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TOURISM, SAFETY, AND HEALTH INFORMATION PROVIDED ON OFFICIAL TOURISM WEBSITES OF AFRICAN COUNTRIES

Matthew Lee Smith and Dara Silverman

College of Public Health, The University of Georgia, USA

Ericka Amorim and Jorge Umbelino

e-Geo, Centro de Estudos de Geografia e Planeamento Regional, Escola Superior de Hotelaria e Turismo do Estoril, Portugal

The recent globalization of tourism has increased attention on the role of developing countries in the tourism market. In Africa, the touristic offer traditionally highlights developed countries, which may detract from the lesser-known treasures in developing regions. This situation highlights the potential for developing countries to create attractive touristic offers and promote them on internet-based platforms for widespread and inexpensive international visibility. The primary purpose of this study was to assess the content provided on national tourism websites of 50 African countries as related to tourism/ destinations, safety/ security, contact information, and health/health care. A secondary purpose was to identify opportunities for countries to improve their tourism websites for potential travelers to enhance their visiting experience. A content analysis was conducted for official tourism websites utilizing a content rubric containing 36 topics. Of the 50 countries assessed, 17 did not have official tourism websites. Of the countries with official websites, most highlighted promotional content about the destinations. Many also displayed health and safety information related to airline travel and vaccinations, which may be indicative of unique customs and indigenous diseases. Findings reveal dramatic differences in internet-based resources being underutilized between developed and developing African countries. Opportunities exist for developing countries to strategically promote destinations on the internet to increase international inbound tourist flow and national revenue.

Keywords: African tourism, Tourist information, Official tourism websites.

Introduction

In 2012, a new benchmark for international travel was achieved; one billion tourists traveled in a single year (WTO, 2012). Relative to all travel in 2012, Africa accounted for only 5% of all international tourist arrivals, which represented 53 million travelers. Similarly, in 2012 Africa accounted for only 3% of all international tourism receipts, which represented $34 billion USD. Although the arrivals and receipts in Africa are higher than ever before and remain higher than figures for the Middle East, the African tourism industry does not compare to other markets such as Europe (i.e., 534 million arrivals, $457 billion USD receipts) or Asia and the Pacific (i.e., 234 million arrivals, $323 billion USD receipts) (WTO, 2012).

While Africa's international tourism arrivals and receipts have consistently risen since about 2002 (WTO, 2012), the continent continues its struggle to define its role in the tourism market. In a prospective sense, there is no doubt that African tourist destinations can be quite appealing. The exoticism of their (at least potential) tourism products fit well in the current search for unique and unforgettable tourist experiences. African Tourism is primarily in demand by Western countries. Mkono (2013, p. 210), watching from the African point of view, states that "Western tourists, particularly in their online reviews, where they recounted and reflected on their experiences, frequently referred to authenticity and inauthenticity." In another study centered in Africa, authors highlight that "The changing demographics of tourists' lifestyles, holiday and work patterns have supported innovation in the tourism industry and provided opportunities for companies to respond to tourist demand for quality in adventurous, educative, learning experiences, known as niche tourism" (Carlisle et. al., 2013, p. 61).

Upward trends have been attributed to the continued growth of Sub-Saharan Africa and changes in North Africa. Given the vast cultural- and wildlife-related attractions available throughout diverse the African landscapes, there remains great opportunity to strategically plan for future market expansion by publicizing advancements in particular regions and making the touristic offers more robust and appealing to travelers.

As seen in Table 1, three countries (Morocco, South Africa, and Tunisia) account for almost half of all tourist demand for the continent (see Table 1). Conversely, 60% of the listed countries have no available information or a demand below 1% (it is important to refer that Egypt and Libya are not included because they belong to the WTO Region of Middle East; in the case of Egypt, the tourist demand is about 11.5 million tourists per year, which is more than 20% of the African demand).

In other words, the diversity of the African tourist offer will only become real if it integrates additional countries (if not all or the majority). In fact, only some African countries have substantial tourist offers, and these are, without surprise, the richest ones and those with a more complex economic system.

Table 1. Arrivals of non resident tourists at the national borders of African countries (thousands), 2013.

