Eastern Nigeria. The primary data were obtained through administration of questionnaire to the respondents. Thus, the sample size of the study is 135 out of the population size of 203 to be studied. They include tourists present at the tourist site during two major festive seasons. The Cronbach-alpha values obtained were website (0.871), social media (0.812); customer satisfaction (0.762) and service delivery (0.793). Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for the analysis of the data via the SPSS version 24.0. While descriptive statistics was used to analyse the univariate variables, the Spearman Rank correlation coefficient was used to analyse the bivariate variables

4. ESTIMATION RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Out of the 135 copies of questionnaire administered 122 (90.4%) were used for analyzing the research questions and

hypothesis. The demographic characteristics of the respondent showed that 66 respondents were male and 56 were female corresponding to 54.1% and 45.9% respectively. Also, 10% were within the age range of 18-25; 14% were within 26-35 years old; 30% within 36-50 years old; 30% were of 51-65 years old; 11% were over 65 years and only 5% were up to 18 years. Furthermore, the responses for marital status were 12.7%, singles, 74.6%, married, 3.4% divorce and 9.3% widowed respectively. Only 1.92% respondents had SSCE/NECO/GCE; 19.25% respondents had only A level; 12.18% OND/NCE, 43.59 had BSC/BEDU/BA/HND 23.08% had higher degrees.

The occupations of the respondents were not the same: 8.38% were professors; 3.06% were teachers; 9.15% were in the field of medicine; 8.77% were entrepreneurs; 5.10% were artists; 8.90% were caterers; economist were 3.24%; legal practitioners were 4.47%; traders were 3.77%; administrators were 2.61%; architects were 6.51%; service sector were 11.10%; farmers were 1.20%; executive positions 6.91%; students were 12.64%; pensioners were 1.42% and 2.64% were unemployed. 78 respondents connect to the internet corresponding to 63.9%, while 44 (36.11%) are on various forms of social media. Out of 68 respondents who responded to the use of social media, 65 respondents use facebook, which corresponds to 95.58%. Also, 56, 23, 47, 38 and 58 respondents respectively use twitter, imo, skype, Instagram and WhatsApp, corresponding to 82.35%, 33.82%, 69.11%, 55.88% and 85.29% respectively.

Hypothesis Testing

(H0₁): There is no significant relationship between destination’s website and customer satisfaction.

Correlations

		Firms Website	Customer Satisfaction
Spearman's rho	Firms Website	1.000	.766**
	Correlation Coefficient		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.004
Spearman's rho	N	118	118
	Customer Satisfaction	.766**	1.000
	Correlation Coefficient		
Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.
	N	118	118

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation analysis from the above table shows that the correlation coefficient (r = 0.766) between firms website and customer satisfaction is strong and positive. The coefficient of determination (r² = 0.59) indicates that 59% of the customer satisfaction can be influenced by firms

website. The significant value of 0.004 (p<0.05) reveals a significant relationship. Based on that, the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, firms’ website has significant relationship with customer satisfaction.

(H0₂): There is no significant relationship between destination’s website and service delivery.

Correlations

		Firms Website	Service Delivery
Spearman's rho	Firms Website	1.000	.836**
	Correlation Coefficient		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
Spearman's rho	N	118	118
	Service Delivery	.836**	1.000
	Correlation Coefficient		
Spearman's rho	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	118	118

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Result from the above table shows that the correlation coefficient (r = 0.836) between firms website and service delivery is very strong and positive. The coefficient of determination (r² = 0.70) indicates that 70% of the service delivery can be

influenced by firms website. The significant value of 0.00 (p<0.05) reveals a significant relationship. Based on that, the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, firms’ website have significant influence on service delivery.

(H0₃): There is no significant relationship between Social media and service delivery in destinations.

Correlations

		Social Media	Service Delivery
Spearman's rho	Social Media	1.000	.611**
	Correlation Coefficient		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	118	118
	Service Delivery	.611**	1.000
	Correlation Coefficient		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	118	118

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Result from the above table shows that the correlation coefficient (r = 0.611) between social media and service delivery is weak and positive. The coefficient of determination (r² = 0.37) indicates that 37% of the service delivery can be influenced by

social media. The significant value of 0.00 (p<0.05) reveals a significant relationship. Based on that, the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, social media have significant influence on service delivery.

(H0₄): There is no significant relationship between social media and customer satisfaction.

Correlations

		Social Media	Customer Satisfaction
Spearman's rho	Social Media	1.000	.728**
	Correlation Coefficient		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	118	118
	Customer Satisfaction	.728**	1.000
	Correlation Coefficient		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	118	118

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Result from the above table shows that the correlation coefficient (r = 0.728) between social media and customer satisfaction is strong and positive. The coefficient of determination (r² = 0.53) indicates that 53% of the customer satisfaction can be influenced by social media. The significant value of 0.00 (p<0.05) reveals a significant relationship. Based on that, the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, social

media have significant influence on customer satisfaction.

