**INTERNET SOURCES; A MARKETING TOOL FOR TOURISM ON THE JOS PLATEAU**

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**Abstract**

*Information sources play an important role in influencing tourists ‘decision-making process. Word of mouth, WOM is such an important source in this context. The main challenge of the study is to find out the Information sources/materials that tourists used in selecting Jos Plateau as their preferred tourist destination in Nigeria. The study investigated at nine purposely sampled tourist sites where 1,014 tourists were sampled and interviewed on the subject matter.  Findings show that tourists interviewed obtained information about Jos Plateau from different sources to include mainly word-of-mouth (WOM) and news/documentaries from electronic and print media, social media to bog. The Word-of-mouth (WOM) information sources are usually the most reliable information source in the travel decision-making process in the developing countries. Word of mouth is a powerful medium that attracts potential tourism buyers and consumers to a destination. An even more powerful medium is electronic word of mouth, eWOM where satisfaction and dissatisfaction towards tourism products and services are expressed. Word of mouth is particularly powerful in the tourism context because tourism remains a risky purchase as the benefits and quality of the tourism service itself is hard to evaluate before purchase, but word of mouth provides an element of consumer credibility to assure buyers.* *Researchers recommend that tourists should explore the social networks on the Internet which is an important source of information as a more reliable electronic word of mouth, eWOM by potential tourists, whether through images and interactions on the Web, making it a possible medium to project and perceive a sustainable tourism destination and a very vibrant, strong and positive tourism destination image for a booming livelihood in tourism and even many other systems.*

***Keywords*:** Tourism, Marketing tool, WOM, Internet bogging and Jos Plateau

**Introduction**

Word of mouth (WOM) has been acknowledged for many years as a major influence on what people know, feel and do. Word of mouth is a powerful medium that attracts potential tourism buyers and consumers to a destination. An even more powerful medium is electronic word of mouth,,eWOM where satisfaction and dissatisfaction towards tourism products and services are expressed via online media such as social media networks like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and also blogging platforms. Social media has become an enormous part of everyday life, especially amongst the younger generation. The advancement of mobile technology devices allows people to carry social media with them at all times and to express their thoughts at any moment. Their thoughts and feelings towards destinations or places, products and services can very quickly become ‘real time sharing’ with millions around the world.

Word of mouth or *viva voce*, is the passing of [information](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information) from person to person by [oral communication](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communication#Oral_communication), which could be as simple as telling someone the time of day. [Storytelling](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Storytelling) is a common form of word-of-mouth communication where one person tells others a story about a real event or something made up. [Oral tradition](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oral_tradition) is cultural material and traditions transmitted by word of mouth through successive generations. Storytelling and oral tradition are forms of word of mouth that play important roles in [folklore](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folklore) and [mythology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mythology).

In marketing, word-of-mouth communication (WOM) involves the passing of information between a non-commercial communicator (i.e. someone who is not rewarded) and a receiver concerning a brand, a product, or a service. When WOM is mediated through electronic means, the resulting electronic word of mouth (eWoM) refers to any statement consumers share via the Internet (e.g., web sites, social networks, instant messages, news feeds) about a product, service, brand, or company. eWOM is typically executed via social media or social networking platforms. The process in which the sender of word-of-mouth communication is rewarded is referred to as [word-of-mouth marketing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word-of-mouth_marketing). This process relies on the added credibility of person-to-person communication, a personal recommendation.

WOM has been researched for many years and as a result much is known about what drives WOM (e.g. customer satisfaction, trust and brand commitment) and its far-reaching consequences (e.g. affective/emotional, cognitive, and behavioral) for both consumers and organizations. WOM's effectiveness as an information source for consumers can be broken down into two factors: WOM's reach and WOM's impact. These two factors are in turn explained by 13 other drivers.

The eWOM has fastidiously attached itself to the travel industry.  It is often the single most influential factor in selecting a destination especially in cases where there is a shortage of traditional WOM sources.  The fact that tourism belongs to the service industry and is fundamentally an experience good add even more to the importance of eWOM as potential consumers devour and digest the experiences and opinions of previous consumers.  Only then will many arrive at a final conclusion as to which decision should be made.  ‘eWOM’ is permanent, its expansion and continued penetration in travel and other markets are inevitable.  Leisure tourists on a whole value online sources that contain personal experiences channeled as a form of WOM. Marketers must pay attention to that which the consumer is paying attention, and the consumer is focusing on eWOM big time; allowing it to shape their decisions by the good and the bad that is purported.

