

WEB PRESENCE AND SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION ON HOTEL PATRONAGE IN AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

By

Justina Ekom EKONG¹
Bassey Okokon ATTIH²
Aniebiet Johnny ETUK³

^{1,2,3}Department of Marketing, Faculty of Management Sciences,
Akwa Ibom State University, Obio Akpa campus Nigeria.
Corresponding Author's email: tinafidus@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This study examined the effect of web presence and search engine optimization on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Web presence, search engine optimization and hotel patronage formed the specific objectives of the study. 1122 employees that had access to information of customers who made hotel reservations from forty-one hotels registered with Akwa Ibom State Hotels Management and Tourism Board formed the population. The study employed a census sampling technique. Primary data were gathered through a structured questionnaire. Simple percentages and charts were employed for the demographic analyses, leveraging the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 to facilitate the data analyses. The univariate analyses were done using means and standard deviations to provide insights into the central tendencies and variability of the data. To test the study hypotheses, the researchers employed Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), facilitated by the SmartPLS version 3.2.9 software. Findings of the study showed that web presence ($\beta = 0.713$, t -value = 10.156, p -value = 0.011 < 0.05) had positive significant effect on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State and search engine optimization ($\beta = 0.613$, t -value = 8.046, p -value = 0.003 < 0.05, a statistically significant and positive effect on hotel patronage. Based on the empirical findings, we recommended that management of hotels in Akwa Ibom State should ensure that they have a well-designed, user-friendly, and informative website that showcase their offerings and provides a seamless booking experience for customers. Regular updates and maintenance of the website should be a priority to keep it relevant and engaging. The hotel owners and operators should prioritize the implementation of effective search engine optimization strategies to improve their visibility on search engine results pages. This should include optimizing their website content, improving website structure and navigation, and leveraging relevant keywords to attract potential customers.

Keywords: *Web presence, search engine optimization, online bookings, and hotel patronage.*

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry, which is one of the world's fastest-growing sectors, has recently captured the attention of researchers. The hospitality service sector has great potential to stimulate economic development, increase the number of new jobs and improve the social climate (Langvinien & Daunoravi, 2015). Nsien & Ekong (2023) assert that the hospitality business has emerged as a driver of the economy in most countries of the world. The hotel industry product elements are interrelated and complex thus, hotel management seek to improve their marketing performance. The rapid advancement

of communication technologies has significantly reshaped the marketing landscape, requiring businesses to adapt to new digital tools and strategies to stay competitive (Smith, 2021; Etim, et. al., 2023). In order to increase customer traffic and patronage of their products, hotels have adopted the use of digital marketing tools of web presence and search engine optimization amongst others. The hotel industry provides four major segments as posited by Obeke & Abugu (2021); Tribe (2011) and Mohammed (2020). These segments are food and drinks, travel and leisure, lodging/accommodation, and recreation/entertainment.

In an increasingly digital world, the visibility of a hotel's online content can significantly influence its success. Search Engine Optimization is a dynamic and essential discipline that aims to enhance the visibility and ranking of web pages in search engine results. Search engine optimization encompasses a range of techniques, including keyword research, on-page optimization, link building, and content quality enhancement, all designed to improve a website's organic reach and user experience. Web presence serves as a reflection of one's identity and values in the virtual realm, allowing for meaningful engagement with target audiences (Uford, Charles & Etuk, 2022).

Web presence and search engine optimization as tools of digital marketing adopted in the hotel business operations, in creating awareness and patronage has attracted wide interest of researchers from all fields of human endeavour. Some of which include, Etuk & Akpan (2015), they posit that search engine optimization serves as a form of digital marketing that seeks to promote websites by increasing their ability in search engine result pages (SERPs), Rangaswamy (2020), are essential platforms for marketers which facilitate an exchange of value between three types of users: consumers seeking information, advertisers trying to reach those consumers and content providers, representing one of the most critical points of contact between the company and consumers on the internet and Runfola et al. (2013), the internet allows potential guests to gather information about hotel amenities and facilities in a utilitarian nature since they can compare prices without contacting a hotel's sales representative or travel agent and prepare their travel itineraries while looking at a screen .

