



# Internet Marketing and Patronage of Tourism Products

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**Abstract** *This study examined internet marketing and the patronage of tourism products. It was aimed at determining the effects of content marketing, social media marketing, email marketing and search engine marketing on the patronage of tourism products. The study adopted cross-sectional survey research design. A sample of 323 tourists were used for the study. The findings of the study revealed that content marketing, social media marketing, email marketing and search engine marketing had significant positive effects on the patronage of tourism products in Cross River State. The study recommended that: tourism-based businesses should harness the potential of content marketing, social media, email marketing and search engine marketing to create and promote valuable, entertaining and informative content; responsive customer services that will generate interest and attract tourist to destination.*

**Keywords:** *Internet Marketing, Content Marketing, Social Media Marketing, Email Marketing, Search Engine Marketing, Tourism Product*

## INTRODUCTION

The ever-increasing number of people accessing the internet and the recent explosion of e-commerce world-wide may have considerable implications for the tourism industry. Tourism suppliers are investing in the internet via web pages, advertising and e-commerce, but what role does the internet actually play in tourism patronage? Tourism is a viable factor in the World economy. The rise of travel and tourism has shown significant resilience globally. Despite slow economic growth in advanced economies and geopolitical tensions in some regions, the Travel and Tourism sector still accounts for a large part of the global economy (Simpson, 2022). Simpson (2022) launched the World Travel and Tourism Council's latest Economic Impact Research (EIR) which shows that by the end of 2022 the sector will have recovered to US\$8.35 trillion. She shared that over the next 10 years, to 2032, Travel & Tourism is poised to have an average annual growth rate of 5.8%, outstripping global GDP. It is also estimated to create 126 million new jobs in

that period. Over the past six decades, tourism has witnessed progressive growth and diversification which has made it one of the leading, largest and fastest growing economic sectors of the world. China is the country worldwide with the highest outbound tourism expenditure in 2021.

That year, China's outbound tourism spending amounted to nearly 106 billion U.S. dollars, showing a 19 percent decrease from 2020 and only accounting for roughly 42 percent of the value reported in 2019. Meanwhile, the United States and Germany followed in the ranking in 2021, with around 57 billion and 48 billion U.S. dollars in outbound tourism expenditure, respectively. Statista (2022) In Nigeria, Tourism has significantly contributed to the nation's development in various ways such as generation of employment opportunities, enhanced brand image, income generation and solving the problem of balance of payment deficit, boosting Gross Domestic Products and increasing the nation's per capita income. Nigeria, the giant of Africa, has enormous tourism potentials and marketable

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tourism products ranging from diverse species of wildlife and aquatic creatures, appealing sandy beaches, beautiful green vegetation of her mangrove forest, unique cultural dynamics, beautiful hotels and restaurants, enticing parks and very friendly and hospitable people (Egbaji, 2007).

Most of these inexhaustible tourism products can be found across the three senatorial districts which comprise of the eighteen local governments in Cross River State. Little wonder it is referred to as the 'Tourism Hub of the Nation'. The state's tourism products consist of wildlife species, mountain climate, alluring hills, fascinating waterfalls, beautiful parks, rich cultural heritage, welcoming hotels, appetizing dishes, Africa's biggest street party- Calabar Carnival, the list is endless as some of these sites are yet to be discovered. For a state like Cross River full of natural and inexhaustible tourism resources yet with limited industrial capability, it is undeniable that tourism remains a very important source of internally generated revenue (Egbaji, 2007). This gives indication that the tourism products of Cross River State would require effective and sustainable marketing strategy to boost its sales and consumption. It is to this end that this study was designed to assess the effect of internet marketing on the patronage of tourism products in Cross River State.

## Objectives of the Study

- To determine the effect of content marketing on the patronage of tourism products in Cross River State.
- To determine the effect of social media marketing on the patronage of tourism products in Cross River State.
- To examine the effect of email marketing on the patronage of tourism products in Cross River State.
- To explore the effect of search engine marketing on the patronage of tourism products in Cross River State.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Dynamic Theory of Innovation