Tourism is a highly fragmented industry incorporating different product and service sectors. The tourism experience can be considered a hybrid of many different experiences with different products and services at different stages as the whole experience takes place from pre-trip to post-trip. This makes it difficult for scholars and researchers to understand tourists’ overall perceptions towards a destination because the overall perception of a destination will be influenced by the different attributes. These could be external influences such as weather, general infrastructure like transport, tourism infrastructure, food and beverages, activities and attractions and political factors or situations within the tourists destination which tourists could encounter during their trip (Beerli & Martín, 2004).

The different definitions of destination image by different scholars makes it more difficult to understand the different attributes which could contribute to the perception of an overall destination image. Phelps (1986) has suggested there are two categories of perception towards destination image: primary, where perception is based on the actual visit and experience, and secondary where perception is based on external sources. It is important to understand tourists perceptions towards Jos Plateau destination image during and after their experience with the region tourism products and to understand what the strengths and weaknesses of the tourism industry are when catering to the tourist market.

Destinations plagued by conflicts, war and random terrorist acts for example cannot expect to be as desirable to visit as destinations synonymous to or notorious for peace, relaxation and fun to say the least.  Human beings, and by extension, tourists, place a high value on life and will avoid these potentially threatening destinations where security and safety may be compromised. Destination selection is a complex process.  Gunn (1988) believes that the initial formation stage before the trip is the most important phase in tourists’ destination selection processes. The verbal coercion is widely known and has appropriately been coined word-of-mouth (WOM).  -.  The benefits of this to the potential customer is obvious and it is not coincidental therefore that research has shown that although consumers learn about the attributes of a product through various means, WOM is often the most important and influential.  Westbrook (1987) also postulates that positive and negative WOM can influence a consumer’s loyalty, product evaluation and purchase decision.

Research generally supports the claim that WOM is more influential on behaviour than other marketer-controlled sources. Indeed, it has been observed that WOM can be more influential than neutral print sources such as *Which* and *Consumer Reports* (Herr *et al*., 1991). WOM has been shown to influence a variety of conditions: awareness, expectations, perceptions, attitudes, behavioural intentions and behaviour. Sheth (1971) concluded that WOM was more important than advertising in raising awareness of an innovation and in securing the decision to try the product. Day (1971) inferred that this was due to source reliability and the flexibility of interpersonal communication. He computed that WOM was nine times as effective as advertising at converting unfavourable or neutral predispositions into positive attitudes. Mangold’s (1987) review of the impact of WOM in the professional services context concluded that WOM has a more emphatic influence on the purchasing decision than other sources of influence. This is perhaps because personal sources are viewed as more trustworthy (Murray, 1991). In the industrial purchasing context, WOM influences expectations and perceptions during the information search phase of the buying process and influences attitude during the pre-choice evaluation of alternative service providers (Lynn, 1987; Woodside *et al*., 1992). The influence of WOM on expectations has been reported by Webster (1991) and Zeithaml *et al*. (1993).

WOM can influence decisions either positively (Engel *et al*., 1969; Richins, 1983) or negatively (Tybout *et al*., 1981; Bolfing, 1989). It does appear that negative WOM has a more powerful impact than positive WOM for example, reported that dissatisfied customers are likely to tell twice as many people as satisfied customers. Desatnick (1987), citing research conducted for the White House Office of Consumer Affairs asserted that ‘90%or more who are dissatisfied with the service they receive will not buy again or come back. Worse still, each of those unhappy customers will tell his or her story to at least 9 other people, and 13%of those unhappy former customers will tell their stories to more than 20 people’. It is not reported to how many these WOM recipients retell the story.**.**

An organic image is the image based primarily upon information assimilated from non-touristic, non-commercial sources, such as the general media (news reports, magazines, books, and movies), word of mouth (WOM) and the opinions of family/friends. Induced image is based on commercial sources of information, such as travel brochures, travel agents, travel guide books and advertorials. As a result of accessing these additional sources of information, the organic image may be altered. This modified or induced image based on information sources that are mostly commercial are very limited. Destination images, however, seem to be derived more from a much wider spectrum of information sources. This means that the information gleaned from non-commercial sources concerning various historical, political, economic and social factors is incorporated into the destination image.