Does the usage of web presence and search engine optimization effectively enhance the patronage of hotels in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria? This study was conducted to ascertain the effect of web presence and search engine optimization on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State.

Statement of the Problem

Some studies have been conducted to investigate the effect of web presence and search engine optimization on hotel patronage (Okpaleke & Ezeanyi, 2022; Walker, 2023; Patel 2022; Al-Hadid, 2023; Jones, 2023; Lee et. al., 2022; Johnson & Kim, 2023) amongst others. While some studies have discovered positive and statistically significant effects on hotel patronage, others have discovered negative evidence. As a result of the mixed findings regarding the outcome of extant studies, (Mahmutovic, 2023; Matthew, et. al., 2019; Khriam, 2015; James & Inyang, 2022; Hussain, 2019; Almutawa, 2022), we observed that there is a knowledge gap.

The economic meltdown that ensued post covid-19 period had the hospitality industry as one of its biggest casualties of low operational activities and resulting low returns on marketing investment, losses on revenue, high labour turnover and low market shares (Nsien & Ekong, 2023). Some hotels in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria have lost frequent patronage, experienced a drop in high market shares, recorded low returns on their investment and generally experience serious threat to their continued

operations. The hotel industry seek to improve their marketing performance to survive in today's competitive environment (Breesam, et.al., 2019) and generate increased patronage and profit. Studies show that they adopt digital marketing innovations such as, search engine optimization, e-mail marketing, affiliate marketing, website marketing amongst others to attract patronage. This innovation has enabled clients/customers to gather information on hotels and their available services.

Despite the usefulness and contributions of the web presence and search engine optimization to the success of the hotels, some customers have had to deal with having their vital information lost to fraudsters while making their online bookings. Some are repelled by the fact that prices of hotel accommodation booked for online are different from the actual price at the counter. Physical features, such as pictures of the hotel rooms, the building architecture, the presence of free Wi-Fi that some hotels claim to offer as uploaded through the use of digital media tools are not accurately a true representation of reality.

In Akwa Ibom state, a gap exists in knowledge on the interaction between web presence and search engine optimization on hotel patronage. Hence, the need to fill this gap. It is against this backdrop that this study attempted to investigate the influence of web presence and search engine optimization on customers' patronage of hotels in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were to;

- i. examine the effect of web presence on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.
- ii. determine the effect of search engine optimization on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed in order to address the objectives,

- i. How does web presence affect hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria?
- ii. How does search engine optimization affect hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria?

Hypotheses of the Study

The following null hypotheses were postulated:

- 1: There is no significant effect of web presence on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.
- 2: There is no significant effect of search engine optimization on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Web Presence

A web presence is the digital representation of a company, brand or personal brand. It is made up of texts, images, videos and music that communicate the brand's identity. A well-designed website can help a business succeed in its industry and provide a user-friendly experience to potential customers. Studies generally agree that consumers are looking for necessary information from the hotel website

and are most interested in reservation, facilities, contact, and availability information (Law, 2019; Leung et al., 2016). Every hotel need to have a website and it is becoming necessary for making the hotel visible through online and the main aim of that website is to attract the traffic to a specific hotel web site with the help of online tools. (Quinton & Khan, 2009). Online presence is an integral part of any business's marketing strategy.

Web presence is the extent to which a website is visible in search engines and social media. Web presence can be measured by keyword ranking, social media reach and by the number of visitors who visit the sites. Traffic and Alexa rankings are two common metrics for measuring the effectiveness of a web presence. These rank sites are based on their traffic levels and popularity among other sites. However, Leung et al., (2016) assert that hotel website functionality is the most crucial factor for travellers when booking via an online reservation site. Hotel website functionality refers to the quality of information capacity, including a website content's ability to provide sufficient information about the hotel's products and services (Law, 2019; Wong et al., 2020).