		Tourists	%				Tourists	%
East Africa					Southern Africa			
	Burundi (2010)	142	0,3			Botswana (2010)	2145	4,1
	Comoros (2011)	19	0,0			Lesotho (2012)	422	0,8
	Djibuti	..	..			Namibia (2011)	1027	1,9
	Eritrea (2011)	107	0,2			South Africa	9510	18,0
	Ethiopia (2012)	596	1,1			Swaziland (2012)	1093	2,1
	Kenya (2012)	1619	3,1		West Africa			
	Madagascar	196	0,4			Benin (2012)	220	0,4
	Malawi (2011)	767	1,5			Burkina Faso * (2011)	238	0,5
	Mauritius	993	1,9			Cape Verde *	464	0,9
	Mozambique (2012)	2113	4,0			Côte d'Ivoire (2012)	289	0,5
	Reunion	416	0,8			Gambia	171	0,3
	Rwanda (2012)	815	1,5			Ghana (2010)	931	1,8
	Seychelles	230	0,4			Guinea	..	..
	Somalia	..	..			Guinea-Bissau	..	..
	Uganda	1206	2,3			Liberia	..	..
	U.R. Tanzania (2012)	1043	2,0			Mali (2012)	134	0,3
	Zambia (2012)	859	1,6			Mautitania	..	..
	Zimbabwe	1933	3,7			Niger (2012)	81	0,2
Central Africa						Nigeria (2011)	715	1,4
	Angola (2012)	528	1,0			Saint Helena	..	..
	Cameroon (2012)	817	1,5			Senegal (2011)	1001	1,9
	Central African R. (2010)	54	0,1			Sierra Leone	81	0,2
	Chad * (2012)	86	0,2			Togo * (2012)	235	0,4
	Congo * (2012)	256	0,5		Total		52798	100,0
	Dem. Rep. Congo (2011)	186	0,4					
	Equatorial Guinea	..	..					
	Gabon	..	..					

S. Tome Principe (2011)	12	0,0	
North Africa			
Algeria	2733	5,2	
Morocco	10046	19,0	
Sudan (2011)	..	..	
Tunisia	6269	11,9	

* Arrivals of non resident tourists in hotels and similars establishments (thousands)
Source: UNWTO, Tourism Highlights, ed. 2014

In Africa, the touristic offer is traditionally centered in the more developed countries, which may detract from the lesser-known treasures in developing regions. However, a large proportion of African countries is really considered 'developing,' which refers to nations with underdeveloped industrial bases and low Human Development Index (HDI) scores, and gross domestic products relative to other nations (Sullivan & Sheffrin, 2003). In 2013, 64% of the African countries were categorized as having 'low human development' based on their HDI scores, which is a general measure of national wellbeing based on their life expectancy, literacy, education, and standards of living (United Nations, 2014).

The absence of developed countries not only weakens African's overall tourist offer, but also deprives these countries from potential economic development and beneficial intercultural experience.

The less developed countries face their own economic and political challenges. According to Brown (1998), governments in Africa persistently struggle for economic growth and independence. "To the citizens of these societies, economic justice is a necessity for survival" (Brown, 1998, p. 237). This situation highlights the potential for developing countries to create creative, attractive touristic offers and promote them on internet-based platforms for widespread and inexpensive international visibility.

In the early nineties, researchers developed five factors inhibiting tourism development. Those factors include: negative image; foreign exchange constraints; lack of skilled manpower; weak institutional frameworks for tourism planning; and political instability (Ankomah & Crompton 1990, p.15). This framework still applies today. In addition, there are four other factors that affect Africa and its' development in tourism. The first factor is proximity. Geographically, much of the population in Africa is scarce and living in poverty, and there is absence of regional demand of proximity. The more geographical distance from a developed country, the more difficult and expensive it is to develop tourist demand. The second factor is perception of risk. Many African countries have developed a high perception of risk based on safety and security, whether or not that perceived risk is exaggerated. This can negatively impact the potential tourist demand. Carter (1998, p. 352, apud Lonely Planet, Africa, 1985), refers that "Africa (...) is the adventurer's last frontier... It would be irresponsible to suggest that all African countries enjoy political and social stability – some are embroiled in endless rounds of political turmoil... there's never a dull moment!" Third, potential travelers also perceive there is a risk associated with health, based on the exposure to contagious diseases and the fragility of the medical care systems. Finally, the fragility or inexistence of a touristic offer system reflects a lack of territorial and societal infrastructures and a lack of skilled manpower, which impact in the perceived benefits by the local population. There are both benefits and challenges to community-based tourism.

