

Social Media Exposure and Tourism Destination Choices among Youths of Southeast Nigeria

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Abstract

Tourism is one of the world's most promising industries and accounts for major foreign exchange in countries that are fully exploring its potential. Research suggests that tourism and travels remain integral to the lifetime involvement of young people, and their choice of tourism destinations is influenced, among others, by available information. Social media (SM) have been increasingly recognised as one of the sources of information on tourism locations and travel arrangements. These platforms are interactive and promote community-based content creation and sharing. This study investigates how SM exposure influences the choice of tourism destinations among youths in Nigeria's southeast. Anchored on the Media Systems Dependency Theory and Selective Response Theory, the study utilises the survey research approach to sample the views of 400 respondents recruited through multi-stage sampling. The outcome shows the popularity of SM as trusted purveyors of tourism-related information, identifies the main SM platforms utilised by youths in the selection of tourism destinations, and the reasons behind such choices.

Keywords: Hospitality, leisure travels, social media, tourism, youths

Introduction

Tourists, these days, rely heavily on information from social media through the use of digital tools to decrease the risk and uncertainty associated with purchasing travel-related products. These digital tools, according to scholars (Ashiekpe & Mojaye, 2017; Okoro & Nwafor, 2013), have impacted on global commerce, culture, religion, politics and tourism. The rise of the internet and related technologies, particularly social media platforms, has long been recognized as having an ongoing impact on tourists' decision-making in the tourism business. Social media have, therefore, become a perfect platform for the tourism industry, which relies heavily on information to operate because of its capacity to spread enormous volumes of data quickly. Social media have drawn significant scholarly attention in the field of tourism over the past ten years as evidenced by a number of special issues (Backer & Hay, 2013; Law & Xiang, 2013; Law, Fong, Koo, & Ye, 2017; Ozturk, 2017).

Social media platforms are typically utilized for feedback from the local community, content sharing, interpersonal communication, and teamwork. These platforms such as facebook, twitter, youtube, Wikipedia and LinkedIn influence destination choices and the use is increasing (Bakr & Ali, 2013; Tussyadiah, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2011). According to Chaffey (2022), 58.4% of the global population currently uses social media (and the use of these social platforms' channels is having a big impact on social network information and tourism activities. These channels serve as sources of information and influence the tourists' decisive nature and have made social media a significant network of consumer knowledge. Tourists may want to use multiple channels simultaneously, often because the same messages are not communicated across all channels (Key & Czaplewski, 2017; Jain et al., 2021; Jhamb et al., 2021).

Numerous scholars have examined social media's role in tourism from various angles, including the perceived advantages and disadvantages of utilising it (Parra-Lopez et al., 2011; Kang, 2011), with traveler participation in social media being positively correlated with opportunity and motivation (Leung & Bai, 2013). While it has been shown that social media is being utilized more and more for local, micro-level selections within a place, such as which restaurant to eat at or which hotel to stay at (de Lima, Mainardes, & Cavalcanti, 2019; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017), the long-held belief that social media has a significant impact on travelers' choice of destinations is now being challenged by researchers. (Magno & Cassia, 2018; Tsiakali, 2018; Tussyadiah, Kausar, & Soesilo, 2018; Xu & Pratt, 2018). These studies further found out that the use of social networking may boost tourist mobilization and, consequently, citizen participation in tourism (Ihejinika, Mbazie and Ndinojuo, 2015).

Youth tourism remains a high-value sector as young travellers are eager to explore new destinations, immerse themselves in different cultures, and have unique experiences. Over 23% of the one billion plus international tourists are represented by youths according, to the Global Report on the Power of Youth Travel published by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), and the World Youth Student and Educational (WYSE) Travel Confederation in 2016. As the total global expenditure on youth travel was USD 286 billion in 2014 and is anticipated to reach USD 514 billion by 2026.

Since social media allows users to connect with people from all over the world, users can take advantage and numerous benefits which could have diverse impacts on their travel choice and help boost a country's GDP but information has shown that tourism only makes up 30% of Nigeria's GDP annually, which is disappointing when compared to Nigeria's other income-generating industries like agriculture, oil and manufacturing industry (Mbanefo, 2015). The

need to investigate how exposed people are in selecting tourism destination choices especially the youths who are the highest consumer of social media product gave birth to this piece. Millions of people have been recorded utilizing social networks daily, according to internet research (Miles, 2015). As a result, social networks serve as platforms for the dissemination of information. Unfortunately, the potential of this kind of communication has not been completely realized in the growth and promotion of different tourist destinations in Nigeria. In this context, this study seeks to (i) determine the level of exposure to tourism-related contents on social media among youths in Nigeria's south-east; (ii) ascertain the popularity of social media as trusted sources of tourism-related information among youths in Nigeria's south-east; and (iii) investigate the influence of social media exposure on the choice of tourism destinations.

