

Digital Marketing Tools and Hotel Patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the effects of digital marketing tools on hotel visits in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, emphasizing social media and affiliate marketing as independent variables, and hotel patronage as the dependent outcome. The research targeted a population of 1122 employees with access to customer reservation details across forty-one hotels registered with the Akwa Ibom State Hotels Management and Tourism Board. Data was collected via a structured questionnaire given to hotel employees. Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 25 for demographic data, utilizing simple percentages and charts. Univariate analyses employed means and standard deviations to examine data central tendencies and variability. 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. Findings of the study showed that social media ($\beta = 0.803$, $t\text{-value} = 13.113$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000 < 0.05$) had significant effect on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State and affiliate marketing ($\beta = 0.701$, $t\text{-value} = 10.002$, $p\text{-value} = 0.021 < 0.05$), had a statistical significant effect on hotel patronage. The empirical results revealed that social media has a significant effect on hotel patronage. From this result, we concluded that social media platforms offer hotels a direct channel to engage with potential and existing customers, build brand loyalty, and influence travel decisions. Also, affiliate marketing has a statistical significant effect on the patronage of hotels in Akwa Ibom State. Affiliates, such as travel bloggers, online travel agencies, and other related service providers, promote the hotel to their audience, thereby driving traffic and increasing bookings. Based on the empirical findings, we recommended that management of hotels in Akwa Ibom State should maintain their strong social media presence while exploring other social media platforms in order to engage with their target audience. They should also actively explore and implement affiliate marketing strategies to drive increased customer patronage. By leveraging the synergies between these different components, hotels can maximize the effect of their digital marketing efforts and drive increased customer patronage.

Keywords: Digital marketing, social media, affiliate marketing, online bookings, hotel (customer) patronage

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INTRODUCTION

The hotel industry is a large sub sector of the service industry where product elements are interrelated and complex and just like many other businesses, the organizations seek to improve their marketing performance. This has propelled hotels to use digital marketing tools that will increase customer traffic and patronage of their products. Operationally, the hospitality

industry is beyond the provision of accommodation. It provides amongst others food and beverage, tourism, travel, etc. It also impacts the economy through its direct contribution to taxes, employment, income and gross domestic product (GDP) of the country (Gawler, 2005; Nsien & Ekong, 2023).

Digital marketing has become an important and

indispensable part of every business today. This can be attributed to the advent of information and communication technologies (ICTs) that provide newer and more sophisticated means of reaching out to target audiences also according to Etuk, et al. (2021) digital marketing alters the way businesses run, providing enhanced efficiency and profitability in the digital world of today. Digital marketing therefore has engulfed industries and transformed the way through which businesses reach out to customers. Before the 1990s, marketing activities were carried out using traditional channels such as printed media, billboards and broadcasting stations in the promotion of their products. Today, there are several digital marketing platforms where an industry can promote and boost its business.

The industry is important because it contributes to the growth of an economy by providing a lot of employment opportunities for the people, representing a large percentage of a country's Gross Domestic Product. This help to raise the national income and earning foreign currencies through the goods and services provided to foreign visitors, thus improving the balance of payments (Baker et al., 2000).

According to Akpabio (2007) with the recent economic recession, Nigeria strives towards economic growth especially through the hospitality industry. Akpabio explains that between 70% and 75% of international tourists' expenditure goes to hospitality services on an annual basis as stated by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). He posits that there has been a rapid increase in the number of hotels in Akwalbom State, which in turn has a great influence on the economic, social, cultural and aesthetic evolution of the city. Despite the achievements of the hospitality industry, Akpabio (2007) further explained that one of the greatest challenges facing the hotel industry today in Nigeria is the ever-growing volume and pace of competition due to little or no difference between one hotel's products and another. Amadi (2008) identified erratic power supply as another challenge; Nwosu (2008) noted poor services and Awoseyin (2007) spotted unethical behaviours by professionals.

