

Recommendations for e-commerce systems in the tourism industry of sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

The recommendations described in this paper are a continuation of research previously reported in the Telematics and Informatics journal. This paper explains how the tourism organisations from sub-Saharan Africa can evolve their websites into marketing tools and how they can overcome the impediments to e-commerce adoption and usage. The recommendations also explain how the other major players within the economies of these countries can make the environment conducive for e-commerce development and growth so that the tourism organisations from this region can break into the lucrative international tourism market. The recommendations were tested by sending them to the African organisations and experts in e-commerce and tourism who have worked in, or are currently based in Africa, south of the Sahara. The results showed most organisations and experts who responded think that these recommendations will help African tourism organisations adopt and use e-commerce. African tourism organisations that intend to implement or are in the process of implementing e-commerce systems should follow the recommendations outlined in this paper to help sub-Saharan Africa reach its tourism potential.

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1. Introduction

The tourism industry is regarded as one of the biggest sectors in the world generating an estimated 11% of the global gross domestic product (GDP) and employing 200 million people and serving 700 million tourists worldwide – a figure which is expected to double by the year 2020 (Roe and Urquhart, 2001). With the other major sectors of the economy not performing well, the tourism industry has emerged as the biggest contributor of the GDP since the early 1990s in most African countries and is now viewed as the panacea of the African economies (Gauci et al., 2002; Dieke, 2000).

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Despite the diverse wildlife, unique resorts and the exotic flora and fauna, Africa's tourism potential remains underutilised and undeveloped (Naudé and Saayman, 2005). Today the Internet with its growing population has technologies which provide the African merchants with an unprecedented level of connectivity and the ability to communicate efficiently and effectively directly with customers. Electronic commerce (e-commerce) which operates on the backbone of the Internet could help the African tourism organisations generate additional revenue by reaching the markets they could not access using traditional systems. Adoption and usage of e-commerce in the developed world has produced tremendous results with revenues in the travel and tourism industry set to increase dramatically (Anite Travel Systems, 2000; Paulo, 2000; Accenture, 2002; Werthner and Ricci, 2004). e-Commerce could help achieve the potential of the African tourism industry thus increasing the in-flows of the much needed foreign currency into their economies.

2. Methodology

The study described in this paper is a continuation of research previously reported in the Telematics and Informatics journal by Maswera et al. (2006). As there is little published information about the e-commerce activities in Africa south of the Sahara (Molla and Licker, 2004), a study (Maswera et al., 2006) was carried out to find out if organisations in the tourism industry in four African countries were adopting e-commerce. The countries studied were South Africa, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Uganda. These four African countries were chosen for the study as they are some of the tourist destinations which are better known for safari-type of tourism. This research is described in more detail in the previous paper in Telematics and Informatics by Maswera et al. (2006), in the PhD thesis by Maswera (2006), and in papers by Maswera and Dawson (2003a,b, 2004) and Maswera et al. (2005). However, for ease of reference, this section provides a summary of the research undertaken.

There were two phases in this study. The first phase involved examining a large number of websites of various tourism organisations from the above-mentioned countries. Three surveys were carried out, the first to determine what e-commerce features are available on the sub-Saharan African websites, the second to examine the content accessibility and the third to examine the usability of the websites. Availability sampling was used to choose the organisations to survey. Search strings were used to find as many websites as possible relevant to tourism in the African countries. For this purpose the search engines used were Google and Excite. To get the most out of a search the researchers used search strings such as “Major Hotels in South Africa” and “Travel Agencies in Namibia”. Other websites were found at sites of various associations. For example, the Tourism Business Council of South Africa (TBCSA), the Kenya Association of Tour Operators (KATO), and the United States Tour Operators Association (USTOA) have lists of links to websites of their members.

The limitation of this sampling method is that it is difficult to determine the total population the tourism organisations that the survey represents. However, by obtaining as many companies as is possible with between 300 and 600 websites examined in each survey, all categories of tourism organisations were well represented. The websites which were accessed were those of the various tourism organisations which included national airlines, national parks, government-run and private tourism promotion organisations, car rental companies, travel agencies and tour operators. The websites of the aforementioned organisations are likely to provide information a tourist needs before deciding whether to embark on the particular trip. These websites will also enable the customer to carry out the necessary transactions such as making enquiries or online reservations and paying for the products and services.

The analysis of the data gathered from the surveys revealed that although the websites were comparable in terms of providing tourism product information to those of their counterparts in the USA and Europe they need to be evolved into marketing tools for them to attract enough business for the tourism organisations to make an impact in their respective economies. In terms of accessibility and usability, the results showed that although the African websites were comparable to those of organisations from established and more developed markets, this was usually because the African websites were relatively simple and lacked the more advanced features of their American and European counterparts. The African organisations need to follow the Web Accessibility Guidelines when designing and developing websites so that they add more advanced features that are able to fully capture that market which is not being catered for on other websites.

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