

The Role of Facebook in Promoting Domestic Tourism during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Kenya: A Case Study of Wanderlust Diaries Facebook Page

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Abstract

This research explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Kenya's tourism industry, with a specific focus on leveraging research, technology, and innovation in the new economy for sustainable development. It critically examined the role of social media, particularly Facebook, in promoting domestic tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic period. The study is centered on the Wanderlust Diaries Facebook page, which has actively encouraged domestic travel in Kenya since April 2020 by providing a platform for individuals to share their experiences and recommendations. By conducting interviews and analyzing posts from the page followers, travel bloggers, and influencers within the group, the research gathered qualitative data to understand Facebook's effectiveness in communicating and promoting domestic tourism amid the pandemic's restrictions. The study's primary objectives were to investigate the significance of Facebook posts in conveying vital domestic tourism information and to analyze how these posts served as a marketing tool during the of Covid 19 Pandemic period challenges in the tourism sector. Guided by Chaffey's Theory of Social Media Marketing, the research employed a descriptive research design, allowing for the collection of in-depth data through interviews with 30 participants who are engaged followers and members of the Wanderlust Diaries Facebook page. The findings reveal that Facebook posts played a key role in creating awareness about domestic tourism, influencing interest in visiting local parks and attractions, and effectively marketing the tourism sector, even amid lockdowns and travel restrictions. This research underscores the immense potential of social media platforms, particularly Facebook, to promote tourism, providing valuable insights for businesses on how to utilize such platforms for effective marketing purposes. In conclusion, Facebook proved to be a vital tool in sustaining domestic tourism in Kenya during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the significant value of social media as an effective and efficient marketing tool for the tourism industry in times of crisis.

Key Words: Domestic Tourism, Facebook, COVID-19 pandemic, Wanderlust Diaries, Social Media Marketing.

1.0 Introduction

In recent years, social media platforms, including Facebook, have become increasingly popular due to the rise of the internet, affordable digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops, and high penetration rates globally (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). These platforms have transformed the way people interact, communicate, and access information, with significant implications for industries such as tourism. On October 28, 2021, Facebook rebranded itself as

Meta, with its CEO Mark Zuckerberg explaining that this new name reflects the company's broader vision of building an immersive, interconnected virtual world beyond the internet as we know it (Zuckerberg, 2021). This shift signals the importance of technology, innovation, and digital transformation in shaping the future economy.

The theme of leveraging research, technology, and innovation in the new economy for sustainable development is at the core of this study, particularly in the context of the tourism industry. Technology, especially social media, has played a crucial role in bridging gaps created by external disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic dramatically reshaped the global tourism landscape, resulting in unprecedented challenges for the industry. In Kenya, where tourism is a key pillar of the economy, the crisis prompted a severe decline in international tourist arrivals, necessitating a strategic shift toward promoting domestic tourism as a means to revitalize the sector (Ochieng, 2020).

As global travel restrictions limited movement and heightened health concerns, domestic tourism emerged as a critical strategy for supporting the industry's recovery. Amid this shift, social media platforms, particularly Facebook, became powerful tools for tourism marketers to engage potential travelers, create virtual communities, and sustain a connection with audiences during times of restricted physical movement. Facebook's vast reach and interactive features enabled marketers to raise awareness about local destinations, build brand loyalty, and stimulate interest in domestic travel options. The Covid-19 pandemic as explained by Adetunji, Mohd and Ishak (2018) propelled online business, online markets and social networks where almost all businesses and buyers switched to e-commerce and online shopping, respectively as preventive measures against the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Adetunji, Mohd and Ishak (2018), online portals and social networks were increasingly used in marketing businesses, products, and services, and Facebook posts were not exempt from promoting offerings, including the tourism industry's offerings (products and services).

Research has shown that social media significantly influences consumer behavior, especially in tourism, where User-Generated Content (UGC) plays a central role in shaping travel decisions. According to Namasasu and Kinyanjui (2019), social media enhances consumer engagement by providing real-time information and creating a space for interaction between users and businesses. During the COVID-19 pandemic, platforms like Facebook proved invaluable for

maintaining relationships with customers, fostering community engagement, and adapting marketing strategies to reflect changing consumer preferences. With consumers confined to their homes, social media became a primary source of travel inspiration, allowing users to explore destinations virtually and plan future trips.