Lamers et al. (2014, p. 251) recognizes that "challenges faced by community-based tourism, particularly, include communities' lack of business skills (…) and the unequal distribution of benefits and power among community members."

For countries with an interest in developing their touristic offer, the Internet has emerged as a solution, given its relative agility and low cost. The Internet has become a common instrument of communication.

Many countries have official tourism websites, which serve as useful mechanisms for international destination promotion. Research shows that "about 95% of web surfers use the Internet to gather travel-related content; about 93% indicate that they visited tourism websites when planning for vacations; and nearly one half said they used email to gather information" (Pan & Fesenmaier 2006, p. 810). Another study concluded that National Tourist Organizations (NTO) "need to develop websites that can satisfy the reason people are logging on the Web, which is to find localized and detailed information on tourism

activities and to engage in trip planning online. They need to provide a space where two-way communication between online travelers and the organizations can occur" (Han & Miles (2006, p. 426),

The primary attractiveness and utility of internet-based promotion is that it is inexpensive, widely available, and easily accessible to tourists and potential tourists (Smith & Amorim, 2013). Official websites are helpful to potential tourists who have yet to decide where to travel because they serve as a central location that provides neutral and trusted information (Fesenmejer, Wober & Werthner, 2006) related to important aspects of a country's accommodations, attractions, and activities. Official websites are also helpful to tourist once they have selected a travel destination because they can learn more about the country, thus maximizing their touristic experience and minimizing their risk of encountering risks/dangers during their travel (Kozac and Andreu, 2006).

In general terms, the availability of information can improve tourists' satisfaction with the touristic offer and experience, which can result in positive recommendations to others and repeat business. Consequently, potentially erroneous information or an over optimistic attitude can also be a risk by demonstrating a mismatch between the expectations that are created by the offer and the reality that will be observed by the tourist.

As such, the primary purpose of this study was to assess the content provided on national tourism websites of 50 African countries as related to tourism/destinations, safety/security, contact information, and health/health care. A secondary purpose was to identify opportunities for countries to improve their tourism websites for potential travelers to enhance their visiting experience.

Materials and Methods

A content analysis was conducted using official tourism websites of 50 African countries. Websites were evaluated utilizing a content rubric, which was developed by study investigators and guided by literature pertaining to relevant tourism, safety, security, and health topics (Smith & Amorim, 2015). A total of 36 topics were identified and included in the rubric. Using previously established rubric methods (Smith & Amorim, 2015), official websites were assessed related to destination/promotion (i.e., city characteristics, recommended destinations, attractions, transportation, lodging, climate, cultural aspects, and accessible tourism), safety/security (i.e., dangerous locations, recommendations to avoid crime, and airline travel as well as food, water, and wildlife safety), local authority contact information (i.e., embassy/consulates, security force, health care), and health/health care (i.e., vaccination requirements, health system information, and prescription medication information as well as laws/regulations about drugs, alcohol, tobacco, driving, and sexual behaviors).

Using established review protocol (Smith & Amorim, 2015; Smith, Amorim, & Umbelino, 2013), all portions of the websites were reviewed for content regarding the above-mentioned topics and sub-topics. Information obtained from each website was recorded in the content rubric. Rubric cells were marked with an "x" to indicate the website included content about the topic or sub-topic. Column totals were summed and frequencies were calculated. African countries without official tourism websites were omitted from analyses (n = 17), thus 33 websites were included in the final analytic sample.