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a critical marketing channel that drives real business results for brands, organizations and businesses of all sizes. Khraim (2015) defines SEO as the method of designing, writing and coding a website in a way that aids in improving the quality, volume and visibility of business websites by people using search engines through national or unpaid search results. It is a technique of getting the website in search engine results and this process works with the key words and about the website frequency in search engine listings (Parvez, 2018). Etuk and Akpan (2015) explain that search engine optimization serves as a form of digital marketing that seeks to promote websites by increasing their ability in search engine result pages (SERPs).

The major goal of search engine optimization is to help attract website visitors who will become customers, clients or an audience that keeps coming back. Search engines (Google, Bing, Baidu and others) according to Rangaswamy (2020), are essential platforms for marketers which facilitate an exchange of value between three types of users: consumers seeking information, advertisers trying to reach those consumers and content providers, representing one of the most critical points of contact between the company and consumers on the internet. Gupta et al. (2016) define search engine optimisation as an approver that uses a search principle for search engine to acquire a higher ranking for webpages or websites to enhance the profitability of website accent. Search engine is a methodology which depends on various techniques using a computer program to collect data from the internet and organizing and procuring the searched information for displaying the search results to the users in a systematic way. Organizations provide conveniently allows users to discover their target information quickly and accurately by effectively understanding web user's behaviour.

Overview of the Hospitality Industry

The hospitality industry, which is one of the world's fastest-growing sectors, has recently captured the attention of researchers (Uford, Effiong & Charles, 2023). The hospitality service sector has great potential to stimulate economic development, increase the number of new jobs and improve the social climate (Langvinien & Daunoravi, 2015). Hospitality is also known as part of tourism or considered one of the forms of tourism. Authors mostly split these into definitions, however, because tourism is impossible without hospitality. Hotel industry is one of the divisions of the hospitality industry with the longest service life (Obeke et. al. 2021). Hospitality is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as the pleasant and generous reception and entertainment of guests, and tourists (Barrows et al., 2012).

According to Walker (2013), hospitality means “taking care and shelter giving to the travellers”, hence, providing the service was known in the ancient civilizations already. The principles of the hospitality and hospitality industry are rapidly evolving due to changing environments and customer versatility (Crick & Spencer, 2011). In addition, the concept of hospitality is now synonymous with the support for visitors, involving them in shared events, and conversations among others. Despite the fact that it might not seem a serious activity, hospitality service providers are supposed to be interested in the game with clients, providing a good definition of the outcome in this way (Crick & Spencer, 2011). However, according to Kandampully et al. (2014), until this moment, there is no agreed concept of hospitality. Several scholars, such as Crick and Spencer (2011), Barrows et al. (2012), and Walker (2013) state that without certain critical systemic elements, the hospitality sector industry is impossible. Nevertheless, some researchers state that the hospitality sector has four segments: food and drinks, travel and leisure, lodging/accommodation, and recreation/entertainment.

Food and Beverages: The food and beverage industry, formally recognized as F&B by its acronym, is the largest division of the hospitality industry. The F&B industry is estimated to provide 50% of all meals eaten. It consists of establishments mainly involved in cooking meals, snacks, and drinks off the premises for immediate use. If a restaurant is part of a hotel, the facilities it offers will boost the experience of visitors by serving outstanding cuisine and first-class customer service. Emre et al. (2018) reported that food and beverage sales are one of the core elements of hotel sales revenue.

Travel and Leisure: Travel and leisure deals with services related to moving people from place to place. The transport business is facilitated by the use of buses, cabs, planes, ships, trains and so on. Leisure travel is where, while on a holiday vacation, a person spends money on hotels, meals and leisure, and business travel on the other hand is where a person travels for work and spends money on accommodation and food. Many individuals even engage in leisure whilst on a business trip. The major function of tourism is to encourage people to travel. They expend money on accommodation as individuals travel, either for company or pleasure. Mohamed (2020) stated that globally, the tourism industry contributed \$89 trillion to the global GDP in 2019 which is about 10.3%.

Lodging: Lodging involves renting for a short-period dwelling, like one or more nights for a time or a spot to sleep. In the lodging industry, fancy hotels, youth hostels, elderly hostels, campgrounds, motels and other companies that provide people with a place to sleep overnight are also in the lodging industry (Obeke & Abugu, 2021). Other user classes such as corporate travellers, pleasure travellers, long-stay travellers, discount travellers, and special travellers such as industry, airlines, and military individuals can boast business markets.