A prominent case study illustrating the power of social media in promoting domestic tourism during the pandemic is the Wanderlust Diaries Facebook page. This page successfully showcased Kenya's hidden gems and unique travel experiences, encouraging Kenyans to explore their own country when international travel was largely unfeasible. Wanderlust Diaries engaged a community of travel enthusiasts, posting captivating images, stories, and experiences that reignited interest in domestic tourism. By promoting lesser-known destinations and fostering local pride, the page helped drive domestic tourism during a time of crisis and offered a blueprint for leveraging social media to stimulate travel interest.

The significance of Facebook in this context cannot be overstated. Its ability to facilitate virtual interactions allowed tourism businesses to maintain visibility and relevance during a time when physical travel was restricted. Through targeted posts, travel referrals, and interactive features such as comments and shares, Facebook provided a platform for creating awareness about travel destinations, inspiring potential tourists, and promoting safe travel practices in the face of adversity.

The role of social media in promoting tourism is particularly relevant in the context of sustainable development. By encouraging domestic travel, social media platforms contribute to local economies, reduce carbon footprints associated with international travel, and promote responsible tourism practices. The integration of technology in marketing efforts offers a path forward for the tourism industry as it recovers from the pandemic, highlighting the importance of innovation in creating resilience in times of crisis (Smith & Johnson, 2023).

This paper focuses on the impact of Facebook on promoting domestic tourism in Kenya during the COVID-19 pandemic, using Wanderlust Diaries as a focal point. It aims to analyze the strategies employed by the page to influence domestic tourists' travel decisions and cultivate a sense of adventure despite global challenges. Furthermore, this study seeks to provide insights into the potential of social media, particularly Facebook, as a marketing tool in the tourism sector during crises. By examining how social media platforms can adapt to changing economic

conditions and foster sustainable development, this research contributes to the broader discussion on leveraging technology and innovation for future growth.

In conclusion, the study underscores the power of social media in shaping consumer behavior and promoting domestic tourism, especially during challenging times. Facebook's ability to create an engaging virtual space for travel inspiration, information sharing, and community building illustrates the platform's relevance in modern tourism marketing. This exploration of Facebook's role in Kenya's domestic tourism during the pandemic offers valuable insights into the broader potential of technology and innovation in driving sustainable development in the new economy.

2.0 Literature Review

Tourism promotion is the key component in the marketing of travel packages Raju (2009). The tourism sector should make sure that promotion is not only focused towards potential clients but also to individuals and organizations such as agents and travel writers. Social media has played various roles in the promotion of tourism. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, have revolutionized the way tourism is marketed. According to Xiang and Gretzel (2010), social media serves as a critical tool for Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) to engage with potential tourists, share rich content, and create interactive experiences. The ability to share images, videos, and user-generated content makes Facebook an ideal platform for promoting tourism.

Facebook can be used as a marketing tool for tourism. Facebook's features, such as pages, groups, events, and targeted advertisements, enable DMOs to reach a wide audience efficiently. The interactive nature of Facebook allows for real-time communication and feedback, which can enhance customer engagement and satisfaction (Hays, Page & Buhalis, 2013). The use of Facebook to promote domestic tourism has gained grip, especially in response to travel restrictions and safety concerns during pandemics. Sigala (2011) discusses how DMOs can leverage Facebook to encourage local travel by highlighting nearby attractions, offering special deals, and creating community-driven campaigns that resonate with local travelers. By fostering a sense of community and pride, Facebook can effectively promote domestic tourism. It is clear that tourism crisis can be caused by natural disasters, pandemics, acts of war among other crisis and destabilizers. Henderson explores various crises affecting tourism, including pandemics, and

offers insights into effective management and recovery strategies (Henderson, 2007). In such cases tourists destinations are affected and the country is required to develop strategies to rebuild the industry for economic purposes.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the universal tourism industry, and Kenya has not been an exemption. The restrictions and travel bans implemented to control the spread of the virus have negatively affected the tourism sector. However, social media platforms such as Facebook have provided an opportunity for tourism stakeholders to market and promote domestic tourism. This empirical framework aims to explore the relationship between domestic tourism, social media marketing, and the pandemic (Lama, 2024)

Several studies have examined the effectiveness of social media in promoting tourism. For example, a study by Pappas and Papatheodorou (2016) found that social media platforms influenced tourists' travel planning and decision-making processes. They noted as an evidence of the growing importance of online search and influence on travel behaviors, a survey of the hotel and restaurant industry in Europe in 2007 concluded that 80% of UK consumers are researching online before booking a hotel and half of them maintained to have refrained from booking a specific hotel as a consequence of a negative review on Trip Advisor-like website. A demographic analysis of the users is performed in Trip Advisor website for forums discussion and hotel rating categories comparison. The study did not include the interviews from the people who have posted on the Website. Similarly, a study by Govers and Go (2009) suggested that social media could be used to increase awareness of tourism destinations and encourage visitation.