Results

Table 2 reports findings from the content analyses of 33 African countries' official websites. Websites were evaluated for content presented based on 36 topics related to categories of destination/promotion (n = 14 topics), safety/security (n = 11 topics), local authority contacts (n = 3 topics), and health/healthcare (n = 8 topics). It is important to note that some topics may be appropriately classified in multiple categories.

In terms of destination/promotion, all 78.8% official websites contained information about characteristics of main cities and recommendations to tourists regarding destinations to visit, respectively.

Approximately 88% of websites provided recommendations to tourists related to cultural and natural attractions, respectively. While 75.8% of websites contained information about their country's climate, 90.9% of websites provided information about transportation. About 76% provided information about lodging. Regarding aspects of local culture, 51.5% provided information about language, 48.5% about food, and 45.5% about religion. Only a small fraction of websites (3%) contained information specific to accessible tourism topics such as transportation, services, equipment, and locations/attractions.

In terms of safety and security, 24.2% of websites contained information about the security status of the country or in specific regions/cities, 9.1% reported information about dangerous locations as related to criminality or terrorism, and 27.3% of websites provided recommendations about ways in which to avoid criminality or terrorism. Regarding content specific to airline travel, 84.8% of websites provided information about immigration/visa, 63.6% about currency, and 27.0% about customs. None of the websites provided information related to safety recommendations or travel restrictions. Of the 33 websites, 39.4% contained information about water safety, 18.2% about food safety, and 15.2% about local wildlife safety.

In terms of local authority contacts, 24.2% of websites provided contact information specific to national Embassies or Consulates, 18.2% provided contact information specific to health care, as well as contact information specific to security forces.

In terms of health and healthcare, 51.5% of websites listed requirements about vaccinations. Over 36% of websites contained information about the health care system including content about insurance and 15.2% provided information about prescription medications. Regarding laws and regulations related health topics, 21.2% of websites provided information about driving a motor vehicle and 3.0% contained information about sexual behaviors. None of the websites provided information related to drug consumption, alcoholic beverage consumption, or tobacco use.

Table 2. Percent of Countries Reporting Each Topic*.

TOPIC	Percent of Countries Reported
DESTINATION / PROMOTION	
Main City Characteristics (size, population, history, etc.)	78.8%
Recommended Destinations	78.8%
Recommended Attractions	--
Cultural	87.9%
Natural	87.9%
Transportation	90.9%
Lodging	75.8%
Climate	75.8%
Aspects of Local Culture	--
Religion	45.5%
Language	51.5%
Food	48.5%
Accessible Tourism**	--
Transportation	3.0%
Services	3.0%
Equipment	3.0%
Locations/Attractions	3.0%
SAFETY & SECURITY	
Security in the Country or Specific Regions/Cities	24.2%
Dangerous Locations (criminality/terrorism)	9.1%
Recommendations about Criminality/Terrorism Avoidance	27.3%

Airline Travel	--
Safety Recommendations	0.0%
Travel Restrictions	0.0%
Customs	27.3%
Immigration/Visa	84.8%
Currency	63.6%
Food Safety**	18.2%
Water Safety (especially for coastal areas)**	39.4%
Local Wildlife Safety (insects, animals, etc.)**	15.2%
LOCAL AUTHORITY CONTACTS	
Embassy/Consulates Contacts	24.2%
Security Force Contacts	18.2%
Health Care Contacts	18.2%
HEALTH & HEALTH CARE	
Vaccination Requirements	51.5%
Health System Information (including insurance)	36.4%
Prescription Medication Information (including purchasing)	15.2%
Drug Consumption (Laws)	0.0%
Alcoholic Beverage Consumption (Laws)	0.0%
Tobacco Use (Laws)	0.0%
Driving (Laws)	21.2%
Sexual Behavior (Laws)	3.0%

 * 33 of 50 African countries represented in analyses
**Topics also considered to be related to health

Discussion

This study provides a unique glimpse into the web-based tourism presence of African countries. Findings from this study revealed that 17 of the 50 African countries did not have official tourism websites. This indicates that these countries have no touristic offer, they are still underdeveloped, or they have other economic/political concerns that make tourism less prioritized. The absence of an internet presence for promoting their touristic offer shows there are strategic opportunities for these countries to serve more of the international tourism market.