Recreation: Tribe (2011) defined recreation as the pursuit of leisure activities during one’s spare time. Any organization that performs experiences for rest, relaxation and fun, to refresh the body and mind of a person is in the business of recreation. Film companies that have displays such as movies or cinemas, attractions that are places of particular interest for visits such as zoos and parks, spectator sports and participatory sports are also components of the business of recreation.

Relationship between Web Presence and Hotel Patronage

The digital era has transformed the way hotels engage with potential customers, making web presence a critical factor influencing customer patronage. The importance of a website or web presence refers to the tremendous use of the Internet. This trend can be seen when people desire to plan a trip more strongly (Heath, 2018, Dedeker, 2016). Okpaleke & Ezeanyi (2022) explained that the usage of e-marketing by hotels positively influences customer patronage. Web presence encompasses a hotel’s

website, social media profiles, online reviews, and overall digital footprint, playing a pivotal role in attracting and retaining customers by enhancing visibility, providing comprehensive information, and building trust. A strong web presence significantly boosts a hotel's visibility. Hotels with well-optimized websites and active social media profiles are more likely to appear in search results when potential customers search for accommodations online. This increased visibility can lead to higher traffic to the hotel's website, resulting in more bookings.

In addition, a well-maintained web presence allows hotels to provide comprehensive information about their services, amenities, and location. This information is crucial for potential customers making booking decisions. Detailed descriptions, high-quality images, virtual tours, and customer testimonials can significantly influence a customer's choice. According to Kim (2023), hotels that offer detailed online information are more likely to convert website visitors into paying customers, as they help potential guests make informed decisions.

Empirical evidence underscores the importance of web presence in driving customer patronage. For instance, a study by Smith & Brown (2023) revealed that hotels with an integrated digital marketing strategy, encompassing search engine optimization, social media, and content marketing, saw a substantial increase in direct bookings. Hotels with robust web presence experience higher customer engagement and increased booking rates (Walker, 2023; Patel, 2022). Furthermore, Nguyen et al. (2022) found that hotels with positive online reviews and high social media engagement experienced higher customer loyalty and increased patronage.

A strong web presence is a must for hotels aiming to increase customer patronage. By enhancing visibility, providing adequate information, and building trust, hotels can attract more customers and encourage loyalty. As online engagement continues to grow, investing in a strong web presence will remain a key strategy for hotels seeking to thrive in the competitive hospitality industry.

Relationship between Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Hotel Patronage.

Search engine optimization has become a vital component in the hospitality industry, particularly for hotels aiming to increase customer patronage. Search engine optimization involves optimizing a website to improve its visibility on search engine results pages (SERPs), thereby attracting more potential customers. The relationship between search engine optimization and customer patronage in hotels can be understood through various dimensions, including online visibility, user experience, and competitive advantage. The primary goal of search engine optimization is to enhance a hotel's online visibility. Hotels that rank higher on SERPs are more likely to be noticed by potential customers. This increased visibility leads to higher website traffic, which subsequently can translate into increased bookings and customer patronage.

Recent studies have shown that a significant percentage of travellers use search engines to find accommodations, making SEO a crucial strategy for hotels (Al-Hadid, 2023; Smith, 2022). Parvez et al. (2018) in their research discovered that search engines are playing a primary role in developing hotels business by optimizing hotel websites with the videos and pictures about their facilities, location and the groups they are franchised with; with a view to getting businesses by Airlines, tour operators and travel agents with their websites. Additionally, SEO not only focuses on keyword optimization but also on improving the overall user experience of the website. Factors such as website speed, mobile-friendliness, and easy navigation contribute to a better user experience, which can enhance customer satisfaction and encourage bookings. A well-optimized website can reduce bounce rates and increase the time users spend on the site, further boosting the likelihood of conversions (Jones, 2023).