Literature Review

Information Evolution of Social Media

Information system has played a vital role in transforming business and communications. Over the course of human history, several devices for information dissemination have been developed to facilitate communication (Carton, 2009). The need for communication among people and the development of digital technology have both contributed to social media's evolution. There are many opinions about the first occurrence of social media, although the earliest source of information system dated back to 1792 with the usage of telegraphs for long-distance communication (Ritholz, 2010). While the roots of digital communication run deep, most contemporary accounts of the modern origins of today's internet and social media point to the emergence in 1969 of the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET). This early digital network, created by the United States Department of Defense, allowed scientists at four interconnected universities to share software, hardware, and other data. In 1987, the direct precursor to today's internet came into being when the National Science Foundation launched a more robust, nationwide digital network known as the NSFNET. A decade later, in 1997, the first true social media platform was launched.

Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube are examples of Web 2.0 applications that allow users to create, share, and interact with content. This shift has transformed the internet from a one-way communication channel to a multi-directional and user-driven platform. Some argue that the newest era of digital technologies, characterized by user collaboration and cooperation, can be labeled Web 3.0, (Jenny, 2016). Examples of social media platforms are numerous and varied. Social media according to Kaplan & Haelin (2010), are broadly categorized into social networking sites (as in Facebook), blogs and micro blogs (as in Twitter), collaborative projects (as in Wikipedia), content communities (as in YouTube), virtual game world (as in World of Craft) and virtual social world (such as Second life).

Over the years, social media platforms have been a vital source of information for people and have turned consumers of news into news producers. Accordingly, Nwabueze, Obasi and Obi (2013) postulated that the social media ushered the world into what can be called 'attention age,' an era which followed after the information age; and characterized by the ability of individuals to create and consume information instantly and freely, and as well, share it on the Internet via social media. A further proof of the wide acceptance and attraction of the social media can be seen from the number of people that operate social media accounts. In Nigeria, social media have been referred to as the newest platforms for experiencing journalism's products because they are among the most popular channels for interpersonal communication and idea sharing ((Ajayi & Adesote, 2015). It is estimated that 30.9 million Nigerians use social media regularly, and that number is estimated to increase to 36.8 million by 2023(Clement, 2019).

There are no significant racial differences in using social media as a source of information (Brenner, 2012). This is why Hvass & Munar (2012) believe that the initiator of communication in social media can be an individual or a group of individuals who transmit information or disseminates information without selecting a specific person to transmit information. Internationally, social media use among adults is above 50% in Britain, Spain, and the Czech Republic. As in the United States, there are strong global variations in social media use by age, with the young (18- 29) far more likely to use social media than their older counterparts (50+). For instance, 71% of 18-29-year-olds in Japan use social media, as compared with 8% of those 50 and older (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Social media are progressively being used as an information source, including information related to tourism and tourist destination. The social media's strengths come from how quickly, simply, and affordably they can be accessed by everyone around the world (Erubami, 2020). Contrary to the conventional media, most social media platforms have almost no regulation, code of ethics, or gate-keeping, leaving their usage up to the intentions and discretion of users (Ufuophu-Biri & Ojoboh, 2017). Akpoghiran & Erubami (2019) opine that the improper use of these digital tools could lead to information overload and the dissemination of half-truths (Akpoghiran & Erubami, 2019). This can however affect the ways users, especially youths, who form the participants of this study, select which particular tourist center they wish to visit or the choice of tourism destination. All phases of travel are influenced by social media (Mariani et al. 2019, Mohanan & Shekhar, 2021) as they facilitate information gathering, contacting, and travel decision making (Stepchenkova et al., 2007).