In another study by Mugo and Otieno (2021), it was found that social media platforms, particularly Facebook, were an essential tool for promoting domestic tourism during the pandemic. The study revealed that Facebook posts featuring local tourist destinations, activities, and experiences significantly influenced people's travel decisions. According to an article by Macharia (2020), social media platforms, including Facebook, have become crucial for tourism marketing during the pandemic. The article noted that businesses in the tourism industry had increased their use of social media to promote local tourism, and Facebook had emerged as the preferred platform due to its wide reach and popularity. There is little attention given to the influence of user-generated content on travel decisions or how social media influencers have

shaped perceptions of Kenyan tourist destinations. There is no study that has been conducted related to the role the Wanderlust diaries Facebook page played in promotion of domestic tourism in Kenya.

According to Chaffey Dave who advanced this theory in 2016, human networking and communication via social media are at the heart of human behavior, which eventually manifests itself in consumer behavior (Rahyadi & Aras, 2020). Chaffey's Theory of Social Media Marketing provides a valuable framework for understanding how social media, particularly Facebook, can be used to promote domestic tourism during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The theory emphasizes a consumer-centric approach, where businesses must understand their audience's preferences and behaviors to create engaging, relevant content. This approach allows tourism stakeholders to foster stronger relationships with potential travelers through two-way communication, building trust and loyalty via real-time engagement (Chaffey, 2020). The integration of social media with other marketing channels, such as email or search engine optimization, is crucial for creating a seamless user experience. By focusing on data-driven strategies, tourism marketers can track the success of their campaigns and adjust them to optimize results. However, Chaffey's model assumes a high level of digital literacy and access to technology, which may not be the case in regions with limited internet access, such as rural Kenya. This limitation highlights the need to balance online strategies with traditional offline approaches to reach a broader audience (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

Despite its strengths, Chaffey's model presents some challenges in the context of domestic tourism promotion in Kenya, particularly during the pandemic. The theory's emphasis on continuous optimization and digital tools may be difficult for smaller tourism businesses with limited resources. Furthermore, the assumption that social media is universally accessible overlooks the digital divide that may affect the reach of online campaigns, especially in rural areas with lower internet penetration (Chaffey, 2020). Nevertheless, the theory is instrumental in guiding the development of social media strategies that can effectively influence domestic tourists' decisions during the pandemic. Studies have shown that social media platforms like Facebook can play a key role in engaging potential tourists, showcasing local destinations, and fostering a sense of community and brand loyalty (Hong-yu & Ling, 2019; Michaelidou, 2015). By applying Chaffey's framework, this study aims to explore how Facebook can be optimized to

support the recovery of Kenya's domestic tourism sector during the pandemic, offering actionable insights for tourism stakeholders.

3.0 Methodology

The study employed a descriptive research design to investigate the role of Facebook posts in promoting domestic tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya. Descriptive research is essential for understanding a situation as it exists Kothari (2004), making it a suitable method for exploring the impact of social media on tourism. The primary goal of the study was to determine how Facebook posts influenced domestic tourism during the pandemic, providing insights into how tourism promotion adapted in response to Covid-19 restrictions.

The study focused on the Wanderlust Diaries Facebook page, which had a following of 400,000 users. Thirty participants actively engaging with domestic tourism-related posts during the pandemic were selected using convenience sampling. These participants included travel agents, tour guides, and page moderators who contributed to discussions on Facebook posts. The data collection methods used were semi-structured interviews conducted online, by phone, and in person.

Thematic analysis Braun and Clarke (2019) was employed to analyze the data, with the aid of MAXQDA software for coding and organizing the data. This approach enabled the researcher to identify recurring themes and insights related to the role of social media in promoting domestic tourism. The themes that emerged from the data collection included; The role of Facebook in domestic tourism, Awareness and influence raised by Facebook posts, Effectiveness in providing information, Adaptations to Covid -19 pandemic period and Tourist stakeholders and businesses.

Ethical considerations were an important part of the research process. The researcher sought permission to collect data from the respondents and also the ethics committee which included the NACOSTI and SPU- Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee (ISERC). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. The research followed established ethical guidelines to ensure the protection of participants' rights and privacy.

The study's findings highlight the effectiveness of Facebook posts in promoting domestic tourism during the pandemic. Facebook has shown to be a powerful tool for engaging travellers,

sharing user-generated content, and influencing travel decisions, especially when international travel was restricted. The research provides valuable insights into the use of social media as a marketing tool in times of crisis and offers recommendations for further research in exploring other social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok in promoting tourism.