The World Tourism Organization (WTO, 1980) has stressed the importance of positive images and WOM for the tourist destination thus: “while it is important to any producer of goods and services to know that the notion of image and positive word of mouth, WOM are of capital importance to a country/destination, measuring and mastering them should be placed very high in the order of priorities for planning tourism promotion”. No studies have yet been conducted to measure the perceived image or impact of WOM on Jos Plateau as a tourist destination despite the fact that it is regarded as a prime tourism hub in Nigeria. Such information should be a priority for tourism managers especially in Plateau state with its recent checkered history of disturbances that possess the capacity to distort, dent and even destroy its image as an attractive tourist destination.

The advent and exponential development of the computer, Information Communications Technology (ICT), Computer-mediated-communication (CMC) can be ignored no longer. The information age or technological revolution is at its mature stage and won’t be going anywhere but forward. It is a catalyst to the electronic word of mouth, eWOM revolution.  In today world of globalization and villagization incidences are easily communicated and circulated within shortest time span all over the world through the improved information technology. The benefits of ICT in the field of tourism are felt in the areas of blogging for destination selection process and online booking are now mundane activities for the ever increasing tourist population of technocrats; it is important that stakeholders in the industry realize that online sources and communities are here to stay; contribute to the shaping of the destination image of a place and will get increasingly important (Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2005).  The success story of the internet can be linked to the vast array of information available and the relatively low or no cost attached to accessing this information.

Internet content even tends to be more reliable and credible than the traditional media (Johnson & Kaye, 2000) and has the ability to reach millions of users (Bickhart & Schindler, 2002). These advantages are no different to tourists worldwide as they can digitalize travel information for easy accessibility with virtually no barriers (Choi, Lehto & Morrison, 2006).  Consequently, this easier way of marketing has transformed the distribution and marketing of tourism products (Buhalis & Spada, 2000).  As such, consumers are increasingly relying on online opinions, eWOM when making travel decisions. In order to do this, consumers read and digest blogs and online reviews.  What sources of information did tourists found in Plateau State use is the concern of this study.

Destination image perceived through the word of mouth, WOM communication indeed, influences tourist behaviour (Hunt, 1975; Pearce, 1982). In essence,  those destinations with strong, positive images are more likely to be considered and chosen than those that hold negative and bad images in the travel decision process (Goodrich, 1978;  Woodside and Lysonski, 1989). As a result, destination image and WOM have an important role in the various models of travel decision to date (Moutinho, 1984; Woodside &  Lysonski, 1989).

The perceived image is subjective  and conditional based on WOM about a destination in view which can change over time and space, yet WOM is at the crux of tourism destination packaging and marketing (Jenkins, 1999; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). A successful marketing strategy requires information on tourists’ perceived image of the destination to enhance the attractiveness, strengths and opportunities of a destination and minimize its weaknesses and threats. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 1980) all destinations depend on their positive images and WOM to succeed as tourist destinations or their negative images and WOM to fail in attracting tourists.

Hunt (1975) was the first to demonstrate the importance of positive “destination image and WOM” in increasing the number of tourists visiting a destination as much as, or even more than, tangible resources. Destination image is a key factor in the destination selection process of potential tourists; who, having a limited personal experience of the destination, act on the basis of their image of the destination and WOM, even if their perceived image and WOM do not necessarily coincide with objective reality (Gunn, 1988; Hunt, 1975). It is also a way to differentiate a destination from others with the same relative attributes and to enhance destination competitiveness. This is why destination image and WOM are the current issues in tourism marketing and tourism surveys.

Plateau State had enjoyed a long period of positive image as a tourist destination. Incidentally, recent communal crises and conflicts in the state appear to have dented that image. After more than a decade of deadly communal crises, Plateau State is beginning to reset itself as the prime tourist destination in Nigeria. Terrible incidences that happened in the state have been a washed in the electronic and print media and also by negative word of mouth, WOM communications on these weaknesses.  However, the state has to, first, aggressively launder and reconstruct its image using multimedia channels, WOM inclusive. To do this, image makers require information on the perceived tourism image status of the state, major information channels used by potential tourists and important factors that influence these tourists’ perceived image, WOM inclusive. This is the challenge that this study explores.