Social Media and Tourism: The Decision-Making Process

Over the past three decades, the choice of tourist destinations has been a major discourse in tourism scholarship. (Decrop, 2010; Karl, Reintinger, & Schmude, 2015; Moscardo, Morrison, Pearce, Lang, & O'Leary, 1996). In the light of the growing competition among travel destinations, interest has been raised in influencing visitor preferences. Early researchers recommended using rational decision-making methods while choosing a destination and recognizing different effects (Crompton, 1992; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). As Ononogbo and Ukabuilu (2023) also emphasized that Tourist loyalty is very important for the destination in the recent market environment. The idea of choice sets has been essential to many logical procedures. (Decrop, 2010; Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). According to researchers that study choice sets, travelers evaluate potential destinations cognitively and emotionally in light of their goals or motivations for travelling (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). The process of shifting from destinations a decision-maker is aware of is referred to as an awareness set. He or she can now eliminate destinations to a few remaining alternatives in an evoked set, where these destinations are regarded to be highly fit for the tourist's purpose (Crompton, 1992). A tourist then chooses the final destination from the limited options in the evoked set. (Karl et al., 2015, Mohsin & Ryan, 2004; Nyman, Westin, & Carson, 2018). Social media is used before, during, and after travel to highlight the temporal roles throughout the tourist journey. (Book, Tanford, Montgomery, & Love, 2018). Social media seems to be relevant and helpful in influencing tourist choices and decision-making at each of these three stages. In the pre-travel stage, Liu, Norman, & Pennington-Gray (2013) believe that tourists use social media as tools to solicit tourism-related information, and expedite the information search process. Tussyadiah et al., (2018) opine that participating in social media can assist travelers in defending their decisions and minimizing post-purchase dissonance, even about their choice of place. In their view, destination choices are particularly prone to dissonance for two key reasons; one, the decision to purchase is not immediately followed by consumption, (Jalilvand, Samiei, Dini, & Manzari, 2012). Two, destination decisions are frequently made without having the chance to "pre-test" the experience. (Rathonyi, 2013).

In the travelling process which is the second stage, during the travel experience, social media is a tool that

tourists utilize to share their trip experiences. Some postulate that this is to enable other users to vicariously share the tourist's destination experience (Wu & Pearce, 2017). Others posit that the ideal social self-image has been extended by social media, and the offered tourism experience repositions how a person is portrayed, (Osei, Mensah, & Amenumey, 2018). It is advised that social media should be utilized to let others know where a tourist is when travelling due to the increased importance of safety and security. (Hernandez-Mendez, Munoz Leiva, & Sanchez-Fernandez, 2015).

In the third stage, tourists use social media in the post-travel phase as a repository for vacation memories. Many times, forums and websites with archives of photographs are collections of comments by various tourists outlining their likes and dislikes of particular experiences. (Fakharyan, Jalilvand, Elyasi, & Mohammadi, 2012). Lee, Reid, & Kim (2014) believe that some tourists do this voluntarily, to provide useful information to assist others in planning their travels, while other tourists though, may engage with social media at the post-travel stage to showcase what they've experienced.

It is a known fact now that there are several occasions and ways in which travelers connect with social media throughout their travels. This is why Bakr & Ali (2013) posit that social media makes travel easier and makes it easier to choose a destination. Given that the success of any destination depends on its capacity to influence visitor arrivals and subsequently encourage repeat visits, social media may be a useful approach to increase knowledge of and interest in the destination. (Zhang, Wu, Morrison, Tseng, & Chen, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

The paper was anchored on Media Systems Dependency Theory (MSDT) and Selective Process Theory. In order to explain the societal and individual factors that affect how important media is to people's daily lives, the media system dependency theory first presented by Ball-Rokeach and De Fleur in 1976 offers a multi-layered and ecological framework. Regarding the present study, the MSDT postulates that individuals and organizations rely on the media (social media) to grasp what is going on in society (concerning tourism destination choices, in this case) and make decisions about how to act, and fill their leisure time in various tourist centers. In modern society, people have relied on their personal connections and networks to achieve their goals of understanding what is happening in society and determining how to act and how to spend their free time (Adegbola & Gearhart, 2019). For youths to accomplish their different goals in choosing any tourist center of their choice; it has become challenging for them to rely solely on their personal contacts without using social media as their source of information. According to Kemper (2014), it has become difficult for people to live well in modern society with the growing speed of social change without relying on the media for knowledge.