The dynamic theory of innovation was propounded by Taylor et al. (2002). The theory is a performance-driven approach designed to guide organizations enhance their corporate performance and gain sustainable competitive advantage through constant adaptation and innovation. The theory was developed in response to the high rate of failure experienced by conservative business organizations brought on by environmental changes and globalization. The theory arose to provide an explanation as to why conservative business organizations were left behind as the environment evolved with time. The basic assumption of the dynamic theory of innovation is that organizations

exist in a dynamic environment; one that is fast moving, fast changing and fast evolving, therefore achieving sustainable competitive advantage in such a dynamic environment requires organizations to adapt, adjust and innovate in order to keep abreast of latest trends in the industry (Taylor et al., 2002). According to the theory, a successful organization is one that is constantly in the process of adapting, adjusting and innovating in order to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

The theory posits that organizations can adapt and innovate in four (4) ways, namely: technology, methods and processes, corporate orientation and personnel (Taylor et al., 2002). Technology is the application of science and scientific methods to the production of goods, provision of services and betterment of human life. As time advances, new technologies are being developed and commercialized on the open market. It is essential for organizations to be apprised of new technological trends in their chosen industries and to consistently adopt these technologies in their operations. With respect to methods and processes, as human education and ingenuity increases, new methods and processes of conducting business operations are developed. Businesses are constantly switching from manual business operations to automatic processes in order to save cost, time and increase productivity and efficiency. On the other hand, corporate orientation is the guiding philosophy prevailing in a particular organization. It is a set of beliefs, practices, ethics, ideals and cultures practiced by an organization. Whereas, with respect to personnel, it is imperative to note that an organization is as good as the quality of personnel it employs. Employees are the interior pillars of an organization; they possess the power to make or break an organization from within.

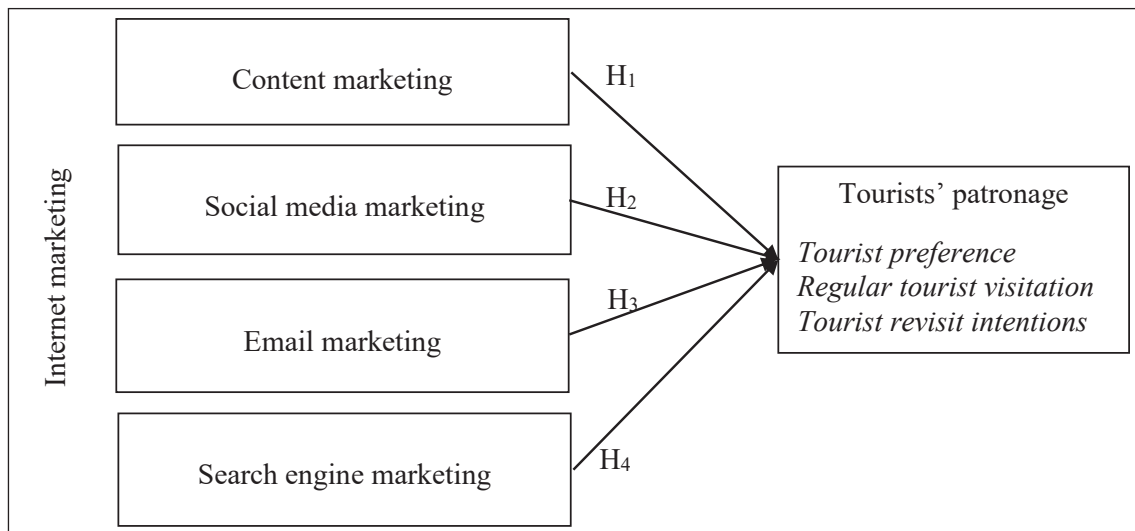
The relevance of the dynamic theory of innovation to this study lies in its basic premise, which suggests that tourism establishments exist in a dynamic environment, which is fast moving, fast changing and fast evolving. As such, the theory suggests that for tourism-based businesses to achieve sustainable competitive advantage (in terms of tourist patronage) in such a dynamic environment, they need to adapt, adjust and innovate in order to keep abreast of latest environmental trends. According to the theory, a successful tourism business is one that is constantly in the process of adapting, adjusting and innovating in order to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. Specifically, the theory posits that tourism businesses may adapt and innovate in four (4) ways, namely: technology, methods and processes, corporate orientation and personnel. This study therefore centers on the technological innovation aspect of the dynamic innovation theory because it revolves around internet marketing. Internet marketing is an innovative approach to marketing that promotes the patronage of tourism products using internet-based platforms. The basic premise of the dynamic theory of innovation suggests that if tourism

businesses innovate and adapt to internet marketing tools, they will be best-positioned to enhance tourist patronage of their products.