In a highly competitive industry like hospitality, search engine optimization provides hotels with a competitive advantage. Hotels that invest in SEO can differentiate themselves from competitors by appearing more frequently and prominently in search results. This can be particularly advantageous for smaller hotels competing with larger chains. SEO allows these hotels to target specific keywords and niches, reaching potential customers who are looking for unique or boutique experiences (Lee et al., 2022). Johnson & Kim (2023) demonstrated that hotels with robust SEO strategies saw a significant increase in direct bookings compared to those relying solely on third-party booking platforms. Similarly, Chen & Wang (2022) found that search engine optimization efforts led to higher customer engagement and retention rates. Search engine optimization plays a critical role in enhancing customer patronage in the hotel industry. By improving online visibility, and user experience, and providing a competitive edge, search engine optimization helps hotels attract and retain customers.

Theoretical Framework

Technological Acceptance Model (Fred Davis, 1986)

The technological acceptance model (TAM) was developed by Fred Davis in 1986 to predict the acceptability of an information system, which shows how consumers accept and use information technology (Ekwueme & Akagwu, 2017). This model hypothesizes that the acceptability of an information system or a new technology largely relies on the Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) of the technology introduced from the user's perspective and not the business perspective. TAM assumes that the adoption and usage of any new technology is a function of the behavioural intention of its users. Furthermore, another view point from Schiffman et al., (2008), explains that the behavioural intention of the users is influenced by the individual's attitude towards the use of the technology and also by the opinion of the utility such technology will create. There are other factors that consumers should consider before accepting or rejecting e-marketing (Chung & Paynter, 2002). Those factors include inability to access the internet due to non-usage of phones that have the facilities and poor internet connection, trust issues, delivery time of the ordered products and payment channels problems.

As the anchor theory for this research, it explains why the internet, being a recent development in the technology of communication, is adopted and used by consumers in their purchasing activities and also for engaging in various marketing communications activities (Ekwueme & Akagwu, 2017). The major factors responsible for the use of e-marketing by consumers are the points mentioned above, which are the perceived usefulness and ease of use it offers. It is a well recognised theory to explain the usage of new technology in the online travel-booking process. Morosan & Jeong (2008) explain that the usability of channels such as navigation, convenience, time-saving, easy-to-price comparisons and appearance is the crucial driver of online purchasing decisions.

Empirical Review

Khraim (2015) investigated the impact of search engine optimization dimensions on companies using online advertisement in Jordan. The study employed a combination of research methodologies and analytical techniques. The study revealed that out of the four identified SEO dimensions, three dimensions had significant impacts. Specifically, search engine optimization competitiveness, search engine optimization experience, and search engine optimization techniques exhibited statistically significant relationships with companies' performance in utilizing online advertising. The research was conducted within the specific context of Jordan, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to

other regions or industries. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data through questionnaires introduces potential biases in responses.

Okpaleke & Ezeanyi (2022) investigated e-marketing strategies and customer patronage in selected hotels in Umuahia North, Abia State Nigeria. The study adopted the survey research design through the use of questionnaire where information was gathered from a primary source. The total population of the study was 200 while the sample size was 133. Mean and frequency distributions were used to analyze the research questions.

[Arohunsoro](#), Ojo & Shittu (2020) evaluated the influence of e-marketing on patronage behaviour and its attendant challenges. The study employed a descriptive survey research design. It employed the use of structured questionnaire that is closed ended. The data collected were analysed through the use of descriptive method of data analysis such as tables, percentage and charts. The study revealed that E-marketing saves time and increases patronage level, E-marketing enhances patronage increase, quality website improves customer patronage and online advertising improves patronage level. However, it was also revealed that some of the challenges facing E-marketing includes no centrally acceptable payment method, Unstructured Presentation of Information, E-Marketing advertisements being poor, E-Marketing internet domain being weak as well as poor sensitization frustrates E-marketing. The study concluded that E-marketing is an important strategy to capture patrons who are use to online booking system and enhancement of convenient booking for online patrons who are relatively far from the locations of the hotels.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In conducting this study, the survey research design was adopted.