On the other hand, Selective processes theory took its origin from the cognitive dissonance theory propounded by Festinger Leon in 1957. The selective processes theory comprises four steps of selective exposure, attention, perception and retention. Through selective processes theory, individuals interpret the media in their own way and tend to avoid messages that do

not confirm their beliefs (Whitaker, Ramsey & Smith, 2012). Thus, individuals only give their time and attention to messages and media that align with their pre-existing beliefs. In relation to this study, the selective exposure theory believes that people will seek information or content related to tourism that endorses their already existing beliefs/views; they expose themselves to media tourism contents that do not contradict their view and then interpret the information they have decided to give their attention to. Perceptions are shaped by a number of elements, such as attitudes, dislikes, beliefs etc. Individuals could have a particular perception or theory towards a tourist destination by reading social media tourism contents. People develop a particular interest or become aware of what tourist center they want to visit while reading or sourcing messages related to tourism in the media and tend to ignore views that are contrary to theirs. Selective retention is what one retains/remembers after perceiving content received as media messages. Individuals will likely retain tourist centers that they believe had a positive or negative impact during their visit and this could be influential in choosing a tourist center when next they want to embark on such journey. Selective retention is all about memory recall with the selected exposed and perceived information from various messages. People have the tendency to remember messages or tourist centers that support their beliefs towards tourism and discard tourism content that does not. Research states that people unconsciously forget or set aside the information that opposes their pre-existing beliefs (Stroud, 2010).

Method

Design and Sampling Procedure

The study used survey research as its primary methodology, which enables researchers to comprehend the peculiar aspects that influence human behaviour (Ugwuoke & Erubami, 2021). The youths of all five states in Nigeria's Southeast geopolitical zone comprised the population of study. The states are Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. The zone consists of the five states aforementioned, covering about 41,440km², with a population of 21,955,414 people (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2018). Using the Taro Yamane's formula, a sample size of 400 respondents was drawn from the above population:

Next, the participants were selected using a multistage sampling technique. In the first stage, the Southeast geopolitical zone was stratified based on states - Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. A simple random sampling technique was used to select Enugu and Imo states in the second stage through a lucky dip. The third stage was choosing the research venues, which were the cities of Enugu and Owerri, the capitals of both states. Given the size and diversity of both cities, the researchers predicted that they would have far higher rates of social media usage and be more tourist-inclined than those in other states and rural areas. Hence, they were specifically chosen for the study. In the fourth stage, convenience sampling technique was used to choose specific respondents from the study locations. According to researchers, the convenience sampling technique has a generalizability and bias problem; as a result, study samples obtained using this technique should be compared to population stratification to gauge how biased they are (Baltar & Brunet, 2012; Sadler et al., 2010). Our collected samples, which are shown in the findings section, did not significantly differ from the stratification of the Nigerian population when compared to the broader Nigerian population (NBS, 2018). Only young Nigerians between the ages of 18 and 35 were included in the final sample of respondents (National Youth Policy, 2009; Oji & Erubami, 2020). Four research assistants who had degrees in archaeology and tourism were sent out to chosen houses in the areas under study to hand out copies of the questionnaire.

Measurement

A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire was used as an instrument for data collection. This is because it helps researchers to gather information on respondents' distinctive attitudes, views, and knowledge in a measurable manner. The questionnaire instrument is typically thought to be appropriate for studies involving many participants. (Akpoghiran, 2014). Respondents were asked to value items with responses ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Prior to the actual data collection exercise, the instrument was subjected to content validation by an expert in research and tourism studies who affirmed the appropriate operationalisation of the instrument against the relevant content domain of the construct. Content validity, which is a significant research technique that gauges how effectively a test captures its intended behaviour, is often referred to as logical or rational validity (Asemah et al., 2017). In order to verify the instrument's initial reliability, we performed a pilot survey with 20 people in Nsukka, Enugu State, a town that is experiencing rapid growth. For each of the factors, the outcome produced acceptable Cronbach's Alpha for all the variables - social media exposure (0.71), trust in social media tourism information (0.81), and social media influence on choice of tourism destination (0.74).

Social Media Exposure

Social media exposure was measured with five items on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree". The items were: (1) I use social media platforms regularly; (2) I am aware that social media provide ample information on tourism and tourism destinations; (3) I use social media platforms to access information on tourism destinations.; (4) I belong to social media networking groups where tourism destinations-related information are publicly shared; (5) If I were to go on vacation tomorrow, I would

consult my social media sources for adequate guidance on tourism destinations; ($\alpha = 0.71$, $\bar{X} = 3.39$, $SD = 1.26$).