The hospitality industry consists of establishments that provide paid lodging and full guest services, typically with a continuous staff presence. There are many different kinds of hotels and they may often be divided into groups based on price, purpose and service. Typical divisions of service levels include; limited service, mid-range service and full services. There is also the 1- Star, 2-Star, 3-Star, 4- Star and 5- Star hotels. One being the lowest ranking and five the highest. The importance digital marketing has on hotel patronage in the hospitality industry has attracted several researchers interest. Unfortunately, there are inadequate works done in this area in Akwa Ibom State thus the need for this research. This research therefore examines the effect of digital

marketing tools of social media and affiliate marketing on hotel Patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study was to examine the effect of digital marketing tools on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The specific objectives include to:

- i. Determine the effect of social media on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.
- ii. Investigate the effect of affiliate marketing on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State Nigeria.

Research questions

In order to address the main and specific objectives, the following research questions were developed:

1. What is the effect of social media on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria?
2. What is the effect of affiliate marketing on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria?

Hypotheses of the study

Considering the objectives of this study, the following null hypotheses were postulated:

- i. There is no significant effect of social media on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.
- ii. There is no significant effect of affiliate marketing on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Literature review

Digital marketing

The concept of digital marketing is defined in a variety of ways, but the majority of definitions agree on the two main elements: First, it is part of marketing plans and strategies; second, it is an activity related to the use of the internet that aims to reach potential consumers more effectively and efficiently as results influence their purchase decision (Al Hadwer, Tavana, Gills & Rezania, 2021; Bala & Verma, 2018).

Digital marketing refers to the utilization of digital channels, platforms and strategies to promote products or brands to reach and engage with a target audience (Uford, Charles & Etuk, 2022). Digital marketing refers to a set of tools and techniques that help transform a large amount of data from disparate sources into meaningful information to support decision-making and improve organizational performance (Tariq et al., 2022).

Digital marketing importantly transformed the way companies and corporations employ communication

technologies. As a recent innovation, digital marketing is used by enterprises as a strategy to compete in the market, establish good reputation and gain positive status in customer perception (Ekong, et. al., 2023). Puthuserry (2020) affirms that digital marketing strategies have become widespread and effective as online technologies become progressively integrated into business plans as well as daily life, and as consumers utilize equipment rather than accessing physical stores. According to Puthuserry (2020), digital marketing is marketing as well as the promotion of goods or services by utilizing digital technologies, especially through the Web, cell phones, visual advertising as well as any other electronic media.

Farrel (2017), digital marketing introduces electronic technology to traditional marketing concepts. It uses electronic media, wireless media and digital databases on customers rather than using printed media as posited by Kariru, Kambona & Odhuno (2017). Digital marketing calls for the use of tools such as electronic billboards, videos, mobile phones and the internet when marketing. These tools as explained by Khan & Kawaz (2021), offer attractive visual displays and fast communication speeds while targeting wide audience bases. Digital marketing encompasses a wide range of techniques and channels, including search engine optimization (SEO), pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, social media marketing, e-mail marketing, content marketing, affiliate marketing, website analytics and more.

Social media

Social media refers to online platforms and websites that allow users to create, share and interact with content in online communities. These platforms are created to facilitate social networking, communication and information sharing using various types of media such as text, images, videos and audio. Social media allows the users, without any need for physical presence to communicate and generate content (Zhang et al., 2017). According to Bernado & Purwanto (2022), social media is a group of internet-based applications that are built on the ideological and technological framework of Web 2.0 and allow the creation of the exchange of information content from internet users. Etim, et. al.(2023) asserts that the information and communication technology have revolutionized the way business organizations operate, with extensive access to the internet and social media platforms making it simpler for firms to contact new clients and engage with existing ones.