Population, Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

The population for this study comprised one thousand, one hundred and twenty-two (1122) employees that had access to information of customers who made hotel reservations using web presence and search engine optimization from forty-one (41) hotels located in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The forty-one (41) hotels comprised of thirty-two (32) 1-Star hotels, five (5) 2-Stars hotels, and four (4) 3-Stars hotels registered with the Akwa Ibom State Ministry of Culture and Tourism. In addition, the hotels have web presence and have been in business for at least three years. The study employed a census sampling technique and a purposive sampling technique to distribute copies of the questionnaire across the hotels. This method provided the opportunity to select the individuals who fit the study.

Data Source/Collection Method and Instrumentation.

Primary data collection was used in this study owing to its advantages of promoting originality and enhancing the perception and opinion of respondents without probable manipulation or distortions. The research instrument was divided into two sections A and B. Section A solicited the biometrics of respondents. Section B dealt out statements on web presence and search engine optimization as independent variables and hotel patronage as dependent variable to which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement in a 5-point Likert scale.

Validity and Reliability of the Study

To ensure that the research instrument was valid, the instrument was subjected to face, content and construct validity. Content validity was utilized to provide for adequate representation of the content of

the item in capturing the variables under study. The face and content validity tests were initiated by giving a sample of questionnaire to senior academics in the field of marketing for expert opinion and inputs. The test-re-test pilot survey method was employed by the researchers to ensure that the instrument was reliable. The correlation or strength of association of the two sets of scores were used to determine the reliability of the research instrument.

Methods of Data Analysis

The study utilized several statistical approaches to analyze the data collected from the respondents. For the demographic analyses, simple percentages and charts was employed, leveraging the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 to facilitate these analyses. For the univariate analyses, means and standard deviations were used to provide insights into the central tendencies and variability of the data. Lastly, to test the study hypotheses, the study employed Partial Least Square - Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), facilitated by the SmartPLS version 3.2.9 computer software.

Decision Rules

Four simple rules of thumb for PLS-SEM as suggested by contemporary scholars (Ringle, Wende & Becker, 2015; Sarstedt & Liu, 2024) were followed in order to decide either to accept or reject the hypotheses formulated. First, the probability value (p-value) was considered with a value less than 0.05 considered significant. Then, beta (β) values of .10 to 0.29 are considered weak, .30 to .49 are considered moderate, values of .50 to .99 are considered strong, while 1 is considered perfect correlations (Cohen, 1988). Lastly, path coefficients are considered significant if t-values are greater than critical t-value. Threshold value for a two-tailed test is $t > 1.96$ ($p < 0.05$) (Hair, et al., 2014; Etim, et al., 2023).

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Questionnaire Administration

Category	Copies Distributed	Copies Returned	Percent Returned	Copies not Returned	Percent Returned	n
Star	43	44	0.81	99	9.19	
Stars	20	4	5.00	6	5.00	
Stars	59	05	5.04	4	3.96	
Total	122	03	4.83	19	5.17	

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Table 1 illustrates that 1122 copies of the questionnaire were distributed, out of which 503 copies representing 44.83 per cent were correctly filled and returned, while 619 copies representing 55.17 per cent were not returned. The 44.83 per cent return rate satisfied the acceptable return rate for a cross-sectional study (Wu et al., 2022). Hence, the returned 503 copies were used for the analyses.

Test of Hypotheses

The two hypotheses proposed earlier in the study, was tested using PLS-SEM. This is appropriate because the study aim to examine the relationships among latent constructs, especially when the research model is predictive in nature. It is also ideal when the data may not meet the stringent assumptions of covariance-based SEM, such as multivariate normality or large sample sizes (Akpan, Johnny & Sylva, 2022). The study proposed that:

- i. There is no significant effect of web presence on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.
- ii. There is no significant effect of search engine optimization on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Table 2: Test of Hypotheses One and Two

Paths(β)	Path Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	T-Values	P-Values	Decision
WP -> HP	0.713	0.081	10.11	0.156	Rejected
SEO -> HP	0.613	0.076	8.003	0.046	Rejected

Note: WP = Web presence, SEO =Search engine optimization, HP = Hotel Patronage, Beta (β) = 0-0.29 = weak, 0.3-0.59 = moderate, 0.6-0.99 = strong ± 1 = Perfect (Chin, 1998).