Trust in Social Media Tourism Information

Trust in social media tourism information was assessed with five questions on a 5-point Likert scale, with possible responses ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The questions were: (1) I have trust in social media as invaluable sources of tourism information; (2) I use social media for tourist destination because it is convenient; (3) The tourism information I gather from social media will influence my final choice", (4) The information I get from social media about tourism is available to me at the right time (5) It is easier to find information on social networks than from other sources; ($\alpha = 0.81$, $\bar{X} = 3.39$, $SD = 1.26$).

Social Media Influence on Choice of Tourism Destination

We constructed a 5-point Likert scale of social media influence in tourism destination with five items, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The questions were: (1) Prior online reviews on tourist centers influence my tourism destination choices; (2) My previous tourism destination choices were influenced by the level ratings accorded those locations by social media users; (3) The comments of social media tourist's influencers and experts affect my tourism destination choices; (4) Social media advertisements and campaigns on tourism enable me to select my preferred tourist destination; (5) My independent research on social media to get tourism-related information influences my choice of tourism destination; ($\alpha = 0.74$, $\bar{X} = 3.39$, $SD = 1.26$).

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using Mean (\bar{X}) and Standard Deviation (SD), which had the benchmarks of 3.00 and 1.41, respectively. Any item with a mean score below 3.00 was rejected, while items with mean scores above 3.00 were accepted (Nworgu, 2006; Oji & Erubami, 2020; Syam & Nurrahmi, 2020). For standard deviation, a high mean and low or moderate standard deviation indicated that the responses are marked different (high variability). In contrast, a low mean and a low or moderate standard deviation indicated a low variability among the responses.

For the data analysis, SPSS version 24 was used to conduct mean and standard deviation analysis. For the decision rule the benchmark for accepting an item was set at 3.00 and 1.44 respectively. Items with mean scores that are greater than 3.00 were approved, whereas those with mean scores of less than 3.00 were discarded (Nworgu, 2006; Oji & Erubami, 2020; Syam & Nurrahmi, 2020). For standard deviation, a high mean and low or moderate standard deviation indicated that the responses have high variability. In contrast, a low mean and a low or moderate standard deviation indicated a low variability among the responses.

Results

The analyses were based on 384 copies of the completed and returned questionnaire, representing a 96% response rate. Female respondents amounted to 44.7% of the sample, while 55.3% consisted of males; the least possible age of the respondents was 18 years, and the highest was 35 years; the modal age range was 25-30 years. 11.2% of the respondents have had primary education, 48% have had secondary education. The remaining 40.8% have received various levels of tertiary education. In addition, 53.6% of the respondents had various forms of active employment, while 46.4% were unemployed. Also, the result also shows that 25.6% makes use of social media several times a day, 19.7% makes use of social media once a day, 24.4% of the respondents makes use of social media several times a week, while those who uses social media once a week a week are 19.3% and those who do not make use of social media at all are 11% of the respondents. Whatsapp was the most frequently used (29.6%), followed by Facebook (25.9%), Twitter (18.4%), Instagram (17.4%), and YouTube (14.8%) while 9% of respondents specified other social media platform they used.

Exposure to Social Media Tourism Information

The results presented in Table 1 shows that despite the fact that a percentage use the social media platforms regularly, ($\bar{X} = 4.12$, $SD = 1.42$), an average of them are not aware that social media provide ample information on tourism and tourism destinations ($\bar{X} = 2.67$, $SD = 1.82$). Nonetheless, those who are aware that social media platforms offer sufficient information about tourism; use social media to evaluate their destination choices ($\bar{X} = 3.35$, $SD = 1.30$). A higher percentage of those who access social media when they want to embark on a tourist destination do not belong to a social media networking groups where tourism destinations-related information are publicly shared ($\bar{X} = 2.63$, $SD = 1.87$), but they consult various social media sources for adequate guidance on tourism destinations whenever they wish to travel for tourist purposes ($\bar{X} = 4.32$, $SD = 1.38$).