Jasin (2022) describes social media as one of the media that facilitates interactive communication between entrepreneurs and anyone, including consumers and interested parties, wherever and whenever. It acts as a bridge in marketing goods and services to various types of customers, organizations and companies. Marketing activities on social media can build brand awareness to

attract new customers and maintain customer loyalty which will ultimately have an impact on increasing sales volume and the number of customers (Soeleiman & Utami, 2021). Social media has transformed the way businesses interact with customers. Juet. al., (2020) assert that as a result of social media marketing, individuals can communicate with large groups of people who would otherwise be unable to do so through traditional media means. Social media marketing includes activities such as sharing content, videos and images. The aim is to create content that attracts attention and encourages the reader to share it with others through social media platforms. According to Attih, et. al. (2024), social media platforms as valuable communication tools have become increasingly important for companies, marketers and consumers as most of them use social media to showcase their products to encourage consumer patronage.

Affiliate marketing

Affiliate marketing which is similar to online commission-based marketing is the collaboration with other organisations or companies and websites to be able to get mutual benefits after promoting their products and services (Aidhama, 2022; Misra et al., 2021).

Affiliate marketing promotes other people's products and affiliates receive a commission every time an affiliate makes a sale or introduces a lead (Chris, 2020). Krisnawat & Halim (2020), Deshpande (2020) defined affiliate marketing as a collaborative activity that involves organisations, companies, or sites to gain profit for both parties in an agreement through the activities of advertising products or services. Affiliate marketing strategy uses banners or links of their websites on a merchant's website to find and attract buyers to their web page.

Schwarz & Grabowska (2015) asserts that there are three different ways affiliates participate in commissions. First, pay-per-click: When a customer clicks on a link provided by an affiliate's website and buys the product from the affiliate merchant they receive a specific commission. Second, pay per lead: Here the affiliates receive a commission for each person who fills out web-based forms and contact details (email address). Commission fees may also depend on the prices of the product sold or the service you bring to the third category: Third, pay per sale: the affiliate earns a certain percentage of the price of the product.

Hotel (customer) patronage

Customer patronage denotes the degree to which buying units concentrate purchases over time to a particular brand based on positive strengthening and expressed via repetitive buying behaviour (Nyakweba et. al., 2015).

Customer patronage is the approval or backing provided by customers concerning a particular brand (Udo, Akpan & Uford, 2024; Etuk & Udonde, 2023). Patronage arises when an individual displays a conscious effort to choose a solution towards his or her need(s) through the process of analyzing situations which would be rewarding and relatively satisfying amidst certain challenges faced in the course of fulfilling his/her desires (Adiele & Grend, 2016). Customer is vital to the success of the hotel industry. Etuk & Ekong (2016) asserts that organizations in high end hospitality strive to meet the immense expectations of the customers they serve. Hence, marketers attempt to determine customers' preferences to adapt and generate value that stimulates customer patronage (Njite et al., 2015).

Customer patronage provides the basis for a steady and increasing market share. According to Nizam (2015), the cost of winning customers is six times as much as retaining existing ones. Ayodele (2016) reiterates that customer patronage is measured by the number of brands purchased, the ratio of purchases and future purchase intention exhibited towards a brand even amid changes in quality and price. Customer patronage inspires consumer loyalty and retention as well as helps organizations build their brand or products, grow their market share, prompt delivery services and create marketing improvement strategies.

Similarly, Nyakweba & Wesonga (2015) suggest consumers are better grouped into four according to their patronage status: 1. Switchers – These are consumers who do not show any loyalty to any firm or service provider. 2. Shifting Patrons – These are consumers who shift from one firm or service provider to the other. 3. Split Patrons – These are consumers' loyal to more than one firm or service provider. 4. Hard Core Patrons – Those who purchase products and services from a particular firm or service provider. Firms that desire sustained patronage in today's highly competitive business environment are required to have the satisfaction of their customers as a key focus.