The foregoing background has stressed the need to assess the perceived tourism destination image of Jos Plateau and the communication media frequently explored by tourists. The present perceived image of a tourist destination and WOM could be favourable/desirable, neutral or unfavourable/undesirable. And based on the existing perceived image and WOM and the preferred image and WOM, it is essential to know whether the preferred perceived image and WOM are deviated from the present perceived image WOM or closely associated or neutral. In case of negative or unfavourable image or WOM, the destination managers need to focus first on either neutralizing or removing the distorted image of the destination and then develop the required impressions (desired image). In case of neutral or favourable image, the destination managers can focus on more details about the destination for creating favourably a more preferred image.

Jos Plateau has been embroiled in series of communal crises and conflicts, bandity kidnapping and terrorism between September 2001 and the present 2024.  These have resulted in the death of thousands of people and destruction of properties worth billions of naira. Associated with this has been the assumed loss of the positive image that the region had groomed over the years. Many residents have relocated to other preferred destinations and stream of tourists, visitors and new residents had dwindled. The reputation of the state as a “*home of peace and tourism”* has suffered calamitously, nationally and internationally through media and WOM channels. The colouration of the conflicts is mostly genocidal attack, religious and ethnic as circulated in the media and WOM which all bothers on the very essence of the Nigerian Constitution and its nationhood. These are very sensitive emotional and sentimental issues chronicled in our communication media.

The polarization has mostly pitched one camp against another and elicited both sympathy and condemnation from our media and WOM communication across the country, based on general grounds of religion, ethnicity and geographic origin in the country. As a result of the religious polarized incessant attack and communal conflicts, Jos Plateau no longer enjoyed the prime status it had as a tourist destination in Nigeria. The influence of the conflicts on the perceived tourism image of Jos Plateau that is the main interest of the research. Specifically, the study investigates the perceived tourism destination image of Jos Plateau at the different time scales. The salient research question being: What is the perceived tourism destination image of Plateau State at different time profiles? An accurate assessment of perceived destination image is a prerequisite to designing an effective marketing strategy and helps the destination marketer to offer what its visitors are expecting and create more realistic expectations, if necessary. The aim of this study is therefore to investigate the perceived tourism destination image of Jos Plateau at different times.

Perhaps, it can be said that the efforts that government and some private investors have made over the years to develop the tourism sector of the state that has earned the sobriquet ‘Home of Peace and Tourism’ as the slogan for the state. This slogan is to boost the image of the region as a tourist destination than can be next to none in the country but the image of the state  as a tourism destination has been marred due negative news reportage by WOM   and other media across. This research is to investigate the marketing tools used  to project the region

**Methodology**

The study area, Plateau State is located in the middle belt zone of Nigeria and lies between latitudes 8030’ and 10030’ North and longitudes 7030’ and 8037’ East. The state shares common boundaries with Bauchi state in the North, Taraba state in the East, Nasarawa state in the South and Kaduna state in the West. The state has an area of landmass covering 26,899 square Kilometres, the twelve largest state in Nigeria with very rich tourism potentials.

The researchers, with the advice of the staff of the Plateau State Tourism Corporation purposely identified and selected the most physically developed and patronized resorts for questionnaire administration. Nine (9) tourist resorts were selected for the exercise including: Assop Falls, Jos National Museum, Hill Station Hotel, Museum of Traditional Nigeria Architecture (MOTNA), Shere Hills, Riyom Rock, Rayfield Resort Jos, Zoological Garden and Jos Wildlife Park.

Convenience sampling was used to generate data for the study and it involves choosing respondents at the convenience of the researcher.  In this particular study, the convenience sample was adopted in the selection of tourists at the sampled sites for administration of study questionnaire. Convenience sampling is helpful especially when it is difficult to draw a probabilistic sample due to lack of reliable data base as is the case here with the number and distribution of tourists in the Jos Plateau over the years. The method also saves time and cost substantially. All in all, a total of 1,014 copies of the questionnaire were validly filled and returned.

**Results**

The 1014 tourists sampled were asked to disclose their various sources of information about Jos Plateau.  Table 1 is the responses.