Source: SmartPLS 3.2.9 Output on Research Data, 2024.

Table 3: Effect Sizes of WP and SEO on HP

Paths	Correlation Coefficient(β)	Standard Error	Effect Size(f^2)	Predictive Relevance(Q^2)	Remarks
WP -> HP	0.713	0.081	0.13	0.341	Moderate
SEO -> HP	0.613	0.076	0.02	0.365	Moderate

Note: WP = Web Presence, SEO = Search Engine Optimization, HP = Hotel Patronage, Beta (β) = 0-0.29 = weak, 0.3-0.59 = moderate, 0.6-0.99 = strong ± 1 = Perfect (Chin, 1998). Effect size (f^2), 0.02 = small, $f^2 \geq 0.15$ = moderate, while $f^2 \geq 0.35$ = large. Predictive Relevance(Q^2), > 0 satisfactory (Hair, et. al., 2019)

Source: SmartPLS 3.2.9 Output on Research Data, 2024.

Tables 2 and 3 show the tests of the study's hypotheses. First, the analysis shows that web presence has a strong positive influence on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, as evidenced by a path coefficient of 0.713, which indicates a strong correlation. With a p-value of 0.011 and a t-value of 10.156, this relationship is statistically significant, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis that there is no significant effect of web presence on hotel patronage. Moreover, the effect size f^2 of 0.13 points to a moderate impact, and the predictive relevance Q^2 of 0.341 confirms that web presence has a satisfactory level of predictive accuracy for hotel patronage.

Similarly, search engine optimization (SEO) also shows a moderate positive effect on hotel patronage, with a path coefficient of 0.613. The p-value of 0.003 and the t-value of 8.046 further indicate that this

relationship is statistically significant, leading to the rejection of the hypothesis suggesting that SEO has no significant effect on hotel patronage. The effect size f^2 for SEO, while small at 0.02, combined with a predictive relevance Q^2 of 0.365, also demonstrates a satisfactory level of predictive relevance.

Discussion of Findings

Web Presence and Hotel Patronage

The first hypothesis stated that web presence does not have significant effect on hotel patronage. The result showed that web presence has a positive significant effect on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The result implies that having a strong web presence positively influence the patronage of hotels in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. This suggests that hotels with well-designed websites, active online booking systems, and informative content are more likely to attract and retain customers. A robust web presence enhances visibility, trust, and convenience for potential guests, thereby increasing the likelihood of bookings and patronage.

This finding agrees with several studies such as Kariru (2022), who investigated the effect of digital marketing in the hospitality industry in Kenya and found that digital marketing contributes to customer satisfaction, competitive advantage, and efficient cost management, thereby influencing profitability. Similarly, Kim, Lehto, and Morrison (2007), who found that a comprehensive web presence significantly impacts customer perceptions and decision-making processes in the hotel industry. Their research demonstrated that hotels with user-friendly websites, detailed information, and easy booking options experienced higher patronage and customer satisfaction. Also, Law, Qi, and Buhalis (2010) conducted a study on the role of the internet in the hotel industry and found a positive correlation between a hotel's web presence and its performance metrics, including occupancy rates and revenue per available room. They concluded that an effective online presence is crucial for attracting and retaining customers in the digital age. In the same vein, Ip, Lee, and Law (2012) highlighted the importance of website quality in the hospitality industry. Their research indicated that high-quality websites with rich content, interactive features, and seamless navigation significantly enhance customer engagement and hotel patronage.

There are also contrasting findings such as that of Harrigan, Evers, Miles, and Daly (2017), who examined the effect of digital marketing strategies on hotel performance and concluded that while a strong web presence was important, other factors such as social media engagement, email marketing, and offline marketing efforts also played significant roles in driving patronage. Also, Jeong, Oh, and Gregoire (2003) explored the relationship between web presence and hotel performance and found that while an online presence is beneficial, it is not a standalone factor. Their research indicated that customer service quality, location, and overall brand reputation were equally, if not more, important in influencing customer decisions.