Social media and hotel patronage

Al-Msallam & Alhaddad (2016) posit that social media is an innovative tool by which hotel brands can take a proactive approach to managing brand relationships with their customers. Qenaj & Beqiri (2022) explains that social media marketing activities have affected the way consumers approach the hospitality industry. Social media advertising is an extremely useful promotion tool and positively affects the increase of bookings and selection of hotels (Uford, Effiong & Charles, 2023). Shaik et al. (2018) assert that social media acts as a bridge between users and visitors or viewers, it also helps to interact with everyone to share their information and opinions about hotels.

Murphey, Varkaris & Nenhoger (2017) discovered that social media enables the hotel decision-making process. Tripathi (2021), Murphey & Baker (2020), Shaik et al. (2018) and Spio-Kwofie et al. (2024) hold the same view that social media influences hotel on hotel reservations. Okpaleke & Ezeanyi (2022) revealed that the various extent of utilization of e-marketing by hotels including social media marketing (Facebook, X, YouTube and Instagram) affect customer patronage as it brings about increased client base, increased internet awareness, creating job opportunities and improved sales. Also, Spio-Kwofie et al. (2024) posit that social media helps to increase the profit margins of hotels through patronage.

Affiliate marketing and hotel patronage

Affiliate marketing's main goals are to promote and sell products. According to a study by Thompson (2023), hotels that utilized affiliate marketing experienced a significant increase in website traffic and bookings, indicating a direct link between affiliate marketing efforts and customer patronage. Mariussen & Bowie (2010) asserts that enhanced affiliate market (AM) relationship for the travel and tourism sector has proved its critical strategic value for customer acquisition and retention generating revenue.

Affiliate marketing has emerged as a significant strategy in the hospitality industry, particularly for hotels looking to increase customer patronage. The relationship between affiliate marketing and customer patronage in hotels can be analyzed through various aspects, including increased reach, cost-effectiveness, and enhanced credibility. One of the primary benefits of affiliate marketing is the increased reach it provides. By leveraging the networks and platforms of affiliates, hotels can access a broader audience that might not be reachable through their marketing efforts alone. Affiliates often have established audiences who trust their recommendations, which can lead to higher conversion rates.

Recent research by Miller and Davis (2022), Johnson (2023) and Brown & Taylor (2022) highlights that hotel that adopted affiliate marketing saw a better return on investment (ROI) compared to those that relied solely on traditional advertising methods. Another crucial aspect of affiliate marketing is the enhanced credibility it brings to the hotel. When affiliates promote a hotel, they lend their credibility and trustworthiness to the hotel's brand. This endorsement can significantly influence potential customers' decisions, as they are more likely to trust a recommendation from a reliable source.

Additionally, Chen and Zhao (2023) discovered that affiliate marketing not only boosted initial bookings but also encouraged repeat patronage, as customers who were initially referred by affiliates continued to book directly with the hotel in the future.

Theoretical framework

Technological Acceptance Model (Fred Davis, 1986)

The technological acceptance model (TAM) is the anchor theory for this study on the effect of digital marketing tools on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. TAM is a well-recognized theory to explain the usage of new technology in the online travel-booking process. 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). It explains why the internet, being a recent innovation in the technology of communication, is adopted and used by consumers in their purchasing activities and also for engaging in various marketing communications activities.

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. Still, looking at it from another perspective, 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 (Schiffman et al., 2008). 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.

Empirical review

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. The results of the different questionnaire items collected revealed that the various extent of utilization of e-marketing by hotels includes social media marketing (Facebook, X, YouTube and Instagram), Search engine (Google), Affiliate marketing (third party hosting) as well as instant messaging (Messenger, Whatsapp and Viber). The result of the findings could not be generalized in that it was geographically limited to Umuahia North of Abia

State, and not the entire Country. Spio-Kwofie, et al. (2024). The study investigated how social media contributes to the patronage of hotels in the Cape Coast metropolis, Ghana. The study employed both quantitative and descriptive statistics in the data analysis. The study considered 5 hotels and 65 respondents from the study area. Convenience sampling techniques were used to select 65 respondents from the population. Questionnaires were the key data collection methods used in the study. The results revealed that social media influences hotel patronage. Facebook was found to be the most used social media platform among the media platforms considered used by guest when searching for hotels. Also, social media helps increase the profit margins of the hotel which is an indication that social media is widely utilised by guests of the hotel.

