
**THE ROLE OF SELECTED SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN TOUR AND TRAVEL. A CASE STUDY
OF BWINDI IMPENETRABLE NATIONAL PARK IN RUKINGIRI DISTRICT.**

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, numerous sources of social media have increasingly played an important role in tourism marketing, and have had a profound effect on Destination Management Organizations' ability to effectively promote their destinations. With the emergence of more social media platforms, there are more tourism stakeholders recognizing the increased importance to access information for tourists related to their destinations of interest. For example, tourist destination managers use social media to provide information about their travel and tour packages, specific tourist attractions, accommodation costs, guiding services, and all other travel related information. Tourists use social media in their planning process to help them identify destinations of interest, to get feedback on what they should expect, as well as to make contacts with the service providers involved in their travel plans. Tour operators use it to market their tour packages, as well as for pre- and post-tour interactions with tourists. However, little is known about the influence that social media has on the decisions of tourists who travel to specific destinations of interest, and the use of social media in their travel plans and activities. Tourism suppliers have limited knowledge of the tourism market and the opportunity for tourism growth in destinations. The aim of this study therefore, is to explore the role that selected social media platforms serve in the travel of tourists to visit, and their overall experience in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda (BINP), which is well known for its gorilla tracking experience. The primary interests and activities of most of the tourists who visit the park is to track gorillas, bird watching, and forest hikes. This qualitative study applied semi structured interviews, which were face to face with thirty- four participants. Participants in this study included tourists visiting BINP, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) that manages BINP, lodge managers, and tour operators who link tourists to the park and have the greatest potential to influence tourist decisions. This study also used Radian6, a social media monitoring software to retrieve Facebook and Twitter posts. In addition, this study analyzed forum posts from the BINP Trip Advisor page.

Key words: **social media, tour and travel**

Background of the study.

Received: 11.09.2023

Accepted: 15.09.2023

Published on: 30.09.2023

Corresponding: Author: research.miu.ac.ug/publications

In line with Panteno and Preta (2013), the net is one of the maximum important assets of statistics for travelers, with the United international locations global Tourism organisation (2012) reporting that the range of travelers the usage of it as an information supply multiplied by way of more than three hundred% over the past 5 years.

Tourists additionally make contributions to this data through supplying person-generated content (UGC) as they proportion their understanding of tour and destinations. on this context tourism providers have lost control of their marketing programs as travelers' percentage their evaluations and lawsuits using their very own UGCs. The research carried out via Knights and Wilmott (2007) and Pantano et al. (2007) supports the importance of those remarks on traveler decision making (Christopher & Felex, 2022). Further, beyond studies has established the importance of web sites within the tourism communication manner (Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2006; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2006) in addition to focusing on tourists' use of social media in a try and advantage insights into how its miles transforming the travel enjoy (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008). Consistent with Inversini, Cantoni & Buhalis (2009), many vacationers' suppliers have followed social media as an aspect in their advertising and marketing applications, emphasizing its effect at the industry (Filstar, 2023).

Thus, the use of social media has had an extensive impact on the journey and tourism quarter for both the providers and the patron: tourism organizers need to talk to consumers and the purchasers want records related to tour destinations (Leung, regulation, Van Hoof & Buhalis, 2013). The internet offers a green and price-effective platform for the tourism enterprise to attain out to their consumers, acting as both an informational and a marketing tool (Phionah et al., 2023). Social exchange idea (SET) turned into used to guide the development of this research as it effectively explains the relationship between the supply of and demand for tourism offerings. One of the maximum primary standards of this principle is that relationships evolve through the years into trusting, unswerving and ultimately into at the same time beneficial commitments (Subcounty et al., 2022). That is especially usual of the services provided to vacationers by excursion operators and the agree with in and the dedication of each event to deliver a part of the good buy.

Problem Statement

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These studies centered on how social media have an effect on prospective vacationers whilst deciding on in which to journey. It also tested how vacationers' percentage their revel in on line. With each tourist and marketing destinations corporations the usage of social media this explores whether consumers depend more on purchaser generated content material or advertising generated content (Damasus et al., 2023). Social media stimulated tourism in BINP each superb and bad approaches, as the selections of potential

tourists had been strongly stricken by feedback and personal reports of other users on social media. In step with Statista, 36.5 percentage of people use social media for tour notion and thoughts, and 60 percent proportion pix on social media at the same time as traveling to Murchison falls. Each week, more than 1 million travel associated hashtags are searched, so whether or not we're making plans to journey or visiting, journey and social media are connected (Phionah et al., 2023).

Objectives of this study:

1. To examine the use of social media in the trip-planning phase with regard to travel to BINP and which types of social media platforms are being used.
2. To investigate the use of social media by both private and public sector stakeholders in promoting their services in Bwindi impenetrable forest.
3. To examine the potential for the use of social media by tourism suppliers.
4. To make tourists aware of the BINP'S presence on social media and how to use it in relation to their travel.