Table 1

Internet sources of Information about Jos Plateau to Tourists

Source                                              Number of Tourists

                                                                        N=1014                                 %

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Word of Mouth/Phone Calls/Texts | 940 | 92.3 |
| Radio/Television | 910 | 89.3 |
| Newspaper/Magazines | 366 | 35.9 |
| Travel Agents | 141 | 13.9 |
| Brochures/Pamphlets/Bulletins | 68 | 6.6 |
| Internet | 42 | 4.1 |

Word of mouth (92%) and electronic media (Radio/Television) (89%) were the main sources of information to the sampled tourists. Also more than one-third of the sampled tourists had obtained information about events in Jos Plateau from newspapers and magazines. These findings mean that both conventional and non-conventional sources of information were effectively used to obtain information about places by tourists.

Perhaps why non-conventional source (word of mouth) is important here is because of the improved communication technology such as introduction of mobile phones, GSM, which allows for proxy contact for the spread of information through the word of mouth. Currently, the use of mobile devices is probably the easiest and fastest way to pass information from one person to another.

The GSM communication system has reduced the world into a village so that the occurrence of any event, in most parts of the country, are easily communicated through the mobile phones by friends, relations and business colleagues. The internet, which is the most widely used by tourists to choose their destinations in the developed parts of the world, is not effectively utilized by the Nigerian domestic tourists due to poor internet connectivity and lack of information on the internet. Jos Plateau has some websites showcasing her rich attractions, but by the finding of this study, not many people access the websites to see what the state offers.  If the internet is properly developed and widely utilized; it could be a very important source for tourists to browse and select their destinations.

**Discussion of Findings**

The travel/tourism research consistently shows the importance of word-of-mouth (WOM) information sources in the travel decision-making process. Friends and relatives have been identified as organic image-formation agents, and it has been emphasized that WOM information is the most relied-upon sources of information for destination selection (Berli & Martin, 2004; Murphy & Benckendorff, 2003). Unfortunately, not much work has been done to understand more specifically how and what behaviour are influenced by WOM sources. Govers and Go (2005) have also reported that social networks on the Internet can play an important role as a source of information for potential tourists, whether through images, interaction and/or multimedia on the Web, making it possible to configure a stronger and lighter image of a destination.

Destination image   perceived by tourists can change depending on the types of information circulated by WOM and other communication channels about thedestination in view. In times of peaceful coexistence and favourable conditions at a destination, a positive image WOM can project a befitting image, but in times of communal crises, insurgencies and disasters, the positive image earlier formed can quickly turn into a negative one through same WOM. The experiences of tourists at a destination also influences image, either while still at the destination (*in-situ* image) or after a return home and when the holiday experience is revisited and evaluated by the tourists (*a posteriori* image). Moreover, should the perception be positive (satisfactory), it may lead to the intention of revisiting the destination or recommending it to others. But, should the perception be negative, it may lead to negative word-of-mouth and no intention of revisiting or recommending it to others. Researchers should investigate the tourists’ destination image perceptionand the sources of information to tourists as these are critical for destinations to be aware of how they are perceived, because selecting a destination is related to how it is perceived (Jenkins, 1999).

**Conclusion and Recommendation**

All incidences which occur at a destination that are eventually communicated to the millions of recipients all over the world originate from various sources WOM inclusive do project images which are the representations of the circulated information or impressions are   either designed consciously or unconsciously about a destination and made available for potential clients’ consideration.  The Projected images usually reflect what the image communicator would expect people to see or experience at a destination and they can either be designed deliberately or may emerge without conscious planning. Knowing why clients   are coming to you or not is very essential to destinations. It can help you to improve the marketing strategy, target your marketing segmentation and make your destination more successful. Jos Plateau as a tourist destination has had her destination image mainly formed from WOM communications arising from her antecedents of intermittent ethno religious conflicts, genocidal attack and insurgencies from 2001 to the present 2024.

Researchers recommend that tourists should explore the social networks on the Internet which is an important source of information as a more reliable electronic word of mouth, eWOM by potential tourists, whether through images and interactions on the Web, making it a possible medium to project and perceive a sustainable tourism destination and a very vibrant, strong and positive tourism destination image for a booming livelihood in tourism and even many other systems.

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