4.0 Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the results, analysis, and interpretation of data gathered through interviews with members of the Wanderlust Diaries Facebook group. The study aimed to explore the role of Facebook, specifically the Wanderlust Diaries group, in promoting domestic tourism during the Covid-19 pandemic in Kenya. The analysis focuses on Facebook's influence on domestic tourism, how it raised awareness of local tourist destinations, and how stakeholders used Facebook as a marketing tool during the pandemic. As stated by Galbraith (2010), social media platforms provide a central place where information is freely shared. The information in the Wanderlust Diaries Facebook page was easily accessible without gatekeeping and it was up to the interested followers to evaluate the shared information to assess the credibility if there were any doubts. The fact finding led to getting more information regarding the destinations and influenced the followers in visiting the destinations.

The Role of Facebook in Domestic Tourism

During the Covid-19 pandemic, movement restrictions and closures limited outdoor activities. However, the Wanderlust Diaries Facebook group provided a platform for users to engage with posts about local tourist destinations. The participants described how Facebook posts motivated them to explore places near their homes, which they had previously overlooked. One respondent stated that despite living near Nyahururu for years, it was only after seeing posts on the Wanderlust Diaries page that they visited Thomson Falls (Participant 7).

In other cases, people discovered destinations they had never heard of before. A post about a team hiking Ngong Hills, for instance, inspired a participant to visit, even though they had never known of the location (Participant 4). Another participant recounted how vivid descriptions of Sweetwaters Camp in Nanyuki led them to feel as though they had visited the destination through the photos and stories shared (Participant 9).

Awareness Raised by Facebook Posts

The posts on Wanderlust Diaries significantly raised awareness of tourist destinations, as participants were introduced to areas they had never considered visiting. One participant was struck by a post describing Chebiloch Gorge in Elgeyo Marakwet, which only required a small fee for local divers to dive into the falls—an experience that piqued their interest (Participant 15). Another participant, who had only seen Mount Kilimanjaro on maps, described their first real view of it during a visit to Amboseli National Park, inspired by a Facebook post (Participant 3). The pandemic also prompted people to rediscover their own country. Some respondents noted that Facebook made them realize the beauty of Kenya, which they had only read about in geography lessons but never truly explored until the pandemic restrictions led them to local tourism (Participant 16).

Influence of Facebook on Tourist Decisions

The descriptive stories, photographs, and narratives shared on the Wanderlust Diaries page had a significant impact on people's decisions to visit tourist destinations. One respondent noted that their first visit to Nairobi National Park for a game drive was prompted by posts on the Wanderlust group, which included beautiful photos and detailed descriptions of the experience (Participant 17). Another participant highlighted how photos posted by a group member motivated them to leave the house and explore Kenya, turning screen time into physical visits to destinations (Participant 6).

For many, the Wanderlust group became an avenue for discovering new activities during the pandemic. Some joined road trips to areas like Samburu National Park after seeing posts on the page (Participant 21). The posts also helped with trip planning, whether for solo or group travel, as members shared ideas and budgets for traveling to various destinations (Participant 14).

Effectiveness in Providing Information

The Wanderlust Diaries page was effective in not only inspiring its followers to travel but also providing them with detailed information about various destinations. Many participants developed an interest in visiting locations they had only read about or seen online. Additionally, the page fostered a sense of community, as members frequently invited each other to join trips and generously shared ideas and travel tips.

One participant highlighted how the page helped them realize that some destinations, which they initially thought were expensive, were actually affordable. This information encouraged them to visit places they had previously considered out of reach. Members felt a sense of belonging to the group, often inviting friends to join and participate in travel plans.

Impact on Tourist Stakeholders and Businesses

Tourism stakeholders and businesses also benefited from the Wanderlust Diaries page. Several new businesses, including tour and travel organizers and hiking groups, were established based on interactions within the group. For instance, one respondent started a tour company after organizing several successful trips through the Wanderlust Diaries group (Participant 25). Another participant, who lost their job during the pandemic, began organizing hiking tours through the platform, ultimately turning their passion into self-employment (Participant 2).

The platform also served as an advertising space for established businesses. Within five months of the group's creation, numerous business operators in the tourism industry began promoting their services on the page. Initially, these posts were unregulated, leading the founder to introduce a fee to manage advertisements. Nevertheless, stakeholders acknowledged that constant posting on the page helped promote domestic tourism during the pandemic.