Table 1: Exposure to Social Media Tourism Information

| S/N | ITEM | \bar{X} | SD |
|-----|---|-----------|------|
| 1 | I use social media platforms regularly | 4.12 | 1.42 |
| 2 | I am aware that social media provide ample information on tourism and tourism destinations | 2.67 | 1.82 |
| 3 | I use social media platforms to access information on tourism destinations | 3.35 | 1.73 |
| 4 | I belong to social media networking groups where tourism destinations-related information are publicly shared | 2.63 | 1.87 |
| 5 | If I were to go on vacation tomorrow, I would consult my social media sources for adequate guidance on tourism destinations | 4.32 | 1.38 |

Trust in Social Media Tourism Information

Regarding the dependability of social media for tourism information, our results presented in table 2 shows that respondents have a high level of trust in social media as invaluable sources of tourism information ($\bar{X} = 4.14$, $SD = 1.45$) because of their convenience when seeking tourist destination ($\bar{X} = 3.98$, $SD = 1.56$), Tourism information gathered from social media also have a great influence in their final choices for tourist destination ($\bar{X} = 3.96$, $SD = 1.58$) The information respondents get from social media come at the right time ($\bar{X} = 3.88$, $SD = 1.50$) and with ease when compared to other sources ($\bar{X} = 4.13$, $SD = 1.44$), thus making them distinctive and trustworthy as sources of tourist information.

Table 2: Trust in Social Media Tourism Information

| S/N | ITEM | \bar{X} | SD |
|-----|--|-----------|------|
| 1 | I have trust in social media as invaluable sources of tourism information | 4.14 | 1.45 |
| 2 | I use social media or tourist destination because it is convenient | 3.98 | 1.56 |
| 3 | The tourism information I gather from social media will influence my final choice | 3.96 | 1.58 |
| 4 | The information I get from social media about tourism is available to me at the right time | 3.88 | 1.50 |
| 5 | It is easier to find information on social media platforms than from other sources | 4.13 | 1.44 |

Influences of Social Media Exposure and Tourism Destination Preferences

On the influences of social media exposure and tourism destination preference, our results presented in Table 3 shows that previous online reviews of tourist centers influences respondents tourism destination choices ($\bar{X} = 3.99$, $SD = 1.34$), while ratings by social media users influenced their previous tourism destination ($\bar{X} = 3.90$, $SD = 1.61$). It also shows that comments of social media tourist's influencers and experts do not have major impact on their tourist destination choices ($\bar{X} = 2.64$, $SD = 1.85$) together with social media advertisements and campaigns ($\bar{X} = 2.60$, $SD = 1.90$). Instead, a major factor that influences their choices of tourism destination is the respondents' independent research on social media to get tourism-related information ($\bar{X} = 4.05$, $SD = 1.50$).

Table 3: Influences of Social Media Exposure and Tourism Destination Preferences

| S/N | ITEM | \bar{X} | SD |
|-----|---|-----------|------|
| 1 | Prior online reviews on tourist centers influence my tourism destination choices | 3.99 | 1.34 |
| 2 | My previous tourism destination choices were influenced by the level ratings accorded those locations by social media users | 3.90 | 1.61 |
| 3 | The comments of social media tourist's influencers and experts affect my tourism destination choices | 2.64 | 1.85 |
| 4 | Social media advertisements and campaigns on tourism enable me to select my preferred tourist destination | 2.60 | 1.90 |
| 5 | My independent research on social media to get tourism-related information influences my choice of tourism destination | 4.05 | 1.50 |

Discussion

This study investigated how exposure to social media tourism information influences young people's tourist destination choices in Nigeria by analysing data gathered from youths in the southeast geopolitical zone. The study found that most Nigerian youths are exposed to the social media, given that 89% of the respondents make use of social media at a particular time of a day/week or at different intervals of a day/week. Further analysis reveals that every four of five persons use social media at a relatively frequent interval. Modern digital tools that enable users to easily access online contents, which are highly accessible (Edogoh et al,

2015) may have been the primary factor for such a significantly high degree of exposure to social media usage. In addition, the increasing adoption of smart phones and ubiquitous access to the Internet has a profound impact on tourists' information search and decision-making, playing an essential role along the overall tourist process (Amaro et al., 2016).

Incidentally, the study reveals that an average of Nigerian youths are not aware that social media provide ample information on tourism and tourism destinations, however, those who are aware majorly make use of social media platforms to access such information. This is in agreement with previous studies that early decision-making tourist process starts with the information search stage (Chung and Koo, 2015). The study found that despite the fact that the usage of the social media for tourism information by respondents was rated highly, most of them do not belong to any social media networking group where tourism-related information is shared. They generally consult several social media sources when they want to take decisions on their tourism destination. This affirms the views of Cox et al., 2009; Schuckert et al., 2016 that individuals obtain information from diversified online sources, including social media.