## Conceptual Framework

This study centered on internet marketing and the patronage of tourism products in Cross River State. In the context of this study, content marketing is viewed as the strategic process of generating attracting content meant to engage actual and potential tourists in order to ultimately enhance patronage of tourism products. Social media marketing

is viewed as the utilization of social media networks, platforms and communities to promote the patronage of tourism products. Email marketing is operationalized as the utilization of electronic mail to connect with potential and actual tourists to promote the patronage of tourism products. Whereas, search engine marketing is viewed as the deliberate coordination and utilization of search engine software like Google to promote the visibility and patronage of tourism products. Through these parameters of internet marketing, the study proposed that the independent variable had some sort of relationship with the dependent variable as presented in the conceptual model in Fig. 1.



Source: Researcher's model (2023).

**Fig. 1: Conceptual Model of Internet Marketing and Tourists' Patronage**

## Internet Marketing

Internet marketing is the marketing of products and services over the internet (Shaltoni et al., 2018). It is the application of marketing strategies, principles and techniques via electronic media and more specifically, the internet. It not only includes marketing on the Internet, but also includes marketing done via e-mail, wireless media and a range of technologies to help connect businesses to their customers. Internet marketing is a set of powerful tools and methodologies used for promoting products and services through the internet (Adede, 2017). It includes a wider range of marketing elements than traditional business marketing due to the extra channels and marketing mechanisms available on the internet. In internet marketing, customers and prospects are targeted with the hopes of achieving profitable exchanges using electronic devices and the internet. A firm using the internet marketing approach utilizes the internet to communicate with customers, serve their needs, build relationships with customers, and enhance organizational profitability. The main difference between conventional (traditional) marketing and internet marketing

lies in the platform through which marketing programmes and activities are executed (Taleghani et al., 2013).

While conventional marketing utilizes conventional (traditional) platforms like radio, television, billboard, newspapers etc., internet marketing utilizes online platforms like websites, emails, search engine optimization, social media etc., for planning, executing and evaluating marketing programmes and strategies. The advantages of internet marketing include its speed, flexibility, interactive nature, cost efficiency, global reach, respect for consumer privacy, ease of spreading message and measurability of marketing campaigns (Ngugi, 2013). Internet marketing is deemed to be broad in scope, because it not only refers to marketing and promotions over the Internet, but also includes marketing done via e-mail and wireless media. It also embraces the management of digital customer data and electronic customer relationship management (ECRM) and several other business management functions (Yousaf et al., 2018). As observed by Al-Azzam (2017), internet marketing includes the use of a website in combination with online promotional techniques such as search engine marketing (SEM), social

media marketing, interactive online advertisements, among others, to promote a company's offerings.

## Internet Marketing Strategies for Tourism Products

### Content Marketing

Content marketing is a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly-defined audience — and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action (Yaghtin et al., 2020). It is a long-term strategy that focuses on building a strong relationship with target audiences by giving them high-quality content that is relevant to them and delivering it consistently. It also means tailoring a company's content depending on what stage of the buying journey the customer is at. For instance, if a firm has got a prospect seeking more information, a good content offering would be an eBook or printed pamphlet. In the view of Kee and Yazdanifard (2015), content marketing is a marketing strategy used to attract, engage, and retain an audience by creating and sharing relevant articles, videos, podcasts, and other media on a consistent basis. This approach establishes expertise, promotes brand awareness, and keeps a company's brand top of mind when it is time for customers to buy what it sells. This marketing strategy establishes a company's brand as a thought leader, boosting trust among its audience by creating and distributing content in various ways. Content marketing is a type of inbound marketing that attracts customers and builds loyalty, making it effective for customer retention.

Content marketing appears as an indirect strategy to attract customer patronage, because it does not explicitly beckon on customers to purchase a company's offerings; but it serves to engage customers to a point where they feel convicted to make purchase decisions (Ahmad et al., 2016). Hence, content marketing mostly results in customer patronage over the long term. Nevertheless, content marketing is becoming a fast-rising internet marketing strategy applied by business organizations. One key content marketing strategy adopted by business organizations is the creation and distribution of informative content meant to give the audience information about the usefulness, values and benefits of using their products or services (Kee & Yazdanifard, 2015). For instance, a hotel establishment may typically promote content related to the health, safety and comfortable benefits of holidaying at luxury hotels. Or a spa-giving firm may promote content about the benefits of regular spa and exercise to people's health and general well-being. With such information, potential and actual customers are exposed to the essential benefits of holidaying in hotels or getting spa treatment at the mall; and over the long term, this may culminate in an actual patronage of hotel or spa services by customers. This implies that consistent content marketing campaigns may

translate into customer patronage behaviour over the long term; which is why this strategy is paramount for tourism-based businesses to adopt in a developing economy like Nigeria. Thus, this study hypothesis that:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Content marketing has no significant effect on the patronage of tourism products.*

### Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing is the way organizations reach their customers with information about their brand or product on the web using tools and websites that allow a conversation to take place between the organization and its target audience (Parker, 2016). It provides a virtual space where people can express and exchange opinions; disseminate and control messages; reach out to friends or family on a daily basis. Kaplan and Haenlein (2013) assert that for businesses, social media is an indispensable tool for finding and engaging with customers, sales, advertising and promotion, gauging trends and offering customer service. Jantsch (2012) maintains that the role of social media marketing in helping businesses is significant because it facilitates communication with customers, enabling the creation of social interactions on e-commerce sites. Its ability to collect information helps focus marketing efforts and market research. It helps in promoting products and services, as it enables the distribution of targeted, timely and exclusive sales and coupons to would-be customers; and it can assist in relationship building, through loyalty programs linked to social media.

With continuous and wide-ranging advances in modern communications technologies, the entire world is integrating into a global village where people are closely intertwined and interacting with each other despite geographical boundaries through internet-based tools (Evans et al., 2021). Social media is one of those internet-based tools, which enables global communications and interactions among people in real time. Its popularity is upheld and strengthened by its reach, flexibility, wide coverage, speed, personalization, cost-efficiency, and interactivity. These inherent features of social media make it a useful marketing tool for business organizations seeking to expand their reach and market coverage (Dwivedi et al., 2021). In today's world, business organizations are adapting to social media marketing at a breathtaking pace; in fact, new business models like social media influencers, are being born and sustained through the potential of social media (Evans et al., 2021). As Alghizzawi et al. (2018) have observed, tourism-based businesses around the world are also adapting to social media tools for marketing purposes. These tools like social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and a host of others are used to project positive images and videos about intended tourism destinations and attractions in order to attract potential tourists in the near term. Social media is also used to contact and interact with previous tourists that had visited

a destination in the hopes of encouraging future revisits. For both existing and potential tourists, the foregoing viewpoint suggests that social media marketing has the potential to encourage the patronage of tourism products. Thus, this study conjectures that:

*H2: Social media marketing has no significant effect on the patronage of tourism products.*

## Email Marketing

Email marketing is the use of electronic mail by firms to target specific groups of consumers and to present and promote products and services to them with the objective of informing, reminding and leading them to make purchases (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020). It is marketing activities, including advertising, that are formulated and executed using electronic mail (email). Firms often use a variety of ways to get customers' email addresses like registration requirements or buying from online marketers, they use these email addresses to prepare a mailing list based on unique customer preferences and patterns, and periodically send messages containing information of available products and services to customers on those mailing lists. Email marketing is the act of sending a commercial message, typically to a group of people, using email. In its broadest sense, every email sent to a potential or current customer could be considered email marketing. It usually involves using email to send advertisements, request business, or solicit sales or donations, and is meant to build loyalty, trust, or brand awareness. Marketing emails can be sent to a purchased lead list or a current customer database.

According to Nuseira and Aljumahb (2020), email marketing is the process of sending email messages with the purpose of enhancing a company's relationship with current or previous customers, encouraging customer loyalty and repeat business, acquiring new customers or convincing current customers to purchase something immediately, and sharing third-party advertisements. It is the targeting of consumers through electronic mail (email). Often associated with data mining, email marketing can be used to impact consumers in a variety of ways. In general, email marketing is a more evolved, digital form of traditional direct mail marketing (Kamarov & Anatoley, 2014). Email marketing is an innovative internet marketing strategy used by businesses to communicate closely and frequently with both potential and actual customers with the objective of informing, convincing and persuading them to patronize their services (El-Gohary & El-Gohary, 2016). It is cost-effective, has a global reach and the capacity to deliver picture, short audio and video clips, documents and other promotional contents designed to attract customers to take patronage actions in favour of a company's services. The foregoing viewpoint suggests that email marketing could be used by tourism-based businesses

to attract customer patronage of their products. Thus, this study hypothesizes that:

*H3: Email marketing has no significant effect on the patronage of tourism products in Cross River State.*

## Search Engine Marketing

Search engine marketing is the practice of marketing a business using paid advertisements that appear on search engine results pages (or SERPs) (Yang, Shi & Wang, 2015). Advertisers bid on keywords that users of services such as Google and Bing might enter when looking for certain products or services, which gives the advertiser the opportunity for their advertisements to appear alongside results for those search queries. These advertisements, often known by the term pay-per-click advertisements, come in a variety of formats. Some are small, text-based advertisements, whereas others, such as product listing advertisements (PLAs, also known as Shopping advertisements) are more visual, product-based advertisements that allow consumers to see important information at a glance, such as price and reviews. An important feature of search engine marketing is that it offers advertisers the opportunity to put their advertisements in front of motivated customers who are ready to buy at the precise moment they are ready to make a purchase (Njau & Karugu, 2014). No other advertising medium can do this, which is why search engine marketing is so effective and such a powerful way to grow a company's business.

For Hamali (2015), search engine marketing (SEM) is a digital marketing strategy used to increase the visibility of a website in search engine results pages (SERPs). While the industry term once referred to both organic search activities such as search engine optimization (SEO) and paid, it now refers almost exclusively to paid search advertising. Search engine marketing is also alternately referred to as paid search or pay per click (PPC). According to Pan (2015), with an increasing number of consumers researching and shopping for products online, search engine marketing has become a crucial online marketing strategy for increasing a company's reach. As the population of mobile phone and computer users increases, the population of search engine users also increases, indicating that the number of search enquiries per day will substantially increase as more people leverage search engines to resolve their queries and locate products/services they require (Kumata, 2018). Through search engine marketing strategies such as search engine optimization, search engine advertising and affiliate marketing, tourism-based businesses can put their offerings in the search results of customers' enquiries in order to persuade them to patronize. This viewpoint suggests that search engine marketing could be used to enhance the patronage of tourism products. Thus, this study conjectures that:

*H4: Search engine marketing has no significant effect on the patronage of tourism products.*

## Tourism Products in Cross River State

According to Nwokoye (1989) as cited in Raman (2013), a product is a bundle of physical or psychological satisfaction that a consumer gets from a purchase. To paraphrase this definition in the context of tourism, a product could be defined as a bundle of physical and/or psychological satisfaction that tourists obtain from their visit to or stay in a destination. It comprises physical items like resort centers, hotels, bars, restaurants, food, ranches, beaches or intangible offerings like relaxation, experience, transportation, recreation, among others. A tourism product could be naturally occurring (like attractions, beaches, forests, and waterfalls), man-made (like hotels, bars, clubs, event centers, and motels) or a combination of both natural attractions hosting man-made facilities for the enjoyment of tourists (Labanauskaitė et al., 2020). In the views of Polat et al. (2019), tourism product is the combination of accommodation, food and beverage, transportation, entertainment, and many other goods and services that are used throughout the trip by tourists. It is a combination of goods and services demanded by tourists during travel to and stay at a destination. These include natural, cultural and manmade attractions and facilities such as hotels, transport and ancillary services. In this process, tourists derive an experience which varies from individual to individual. From a broader perspective, the sum total of experiences derived by the tourists during the entire trip can be considered as the product.

For Benur and Bramwell (2015), tourism products comprise man-made facilities and natural attractions that are visited by tourists to derive relaxation, satisfaction, entertainment and enjoyment. Being a tourism-focused destination, Cross River State is home to a variety of tourism products that are the hallmark of its reputation among Nigerian states. It features a combination of both naturally-occurring and man-made tourism facilities that provide enjoyment, entertainment and satisfaction to foreign and domestic tourists on a daily basis. In Etung Local Government Area of the state, the Agbokim Waterfalls exists as a natural attraction site for tourists. It has seven streams, each cascading over steep cliff which provides seven-faced falls. In Akamkpa Local Government Area, there is the Kwa Falls; another spectacular waterfall located in a narrow, steep gorge on the headwaters of the Kwa River. It is characterized by a staircase of 234 steps from the top to bottom (Onyeakagbu, 2021). Obudu Mountain Resort, Marina Resort, Calabar Slave Trade Park, are also some of the notable attractions for tourists visiting the state. Calabar also plays host to the famous Calabar Carnival, an annual Christmas event that draws tourists from around the globe to participate in the biggest street party in Africa.