Interpretation of Key Findings

The study found that Facebook, specifically the Wanderlust Diaries group, played a crucial role in promoting domestic tourism during the Covid-19 pandemic. The platform allowed users to share and access information about local destinations, inspiring people to explore their surroundings despite movement restrictions. This is consistent with previous studies that highlight the power of social media in influencing travel decisions by providing vivid

descriptions and visual content. According to Chaffey (2011), social media can be used for various publicizing actions such as brand awareness, customer engagement, customer service, and sales promotion. This was evident in the study from the respondents who through the Facebook posts in Wanderlust Diaries Page, they engaged with the people and personnel in the venues they were planning to visit. The good services received by followers led to them endorsing the venues and posting about them which gave them good reviews.

Comparison with Previous Studies

Similar studies have emphasized social media's role in shaping travel behavior, particularly during times of crisis. The findings of this study align with research by Chung and Koo (2015), which noted that social media platforms, such as Facebook, facilitate peer-to-peer interaction, increasing destination awareness and motivation to travel. However, unlike previous studies that focused on international tourism, this study highlights the role of social media in promoting local travel during a pandemic. According to Tench and Waddington (2021) social media will not go away and continues to grow with opportunities in digital space. Facebook is part of the social media and if people understand how to interact and make use of the digital space it can be of great benefit. From the study, the researcher brought out the impact of Facebook in promotion of Domestic tourism during a Pandemic.

Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of this study is its focus on qualitative data, providing rich insights into how Facebook posts influenced domestic tourism. The use of MAXQDA software enhanced the thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of key themes. However, the study's reliance on a single case—the Wanderlust Diaries group—may limit the generalizability of the findings to other social media platforms.

Unexpected Findings

One unexpected finding was the entrepreneurial opportunities that emerged from the Wanderlust Diaries group. Several respondents reported starting businesses, such as tour companies and hiking groups, based on interactions within the Facebook group. This suggests that social media platforms can not only promote tourism but also foster business innovation during challenging times like the Covid-19 pandemic.

The study supports that the social media platforms, such as Facebook, can significantly influence domestic tourism by providing a space for user-generated content and peer recommendations. The Wanderlust Diaries group exemplifies how social media can create a sense of community and drive local tourism activities, even in restrictive conditions like a pandemic.

Summary and Implications

In summary, the Wanderlust Diaries Facebook group was instrumental in promoting domestic tourism in Kenya during the Covid-19 pandemic. The group raised awareness of local destinations, influenced travel decisions, and provided valuable information to its members. It also created opportunities for businesses in the tourism sector, helping them navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic. The findings suggest that tourism stakeholders should leverage social media platforms to enhance domestic tourism promotion, particularly in times of crisis.

Post-COVID, domestic tourism strategies developed during the pandemic—such as building local tourism networks, promoting lesser-known destinations, encouraging eco-friendly travel, and leveraging digital platforms—continue to drive sustainable growth. Community-driven groups like Wanderlust Diaries on Facebook can inspire travelers by sharing hidden gems and user-generated content, helping diversify tourist destinations and reduce overcrowding. Additionally, flexible booking policies, health-focused marketing, and virtual experiences still appeal to travelers seeking assurance, convenience, and inspiration. By maintaining these practices, tourism industries can foster a resilient domestic tourism culture that adapts to changing traveler needs and supports local economies (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2021; UNWTO, 2022).

5.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the study highlights the role of Facebook, specifically the Wanderlust Diaries Facebook page, in promoting domestic tourism during the Covid-19 pandemic. The use of posts featuring personal experiences, images, and recommendations influenced followers, creating a desire to visit the featured destinations. The social interactions among followers fostered trust, leading to increased travel and exploration within Kenya, despite the pandemic's restrictions.

The significance of this study lies in its demonstration of social media as a powerful marketing tool, particularly during crises like the pandemic. The study identifies a gap in literature regarding the specific role of social media in reviving domestic tourism and the potential for trust-building among users through shared content. This presents an opportunity for future studies to explore the impact of social media in different sectors or other areas of tourism.

A recommended course of action is for tourism stakeholders and businesses to continue leveraging social media platforms, such as Facebook, to create awareness and market their services. This can be particularly effective during challenging times like pandemics, where traditional methods may not be viable.

Unanswered questions remain about the full impact of Facebook and other social media platforms on various aspects of tourism, such as their role in reviving international tourism or their use in promoting specific tourism venues. Future research should also focus on the role of other social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram, in tourism promotion, and the potential risks of misinformation or dissatisfaction spreading through these channels. This will expand the understanding of how social media influences tourism and help mitigate any negative effects

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