Yoong & Lian (2019) attempted to investigate the effect of customer engagement in social media on purchase intentions in the hotel industry in Malaysia. Four key motives of surveillance social interaction, sharing of information and attraction are examined as antecedents to customer engagement in social media at Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. The questionnaires used were administered to a convenience sample of 392 hotel customers from Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, through a self-administered questionnaire. Structural Equation Modeling is used to analyse the data and five hypotheses were tested. The findings reported that surveillance, social interaction, sharing of information and attraction have significantly influenced customer engagement in social media. Customer engagement is positively correlated to the purchase intentions.

METHODOLOGY

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 any of the two digital marketing tools studied in this work 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. The research team employed 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 employed 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 social media and affiliate marketing 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 test was initiated by giving a sample of questionnaire to the researcher's supervisor and other senior academics in the field of marketing for expert opinion and inputs. The test-re-test pilot survey method was employed by the researcher 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 were 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

In order to decide either to accept or reject the hypotheses formulated, four simple rules of thumb for PLS-SEM as suggested by contemporary scholars (Ringle, Wende & Becker, 2015; Sarstedt & Liu, 2024) were followed. 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).

RESULTS

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 hypotheses earlier formulated in this study were tested using the partial least square – structural equation modelling. The results are presented in (Tables 2 and 3). Tables 2 and 3 show the outcome of the test of the stated hypotheses.

The result indicates a significant positive effect of social media on hotel patronage, as demonstrated by the path coefficient of 0.803, which indicates a strong influence on hotel patronage, with a p-value of 0.000 and a high t-value of 13.113. These values confirm that the relationship is statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis suggesting no effect of social media on hotel patronage was rejected. Additionally, the effect size f^2 of 0.37 suggests a large effect, while the predictive relevance Q^2 of 0.589 indicates that social media's effect on hotel patronage is both substantial and predictive.

Also, affiliate marketing, exhibits a strong positive effect, as reflected by a path coefficient of 0.701. With a p-value of 0.021 and a t-value of 10.002, the results are statistically significant, allowing us to reject the null hypothesis that affiliate marketing has no effect on hotel patronage. The effect size f^2 is 0.15, indicating a moderate effect, while the predictive relevance Q^2 of 0.287 demonstrates that affiliate marketing also has a satisfactory level of predictive accuracy for hotel patronage.

DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis proposed that social media does not significantly affect hotel patronage. However, the results contradicted this hypothesis, revealing that social media usage indeed has a significant positive effect on hotel patronage in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria (Tables 2 and 3). This finding implies that increased social media engagement among hoteliers and potential customers can enhance the visibility and appeal of hotels, as social media allows for interactive marketing, direct customer feedback, and real-time engagement. This result aligns with numerous studies highlighting social media's impact on brand visibility, customer engagement, and loyalty

Table 1: Questionnaire administration.

Category of Hotels	Copies Distributed	Copies Returned	Percent Returned	Copies not Returned	Percent not Returned
1 Star	843	344	40.81	499	59.19
2 Stars	120	54	45.00	66	55.00
3 Stars	159	105	66.04	54	33.96
Total	1122	503	44.83	619	55.17

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Table 2: Test of hypotheses one and two

Paths	Correlation Coefficient(β)	Standard Error	P- Values	T- Values	Decision
SM -> HP	0.803	0.005	0.000	13.113	Rejected
AM -> HP	0.701	0.091	0.021	10.002	Rejected

Note: SM = Social Media, AM=Affiliate Marketing, HP = Hotel Patronage, Beta (β) = 0.1-0.29 = weak, 0.3-0.59 = moderate, 0.6-0.99 = strong $\pm$ 1= Perfect (Chin, 1998). Source: SmartPLS 3.2.9 Output on Research Data, 2024.