Other attractive events in the state include the popular New-Yam Festival celebrated mostly by inhabitants of Northern Cross River. By far, the Calabar Carnival is the largest event with the highest attraction of foreign and domestic tourists to Cross River State. Its conduct in the state is believed to generate economic benefits for residents of the state and other tourism-based businesses such as hotels, resorts, clubs, restaurants, travel and tour firms operating in the state (Esu et al., 2011; Odere & Ojong, 2021).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted cross-sectional survey research design. Accordingly, a structured questionnaire was used to obtain data from domestic and foreign tourists in Calabar, Nigeria on a one-time basis to generate findings for the study. Given that the data were collected on a one-time basis, cross-sectional survey research design was deemed suitable for the study because it was economical and time-efficient. On this basis, the researcher deemed cross sectional survey research suitable to the nature of the study.

This study was carried out in Calabar, Cross River State, a state in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Key industries involve tourism in and around the wildlife reserves along with the historic Ikom Monoliths site, Calabar Carnival and Obudu Mountain Resort.

The target population for this study comprised all tourists (foreign and domestic) visiting Cross River State in December 2022 - April 2023. Due to the fact that most domestic tourists' visitations in Cross River State, especially through roads and waterways are not formally recorded and due to the inaccessibility of official records of foreign tourists in the state, the actual numerical size of the population was unknown. Therefore, the study relied on the Topman sample size estimation method to obtain the sample size for this unknown population which states thus:

$$n = \frac{Z^2 Pq}{e^2}$$

Where n: Sample size required

Z: Tabular statistical unit (1.96)

P: Probability of positive response (0.633)

q: Probability of negative response (0.367)

e: Margin of error (5%)

To obtain the probabilities of positive and negative responses (P and q respectively), the researcher conducted a pilot survey in December, 2022 before the actual field survey by interviewing a random selection of 30 customers of three major hotels in Calabar, where most tourists were most likely to be found. 10 copies of the questionnaire were administered respectively to customers in the following hotels, making a total of 30 copies: Transcorp Hotels, Monty

Suites, and Axari Hotels. These respondents were asked to identify whether or not they were tourists or residents of Calabar during the pilot survey. Out of the 30 respondents interviewed, 19 respondents representing 63.3 percent said they were either foreign or domestic tourists visiting Calabar at the moment, while 11 respondents representing 36.7 percent said they were existing residents of the town. From the result of the pilot survey, the Probability of Positive Responses (P) was 0.633, while the Probability of Negative Responses was 0.367. By simple substitution, the Topman formula was applied thus:

$$\begin{aligned} n &= \frac{1.96^2 (0.633 \times 0.367)}{0.05^2} \\ &= \frac{3.8416 (0.2323)}{0.0025} \\ &= \frac{0.8924}{0.0025} \\ &= 356.96 \end{aligned}$$

n = 357 tourists approximately.

The study adopted convenience sampling technique to include respondents in the survey activity to obtain required data. The researcher visited hotspots in Calabar, where both domestic and foreign tourists were most likely to be found, easily available and convenient to include them for the study. This include: The Margaret Ekpo International Airport; given that it is the channel through which tourists visit the state by air., the researcher visited popular hotels like Transcorp Hotels, Monty Suites, Axari Hotels, Jacaranda Suites and Orange Resort, where both domestic and foreign tourists would lodge after arrival in Calabar. In doing so, convenience sampling technique enabled the collection of primary data from tourists who were readily available, easily accessible and willing to participate in the questionnaire survey.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

**Table 1: Model Summary of the Effect of Internet Marketing on the Patronage of Tourism Products**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.828 <sup>a</sup>	.686	.682	.62308

a. Predictors: (Constant), content marketing, social media marketing, email marketing and search engine marketing.

**Table 2**

ANOVA <sup>a</sup> of the Effect of Internet Marketing on the Patronage of Tourism Products Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	269.951	4	67.488	173.837	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	123.455	318	.388		
	Total	393.406	322			

a. Dependent Variable: Patronage of tourism products.

b. Predictors: (Constant), content marketing, social media marketing, email marketing and search engine marketing.