Research questions

1. Are tourism suppliers' tour operators, lodge owners, using certain social media platforms to communicate with tourists?
2. Are tourists aware of the BINP's presence on social media and how are they using it in relation to their travel?
3. Has BINP's presence on social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Trip Advisor) influenced gorilla tourists' decision to visit the BINP?
4. Does the use of social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Trip Advisor) by tourism suppliers inform gorilla tourists' expectations of BINP?

Methodology**Research design.**

The study used a case study research design, which was empty qualitative data collection methods.

Qualitative research was used in recording descriptions of the elements of the study in a form which is not numerical and this shall help in getting an in-depth analysis of the problem under investigation. (Creswell et al., 2005)

Received: 11.09.2023**Accepted: 15.09.2023****Published on: 30.09.2023**

Qualitative research was further be applied in order to describe current conditions or to investigate relationship including effects relationships. In addition, it was help in answering questions concerning the current state of the subjects under study. Qualitative research was used to capture details of the study which can be expressed in numerical terms like percentages, ratios, population and sample size among others.

Study population

This study population was constituted mainly the employees if Bwindi impenetrable National parts. These included managerial and operational staff. These are presented in the table below;

Category	Number	Percentage
Tour operators	21	58%
Lodge owners	13	42%
Total	34	100%

Source: Bwindi Impenetrable National Park.

This population was chosen because it was assumed to have adequate knowledge of the subject under investigation and the research variables under investigation.

Sampling design.

According to Ksale& Brinkmann (2009), semi- structured interviews are conducted to data first hand on the lived experiences of the interviews in order to understand the meaning of the described phenomenon. Such interviewing necessitates that researchers establish contact with potential participants that may inform their research topics. These interviews focused on their use of social media, specifically the social media platforms they frequently use Facebook, twitter, and trip advisors and their influence on tourist's choice of the BINP as their travel destination.

Sample size and determination

The sample was determined using cluster and convenience sampling. In the selected department, the cluster sampling was employed that is the respondents was grouped according to their duties and sample random sampling was performed on the clusters. Purposive sampling was applied when collecting data.

The sample size was 21, respondents of which they belong in a tour operator section.

Sampling techniques and sampling methods.

The researcher employed several methods to select the appropriate sample for the study. These include the purposive cluster and convenience sampling. In the selected departments, cluster sampling was employed that is the tour operator's section was grouped into males and females. Purposive sampling was applied when collecting data from the poacher's fighters. Convenience sampling method was applied so that the researcher saves time.

Research instruments.

The study utilized a number of research instruments including questionnaires and structured interview guides.

Questionnaires.

This research used self-administered questionnaires for the respondents. This was distributed among the respondents. The principles were applied to the following research questions;

Is tourist aware of the BINP'S presence on social media and how are they using it in relation to their travel?

Data analysis

After transcribing the recordings, data analysis began by translating any responses in the local languages of the tourists or tour operators into English and then reading the transcriptions in order to obtain a deep and thorough understanding of the information collected.

The data were further analyzed based on the various themes and sub-themes that emerged. While reading and listening, the research took notes articulating what was heard in the data, and then used them to develop categories and the links between them (Maxwell, 2012).

RESULTS**Use of social media in the trip-planning phase with regard to travel BINP****Table 1 Themes and Their Frequency in the User Posts**

Theme	Frequency (%) of Sample)	Example
Gorilla conservation	159 (35.5%)	“RT @faralongcom- Park rangers protect our natural heritage. Happy #WorldRangerDay Here is our story from #uganda #bwindi #gorilla http://t.co/Xjlb1lhkVM
Tourist visits	19 (4.2%)	The top GEAR_ Winston Churchill famously labeled Uganda as the Pearl of Africa. The country offers some of the most breathtaking wildlife terrain in the world. Uganda's most famous tourist places include the Ajai Game Reserve, the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, the Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, the Kidepo Valley.”
Tourism marketing	270 (60.3%)	“ACHIEVE GLOBAL SAFARIS_ 3 Days Uganda Gorilla Safari The 3 days Uganda gorilla safari, takes you to Bwindi Impenetrable National Park a home to the remaining

Received: 11.09.2023**Accepted: 15.09.2023****Published on: 30.09.2023**

		endangered mountain gorillas in the mist.”
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Theme 1: Gorilla conservation

A total of 159 posts (35.5%) were commentaries related to gorilla conservation in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. Three subthemes that emerged include the following:

Gorilla groups

Gorilla babies

Community participation

Gorilla babies

Gorilla doctors, tour operators, tourists, and conservationists, among others commented on and discussed the birth, care and welfare of gorilla babies within the various gorilla groups in the park. For examples, several doctors posted about the treatment of the gorilla babies, including “GORILLA DOCTORS--The day after adult female Muhangi gave birth to her first infant in Bikingi group in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, trackers observed her coughing and shivering (Nicholas et al., 2023).