 However, when considering the economic and developmental diversity among African countries, the question remains whether or not creating and pursuing an internet-based presence is worth the potential return on investment. Because tourism has the ability to stimulate a country's economy and create jobs, creating an official tourism website may afford some counties an opportunity to overcome financial obstacles driven by poverty, crime, and taxes. In a recent study about tourism development (Chand, 2013), there are four factors that affect a group's attitude towards tourism: (1) environmental benefits; (2) cultural benefits; (3) heritage diversity benefits; and (4) economic benefits. It is important to acknowledge that developed and developing countries differ in their financial capabilities and priorities, which may be a reflection of their cultural nuances and attitudes towards welcoming visitors to their country. While residents obviously prefer for tourism to not harm their local ecosystem, buildings, or landscapes, they may simultaneously want their products and services utilized throughout different sectors of the tourism industry (Chand, 2013). A further understanding about this balance of preferences among developed and developing countries (as well as among government officials and tourism-related decision makers) is warranted.

 The Internet has become a necessary channel to disseminate information (Kai, Yangyang, & Weiwei, 2014) because it provides a cheap and efficient way to broadly promote their culture and attractions to

potential travelers and advertise employment opportunities to natives. While our study found that the African countries that had an official tourism website only included limited information about popular destinations, lodging, and climate, only about half provided information about their local culture. These rates of information included on official tourism websites are lower than those found on official websites in other continents (e.g., Europe and Americas; see Smith, Amorim & Umbelino, 2013, and Smith et al., 2014).

From a branding perspective, official tourism websites may have a substantial effect on the willingness of tourists to visit a particular destination. Some researchers have argued that consumers mainly evaluate three components before setting on a destination: (1) type of information given; (2) brand reputation; and (3) service guarantee (Kai, et al., 2014). Because destinations with strong reputations and reputable service guarantees attract more travelers, countries interested in enhancing the internet-based promotion of their touristic offer can benefit from working with marketing professionals to generate a cohesive brand and coordinated promotion campaign.

There were limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. First, the format and organization of official tourism websites differed based on their language and other characteristics. Therefore, despite systematic website reviews, some rubric content may have been provided on the website, but unintentionally overlooked by the content assessor. Second, only one content assessor was used to assess all 33 websites in this study. While this is seen as a limitation because there it limited the ability to measure inter-rater reliability, having the same content assessor ensured consistency in review processes and content documentation. Third, the rubric created for this study was not all encompassing and may have omitted important topics relevant to destinations/promotion, safety and security, local authorities, and health and health care. Fourth, this study was descriptive in nature because it is part of a larger project that compares all continents' use of official tourism websites. More complete and sophisticated analyses will be performed in the future. Fifth, it should be acknowledged that there may be imperfections in the construction of these official websites. It is possible that countries have a tendency for presenting non-factual or exaggerated information about their destinations and/or filter website content to omit less attractive characteristics. Such falsities can foster risk among tourists because they can raise the expectations of the demand while underestimating the risks of negative experiences. In other words, this may shock and disappoint tourists because there is a disconnect between their expectations of the trip and observed realities while traveling. This situation has potential to damage the image and reputation of the destination, especially given the profound impact of internet-based reviews and social networks.

Findings from this study highlight the need to recognize that "information" may mean different things to those in different countries. In developed countries, tourism information not only includes basic concepts such as weather and accommodations, but also more details to guide travelers about what to expect upon arrival to their country (e.g., laws related to the legal drinking age or crime rates). Unfortunately in some instances, developing countries may lack the resources and the surveillance infrastructure to systematically monitor national rates and trends related to tourism, economics, politics, security, health, healthcare, or crime. Although the internet-based interface has great potential for developing countries to promote their touristic offer and recruit international travelers, the reality of launching such a system may not be feasible. In these instances, developing countries may work with tourism researchers and practitioners to define and craft a sound and attractive touristic offer and formulate strategies to promote that offer to increase international tourism arrivals and receipts. Such strategic plans can foster the development of official tourism websites in African countries, especially once the potential return on investment has been identified.

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