This study was based on primary data obtained from domestic and foreign tourists in Calabar with the aid of a research questionnaire. To obtain primary data for the study, the researcher used a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire adapted from existing studies. The instrument comprised two sections; namely: Section A (which collected data on respondents' demographic characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, and country of origin) and Section B (which contained statements drawn from the variables of the study: content marketing, social media marketing, email marketing, search engine marketing and tourists' patronage). In the questionnaire, statements 1 – 3 measured content marketing, statements 4 – 6 measured social media marketing; statements 7 – 9 measured email marketing; statements 10 – 12 measured search engine marketing; while statements 13 – 15 measured tourists' patronage. The opinions of respondents were measured on the following 5-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (SA = 5 points), Agree (A = 4 points), Undecided (U = 3 points), Disagree (D = 2 points) and Strongly Disagree (SD = 1 point).

In this study, content validity method was used to validate the research questionnaire adopted. The reliability status of the research questionnaire was confirmed through the Cronbach alpha reliability method. Draft copies of the questionnaire were administered to a random selection of 30 domestic tourists at Transcorp Hotels in Calabar, as part of a mini survey. The data obtained during the survey were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 23) for reliability testing. The instrument was subsequently deemed reliable and adopted for field administration, because all its measurement scales produced Cronbach alpha coefficients not less than the benchmark of 0.7. To generate findings for the study, the null hypotheses developed for the study were tested statistically using multiple linear regression using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 23).

**Table 3: Coefficientsa of the Effect of Internet Marketing on the Patronage of Tourism Products**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	.016	.147		9.109	.000		
	Content marketing	.011	.054	.409	4.206	.007	.489	2.046
	Social media marketing	.353	.073	.692	4.805	.000	.615	1.626
	Email marketing	1.034	.085	.370	2.131	.000	.245	4.085
	Search engine marketing	.255	.066	.190	3.865	.000	.410	2.440

a. Dependent Variable: Patronage of tourism products.

The results in Tables 1 to 3 demonstrate the effects of internet marketing on the patronage of tourism products. The correlation coefficient ( $R = 0.828$ ) in Table 1 reveals that the relationship between internet marketing and the patronage of tourism products is 82.8 percent. This indicates a very high degree of relationship between the variables in the context of the study. The coefficient of determination ( $R^2 = 0.686$ ) indicates that internet marketing accounts for up to 68.6 percent of the variation in the patronage of tourism products. This implies that if other factors remain unchanged, internet marketing will influence the patronage of tourism products by up to 68.6 percent. Given that  $F = 173.837$  and  $p = 0.000$  as shown in Table 2, it indicates that the effect of internet marketing on the patronage of tourism products is statistically significant.

Furthermore, the collinearity statistics presented in Table 3 indicate that the variables were devoid of multicollinearity because the tolerance values generated exceeded 0.1 and the Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) generated were not greater than 5. This entails that the multicollinearity condition of regression analysis has been met under this circumstance (Ringle et al., 2015). Also, from the standardized coefficients column in Table 3, it has been revealed that with a beta coefficient of 0.692 or 69.2 percent, social media marketing had the highest contribution to the regression model. The second-highest contributor to the model was content marketing, with a beta coefficient of 0.409 or 40.9 percent. Whereas, the least contributing variable to the model was search engine marketing, with a beta coefficient of 0.190 or 19.0 percent. In addition, Table 3 also shows that the p-values of all the variables tested were less than the error margin of 0.05 with positive t-test values [(content marketing: p-value = 0.007,  $t = 4.206$ ); (social media marketing: p-value = 0.000,  $t = 4.805$ ); (email marketing: p-value = 0.000,  $t = 2.131$ ) and (search engine marketing: p-value = 0.000,  $t = 3.865$ )]. Therefore, all the null hypotheses were rejected in favour of the corresponding alternative hypotheses, which implies that content marketing, social media marketing, email marketing and search engine marketing had significant positive effects on the patronage of tourism products in Cross River State.

## Discussion of Findings

From the test of hypothesis one, it was revealed that content marketing had a significant positive effect on the patronage of tourism products. This finding is backed by the study of Ajina (2019), which revealed that content marketing had a positive impact on customers' patronage, trust and loyalty towards private hospitals in Saudi Arabia. The finding is also backed by the study of Chidinma et al. (2019), which revealed that there is a strong significant relationship between content marketing and customer loyalty in new generation banks in Nigeria. The implication of this finding in the context of this study is that content marketing has been confirmed through substantive empirical evidence as an effective internet marketing strategy with the capacity to substantially improve the patronage of tourism products.