Table 3: Effect size of SM and AM on HP

Paths	Correlation Coefficient(β)	Standard error	Effect Size(f^2)	Predictive Relevance(Q^2)	Remarks
SM -> HP	0.803	0.005	0.37	0.589	Large
AM -> HP	0.701	0.091	0.15	0.287	Moderate

Note: SM = Social Media, AM=Affiliate Marketing, HP = Hotel Patronage, Beta (β) = 0.1- 0.29 = weak, 0.3-0.59 = moderate, 0.6-0.99 = strong $\pm$ 1= Perfect (Chin, 1998). Effect size (f^2), $f^2 \geq 0.02$ = 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.

within the hospitality sector (Mahmutović, 2023; Spio-Kwofie, et al., 2024; Ibekwe, et al., 2019; Leung et al., 2013). For instance, Leung, Bai, and Stahura (2013) found that social media enhances hotel marketing effectiveness, helping to build customer relationships and influence patronage decisions through platforms like Facebook and Twitter. In another study, Hudson and Thal (2013) emphasized that social media has transformed customer engagement in hospitality by fostering connections that encourage brand loyalty and influence travel decisions. Similarly, Kim, Lim, & Brymer (2015) observed that hotels effectively using social media can differentiate themselves in a competitive market, thereby attracting more patrons. However, not all studies agree on the direct impact of social media on patronage. For example, Mariani, Di Felice, and Mura (2016) noted that while social media engagement positively affects brand image, it does not always translate into increased bookings, particularly for luxury hotels where traditional marketing methods still hold influence. This suggests that while social media generally benefits hotels, its impact on patronage may vary depending on hotel type and target demographics.

The second hypothesis posited that affiliate marketing has no significant effect on hotel patronage. Contrary to this hypothesis, the results indicated a positive significant effect, suggesting that affiliate marketing can effectively increase customer traffic, visibility, and bookings through strategic partnerships with influencers and online platforms. The effectiveness of affiliate marketing aligns

with findings from various studies (Srinivasan and Wudesa, 2022; Akpan, et al., 2018; Ndikubwimana, 2016; Edet, 2021). For example, Duffy (2005) identified affiliate marketing as a cost-effective way to increase brand exposure and drive conversions by leveraging third-party endorsements. This approach allows hotels to tap into established networks, attracting new patrons. Similarly, Dwivedi et al. (2021) emphasized that affiliate marketing is beneficial in hospitality, where affiliate partnerships with travel bloggers and influencers help increase brand reach and customer engagement. However, some studies have identified limitations to affiliate marketing. For instance, Berman and Thelen (2004) found that while affiliate marketing can drive traffic, it may have limited impact on customer loyalty if promotions are perceived as overly transactional. This highlights that while affiliate marketing is valuable; its effectiveness depends on the quality and authenticity of partnerships and content.

Conclusion and recommendations

The study concluded that digital marketing tools of social media and affiliate marketing are important for hotel patronage. Social media platforms offer hotels a direct channel to engage with potential and existing customers, build brand loyalty, and influence travel decisions. Effective use of social media can enhance a hotel's visibility, attract a broader audience, and raise a community of loyal customers through interactive content, promotions, and customer reviews.

By partnering with affiliates, hotels can expand their reach and tap into new customer segments. Affiliates, such as travel bloggers, online travel agencies, and other related service providers, promote the hotel to their audience, thereby driving traffic and increasing bookings.

The following recommendations are made for the hotels:

1. Management of Hotels in Akwa Ibom State should maintain their strong social media presence while exploring other social media platforms to engage with their target audience. This can involve creating compelling content, interacting with followers, and leveraging social media advertising to reach a wider customer base.
2. The owners and managers of the hotels should actively explore and implement affiliate marketing strategies to drive increased customer patronage. They can do this through partnerships with influential bloggers, social media personalities, or other businesses to promote the hotel and its offerings to a wider audience.

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