Discussion of Findings

This study revealed that the correlation coefficient (r = 0.836) between destination's website and customer satisfaction is very strong and positive. The coefficient of determination (r² = 0.59) indicates that 59% of the service delivery can be influenced by

firms website. The significant value of 0.00 ($p < 0.05$) reveals a significant relationship and hypothesis one was rejected. Therefore, tourism organizations' websites have significant influence on service delivery. This means that a well-designed and user friendly website enables tourists book accommodation and other services with ease and comfort and that this can improve their level of satisfaction when they can access all about the destination from the comfort of their home/office and the destination's website motivates respondents to put in efforts in testing its product and services thereby making them want to willingly visit the destination again. This implies that a tourism organization's website does contribute to customer satisfaction which is in line with the studies of Ali and Ahliyya, (2012) and Abbasi, et al. (2010) where it was asserted that websites have a strong positive relationship with customer satisfaction

This study showed a very strong and positive correlation ($r = 0.836$) between destination's websites and service delivery. The coefficient of determination ($r^2 = 0.70$) indicated that 70% of the service delivery can be influenced by tourism organizations' websites. This means that a tourism organization's website can bring about quality service delivery, in consonance with Haghkhah, et al. (2011) and Ali and Ahliyya, (2012), in which it was concluded that service delivery had a significant relationship on tourists' satisfaction and directly influence their intention to come back on tourist destinations. Several studies show that not only does service quality of destination give effect to the satisfaction of tourists, but that online networking positively contributes to information sharing, knowledge creation and idea generation capabilities of tourists (Gallarza & Saura, 2006; Corte, Sciarelli, Cascella & Guadio, 2015).

The study also revealed that the correlation coefficient ($r = 0.611$) between social media

and service delivery is weak and positive. The coefficient of determination ($r^2 = 0.37$) indicated that 37% of the service delivery can be influenced by social media. The significant value of 0.00 ($p < 0.05$) reveals a significant relationship, and hypothesis three was rejected to affirm that a significant relationship exists between the social media and service delivery. This entails that a tourist destination's social media page helps in sharing the current activities and makes tourists feel closer to the destination, which makes them have a sense of belonging. This is in line with Mahdavi, (2010), Petti & Ndou (2006) and Cavazza (2012), as the studies opined that social media are useful for managing customer relations with their unique ability of attracting customers through in-depth, focused, and member-generated content, engaging customers through social interactions, and retaining customers through relationship building with other members who are online.

For hypothesis four, this study showed that the correlation ($r = 0.728$) between social media and customer satisfaction is strong and positive. The coefficient of determination ($r^2 = 0.53$) indicates that 53% of the customer satisfaction can be influenced by social media. The significant value of 0.00 ($p < 0.05$) revealed a significant relationship to reject the null hypothesis, asserting that social media have significant influence on customer satisfaction. This implies that giving prompt attention to tourists' complaint on the destination's social media page(s) and staying in touch steadily with customers online and responding to their comments/complaints enhances the tourist's customer satisfaction. This further implies that by communicating with customers through different social media applications, destinations could gain insights relating to their competitive advantage and customer perfection. With the social media, tourism suppliers can achieve a better understanding of what tourists want and how they perceive their

destinations, as customers' comments and opinions can also highlight areas of improvement and enable suppliers to protect their brand and images. Mousavi, Ward & Chua (2016) and Pickett (2008) rightly noted that an online community that is connected to a firm who caters for the need of the community that has to do with its brand has a positive relationship with the community.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has shown that as customers' online presence increases, there is a corresponding increase in customers' destination loyalty. The impact of website is significantly positive because it is one of the most powerful contemporary marketing tools. It is therefore recommended that tourist centres strongly utilize the website as a strong tool for publicity, answer frequently asked questions, provide detailed answers to each one, provide clearer contact details, build credibility and expand their tourist base. Other recommendations, based on the findings of this study include:

- i. Tourism destinations/attractions should have a user friendly website and encourage customers to book online.
- ii. Tourism organizations should ensure all products and services are attractively stated on the websites.
- iii. Tourist destinations should have working social media page(s).
- iv. The social media page(s) should be advertised and emphasized to customers by the marketing departments of respective tourist destinations.
- v. The destinations/attractions should add some sort of social benefits to online affairs with customers.

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Appendix I

Questionnaire

Section A: Demographics

Please tick the box or fill the gap in the information provided representing the most appropriate options.

1. Name of respondent (optional).....
2. Sex: Male Female
3. Marital Status: Sing married divorced widow(er)
- 4 Age: less than 18 18-25 26-35 36-50 51-65 over 65
5. Educational Qualifications
 1. SSCE/NECO/GCE
 2. A LEVEL
 3. OND/NCE
 4. BSc/Bed/BA/HND
 5. Higher Degrees (MSc, PhD etc)
6. Occupation:.....
7. Indicate which social media/medium you are familiar with.....
8. Which social media do you actively use to source for destinations.....

Section B: Online Presence

Instruction: Tick the options that you think satisfies your answer.

5=Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 =Disagree; 2=Strongly Disagree; 1=Undecided.

ONLINE PRESENCE						
1.	I use online sources of information about destinations before I visit					
2.	I knew of this destination online					

4	This destination's services are all online					
5	Some of this destination's services are online					
6	None of this Destination's services are online					
7	There is adequate information online about transportation to the destination					
8	You will visit this site again					

Section B: Destination loyalty

Instruction: Tick the options that you think satisfies your answer.

5=Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 =Disagree; 2=Strongly Disagree; 1=Undecided.

S/n	Quality service delivery	5	4	3	2	1
1	I am uncomfortable coming to this destination					
2	This destination doesn't compromise quality					
3	My leisure needs were met here					
4	I enjoyed the value for my money					
5	The cost of purchase is equal to the satisfaction I got.					
6	I did not regret coming to this destination					
7	Safety and security is guaranteed as indicated online					
	Customer satisfaction					
1	What I read online about this destination is not what I saw when I came here					
2	There will be discount every weekend					
3	This destination is known by their online visibility					
4	Convenience of local transportation as indicated online					
5	Availability of travel information					
6	Ease of access as indicated online					
7	I will tell others to visit this destination					