From the test of hypothesis two, it was revealed that social media marketing had a significant positive effect on the patronage of tourism products. This finding aligns with the study of Somanthri and Gumilang (2016), which revealed that social media marketing had a significant influence on customer patronage of clothing stores in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Similarly, the finding is reinforced by the study of Odo et al. (2018), which revealed that social media marketing had a significant impact on customer patronage of United Bank for Africa Plc in Enugu. This finding implies, in the context of this study, that social media marketing is an essential internet marketing strategy with the significant ability to substantially improve the patronage of tourism products in Nigeria.

From the test of hypothesis three, it was revealed that email marketing had a significant positive effect on the patronage of tourism products. This finding is backed by the study of Charlene et al. (2018), which revealed that email marketing had a significant impact on customer patronage of hotel establishments in Singapore. The finding is also corroborated by the study of Anwuri and Nzei (2022), which revealed that online marketing (email marketing) initiatives had a significant positive effect on sustainability of hospitality businesses in Rivers State. The implication of this finding

is that by utilizing electronic mail to execute marketing campaigns, customer patronage could substantially be improved for tourism products in Nigeria over the long term.

Finally, by testing hypothesis four, it was revealed that search engine marketing had a significant positive effect on the patronage of tourism products in Cross River State. This finding is backed by the study of Somanthri and Gumilang (2016), which revealed that search engine marketing had a significant influence on customer patronage of clothing stores in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The finding is also supported by the study of Odo et al. (2018), which revealed that search engine marketing had a significant impact on customer patronage of United Bank for Africa Plc in Enugu. The implication of this finding, in the context of this study, is that search engine marketing has been confirmed through empirical evidence to possess the capacity to substantially boost the patronage of tourism products in Nigeria, if implemented appropriately.

## CONCLUSION

As earlier observed at the outset of the study, the patronage of tourism products has not reached its full potential as might be expected of a well-endowed tourism destination in Nigeria. This was tied to several environmental factors such as lack of adequate tourism management, lack of maintenance culture and negligence by the government. As a consequence, the flow of in-bound tourists mostly occurs during Christmas, when the annual carnival is held. In the other months before Christmas, tourism-based businesses in Nigeria are starved of business opportunities and revenues due to insufficient tourist activities. Against this backdrop, this study was designed to explore how the application of internet marketing strategies might improve the patronage of tourism products.

From a structured questionnaire survey, the study obtained primary data from both foreign and domestic tourists. With the aid of descriptive statistics, the data obtained were analyzed and interpreted, while inferential statistics facilitated the test of the study hypotheses. Consequently, the findings of the study revealed that content marketing, social media marketing, email marketing and search engine marketing had significant positive effects on the patronage of tourism products. The implication of this finding is that through internet marketing tools, tourism-based businesses can achieve substantial increases in tourist patronage of their products. Therefore, the evidence generated through the study's findings have led to the conclusion that, internet marketing has the potential to substantially improve the patronage of tourism products domestically and internationally.

## Recommendations

Tourism-based businesses should harness the potential of content marketing by regularly creating and promoting valuable, relevant, entertaining and informative content on social media to interact and engage with tourists to generate interest and attract them to tourism destinations. Through a well-defined content marketing campaign, tourism-based business could create a social media buzz and generate both domestic and foreign tourists' traffic to patronize their products.

Considering its cost effectiveness, wide reach and flexibility, social media should be more integrated by tourism-based businesses to promote their offerings, provide customer services, and interact regularly with potential and actual customers to encourage product patronage on a consistent basis. Given that today's customers are increasingly found on social media forums and platforms trying to find entertainment. Social media can be a viable platform for tourism businesses to reach a large pool of prospective customers at a reasonable cost.

Electronic mail should be prioritized as a major channel for communicating with prospective and existing customers to promote tourism products while providing responsive customer service to customers from the comfort of their homes. Instead of putting customers through the hassle of making phone calls or physically visiting tourism sites for enquiries or complaints, tourism-based businesses should harness electronic mail to bridge the communication gaps with customers and facilitate patronage.

Tourism-based businesses should recruit or train search engine marketing professionals to increase their visibility on major search engines like Google in order to make it easier for tourists to obtain adequate information about their offerings and patronize them. Given that most tourists are rarely close to their intended destinations, search engine is increasingly becoming a powerful source for tourist information. Hence, tourism-based businesses should harness the potential of search engine to make it easier and faster for tourists to locate and patronize their offerings with minimum effort.

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