The finding of this study is consistent with a broad body of literature which shows the positive effect of a strong web presence on hotel patronage. Hence, a well-maintained and user-friendly website can enhance customer trust, provide valuable information, and facilitate easy booking processes, leading to increased patronage. However, the contrasting studies show that a web presence is just one component of a comprehensive marketing strategy. Factors such as social media engagement, offline marketing, customer service quality, and overall brand reputation also play critical roles in influencing hotel patronage. Therefore, hotels should adopt an integrated approach, combining a strong web presence with other marketing and service quality initiatives to maximize their patronage.

Search Engine Optimization and Hotel Patronage

The second hypothesis stated search engine optimization does not have a significant effect on hotel patronage. The result showed that search engine optimization has a moderate positive significant effect on patronage of hotels. This result implies that the implementation of effective search engine optimization strategies by hotels in the region can lead to increased visibility on search engine results, which in turn can drive higher customer patronage and bookings. Compared to traditional marketing methods, adoption of search engine optimization can offer a cost-effective means of reaching potential customers. It targets users who are already interested in hotel accommodations in Akwa Ibom State, making it a more efficient use of marketing resources.

Further, the finding suggests that efforts to improve a hotel's visibility on search engines like Google can lead to a noticeable increase in customer visits and bookings. This implies that when hotels invest in search engine optimization strategies—such as optimizing their website content for relevant keywords, ensuring mobile-friendliness, and building quality backlinks—they are more likely to appear higher in search engine results pages (SERPs). Higher visibility generally translates to increased traffic to the hotel's website and, subsequently, more bookings and patronage.

Several studies support the finding that search engine optimization positively affects hotel patronage. For instance, a study by Leung, Law, Hoof, and Buhalis (2015) found that hotels that effectively use search engine optimization strategies experience higher visibility on search engines, leading to increased web traffic and higher booking rates. Similarly, Xiang, Magnini, and Fesenmaier (2014) reported that online visibility through search engines is a critical factor for hotels, as it directly affects their ability to attract and convert potential customers. Additionally, research by Pan, Xiang, Law, and Fesenmaier (2011) highlighted that customers often use search engines to find and compare hotel options, making search engine optimization an essential tool for hotels to ensure they appear in these searches. This visibility is particularly crucial for attracting international tourists who may not be familiar with local hotel brands.

However, not all studies agree on the magnitude of SEO's impact. For example, a study by Buhalis and Law (2008) pointed out that while SEO can improve visibility, its direct influence on actual bookings may be overstated. They argue that other factors, such as customer reviews, price competitiveness, and overall online reputation, play a more critical role in the decision-making process of potential guests. Additionally, a study by Verma, Stock, and McCarthy (2012) asserted that while search engine optimization is important, it should be part of a broader digital marketing strategy that includes social media marketing, content marketing, and email marketing. They found that an integrated approach tends to yield better results than relying on search engine optimization alone.

The result that, search engine optimization has a moderate positive significant influence on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State aligns with the several studies suggesting that search engine optimization enhances visibility and can drive customer traffic. However, its effect should be considered in conjunction with other digital marketing efforts and factors influencing customer decisions.

Summary of Major Findings

Firstly, web presence was found to have a significant effect on hotel patronage. This shows that a strong web presence makes the hotel readily discoverable by potential guests searching for

accommodation online. This increases the chances of the hotel being considered during the booking process.

Secondly, the study also found that search engine optimization has a moderate positive significant influence on the patronage of hotels in Akwa Ibom State. This suggests that the implementation of effective search engine optimization strategies by hotels in the region can lead to increased visibility on search engine results, which in turn can drive higher customer patronage and bookings.

Recommendations

- i. The hotels should ensure that they have a well-designed, user-friendly, and informative website that showcase their offerings and provides a seamless booking experience for customers. Regular updates and maintenance of the website should be a priority to keep it relevant and engaging.
- ii. The hotel owners and operators should prioritize the implementation of effective search engine optimization strategies to improve their visibility on search engine results pages. This should include optimizing their website content, improving website structure and navigation, and leveraging relevant keywords to attract potential customers.

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