There are several factors that could influence a user's choice or preference for social media as their trusted means of information for tourism destination. Cox et al. (2009), opined that information obtained from social media is not necessarily perceived as trustworthy and reliable compared to more traditional sources, such as official and governmental tourism websites, but it acts as supplementary to traditional sources rather than as substitute for them. It was found in this research that respondents have trust in the social media as valuable instrument for tourism information because of how convenient it is; while guiding them to make final and suitable pre-tourism destination choices. This is similar to studies of social media influence, specifically on destination choice (Davies & Cairncross, 2013; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012), even though they contradict the continuing claims that social media is highly influential (Leung, Sun, & Bai, 2019).

The finding is also not in conformity with the study by Cox et al. (2009), who believe that social media is used mainly after the destination has been chosen, especially for information searches regarding accommodation and where to go within the destination. However, the respondents believe that social media happens to be there at the right time for them, that is why they have so much trust in it and which in turn makes it easier for them to get tourism information compared to others. Social media are acknowledged as an important information source that influences tourists' travel choices. One of the overarching objectives of the study was to ascertain the influence of social media exposure and tourism destination preferences among young people in Southeast Nigeria. Responses to the question show that previous online reviews and ratings by social media users on tourist centers tend to influence youth tourism destination choices. In the study by Zhang et al. (2010), a web site with more reviews is more attractive to consumers. They believe that many tourists consult online reviews, what social media users have said about a tourist center, before choosing a hotel, tourism centers etc. and these might play an important role especially in tourism destination choices. With the high-level insecurity in Nigeria, it is important that youth go through tourist social media pages to check and preview what others have said in order to make the right tourism destination choices. These lend credence to Media Systems Dependency Theory (MSDT), which postulates that individuals and organizations rely on the media to grasp what is going on in society and make decisions about how to act.

Observably, respondents in this study seem to be less influenced by comments made by social media tourist influencers and tourism advertisement campaign, they rather believe that their self-research effort was more helpful in the selection of their destination choices. . As previous studies explained, reference groups, such as friends and family have a tremendous influence on recommendations (Pesonen & Pasanen, 2017). Additionally, social groups and influencers can also be recognized as reference groups (Evans, et al., 2009, pp. 241-243). Furthermore, Amaro et al. (2016) argued that tourism content created by tourists is more credible and trustworthy than content created by other sources. However, the outcome of this study did not go in line with previous literature that tourist influencers have a great influence in tourism destination choices among youths. The youths believe that influencers' adverts and campaigns would not showcase the negative aspects of a tourist center(s).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study shows that social media exposure has a great influence in youths making decisions about tourism destination. Young people feel that the accessibility and availability of social media make it easy and convenient for them to make tourism destinations decision through various social media platforms. The need for tourist centers to engage in social media awareness campaign on tourism information is very pertinent given that some youths in this study were not aware that social media provides sufficient information on tourism destinations. The study affirms that increased exposure to tourism messages can significantly influence individuals' engagement in tourism destination choices; the decision to engage in self-research for tourism information activities gives credence to this view.

This study provides valuable knowledge for the Nigeria tourism sector by understanding youth's tourist choice processes and the roles of social media. Tourist centers should pay more attention to social media channels to raise awareness and improve their reputation about their services. Moreover, the study recommends that government agencies in charge of tourism as well as destination-management companies should make efforts to enhance youth interest and involvement to significantly increase their visibility in tourism. It has been demonstrated that social media play a direct role as a need generator and/or supporter in tourists' destination choices. Therefore, strategies should be developed to provide opportunities to share photos and videos of beautiful scenery and places of interest that may result in interest among potential tourists. Future studies should try to replicate the research in different geographical locations since the samples for this study were from specific areas in southeast Nigeria. To further understand how social media exposure and engagement affect location preferences over the tourist experience, longitudinal studies might be conducted to look at tourists' interactions before, during, and after their trip (Provenzano, Hawelka, & Baggio, 2018). However, the use of a small sample size, does not undermine the validity of the research findings. Finally, taking into account the possible methodological limitations of our study, we suggest that future researches address the uncertainties associated with social media tourist destination selections using a larger sample size and both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

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