Use of social media by both private and public sector stakeholders in promoting their services

Table 2 Trip Advisor User posts themes

Theme	Frequency	Percent
General preparations for the trip	51	41.5%
Gorilla tracking	39	31.7%
Tour operator and travel services	33	26.8%
Total	123	100%

Themes

Interviews provide in-depth meaning and context to people’s behavior and perspectives, and lead to an understanding of their choice of action (Seidman, 2013). Themes describe the patterns of information that come from the data collected from research and give it meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The three overarching themes with their respective subthemes that emerged from the interviews the researcher conducted included trip planning, internet and social media use and gorilla tracking.

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Theme1; Trip planning

The majority of respondents said they travelled to the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (BINP) to see mountain gorillas by participating in gorilla tracking activities. Therefore, their planning process involved preparing for a thrilling and unique wildlife experience. Most of the participants were traveling in parties, together with someone they knew, either a family member(s) or friends. One of the people in the group did most of the active planning of the trip and passed information on to the rest of the group. In some cases where it was a family, the children did not contribute much in the planning process (Jac & Kazaara, 2023).

Theme 2: Tourism marketing Subthemes**Marketing promotions****Touched by a Mountain gorilla advertising****Marketing promotions**

The majority of user posts commented on tourism marketing, in particular tour operators advertising their services to the public about the packages they have to offer to Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. In addition, some mentioned the activities the Park offered to the visitors: “MBARO SAFARIS COMPANY LIMITED-- Channel. Day 4: To Bwindi

Impenetrable Forest. Day 5: Gorilla tracking in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. Day 6: Volcano

Climbing in Mt. Muhavura. Day 7: Volcano Climbing in Mt. Sabinyo. Day 8: Visit the equator / Return to Kampala or Entebbe Accommodation. Accommodation is based on standard double/twin or single...,” and “MARIA PONS SCHMIDT-- chimpanzee trekking and a boat cruise combined with Mountain gorilla trekking in Bwindi National Park, Batwa pygmies’ community events as well as the rare Golden Monkey on the slopes of the volcanoes of Mgahinga National Park. This safari includes crater lakes exploration as well as interacting with the locals through.”

A number of posts mentioned the *Touched by a Gorilla* video, which was filmed in the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park as some of the tour operators were using it for advertising this destination. It describes the experience of tourists who were staying at a lodge when a gorilla family touched one of them (Christopher & Micheal, 2022).

Theme 3: Tourist visits

A smaller portion (4.2%) of the posts commented on the users’ visits to Bwindi

Impenetrable National Park, focusing on their initial sightings in the park and their excitement at seeing the gorillas and the other sights in the park.

Received: 11.09.2023**Accepted: 15.09.2023****Published on: 30.09.2023**

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Because consumers have become increasingly interested in reading and writing reviews of their travel experiences and sharing information, inquiries, opinions and complaints about their personal experiences with hotels and other service providers (Teixeira & Kornfeld, 2013), the

TripAdvisor website was searched for content about Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (BINP).

This search resulted in 258 forum topics about the BINP, 18 of which were for the period of January to December 2015. These 18 forum topics were analyzed in relation to the topic and purpose of this study, resulting in 123 posts, which were subsequently extracted from TripAdvisor intact and are quoted verbatim here. The three main themes emerging from the analysis of these posts and their frequency can be seen in Table 2 below.

Tourists aware of the BINP's presence on social media

Reasons for visiting the BINP

The majority of participants said they travelled to BINP primarily to see the mountain gorillas, which they had either read about, seen on television or in a documentary or heard through word of mouth. Some of the respondents mentioned that while on their trips to Kenya or Tanzania, fellow tourists talked about the mountain gorillas in Uganda and Rwanda, which led to their finding out more about these destinations in addition to the Congo as possible locations for seeing these primates.

A minority of tourists decided to visit the BINP for other reasons besides gorilla tracking, with these reasons including accompanying their family or friends or just tagging along for a vacation. Their priority for visiting BINP was not necessarily for or primarily to see mountain gorillas, but to accompany others and do something else of interest, with gorilla tracking being seen as an addition to their trip.

Use of tour operators

All the tourists interviewed were internationals who hired the services of tour operators to manage their trip to the BINP since they were not familiar with the destination, with the majority contacting local tour operators whom they had researched on the internet and on TripAdvisor and heard about from family and friends. Others used tour operators in their home country with connections in Uganda or those that had ground handlers to manage the BINP tours

Most of the respondents indicated they used the internet to search for detailed information about the BINP especially that related to decision-making and preparation for the trip. The respondents then contacted the tour operators they found while browsing useful information to help them organize their travel plans. The majority of participants used the internet to read about gorilla permits and the cost of purchasing them as well as the other potential expenses related to traveling to the BINP.

Received: 11.09.2023

Accepted: 15.09.2023

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Conclusion

The findings of this study indicated that social media plays a role in both the supply and demand sides of the travel and tourism industry. According to these results, Facebook, TripAdvisor and Twitter among others, were used by both the tourists and tourism suppliers involved in the destination BINP.

Recommendation

Based on the findings from this study, social media need to inform the decisions of the tourists visiting the BINP through the information it provides related to the destination and especially about the activities available at the park and the services there, including accommodations and tour operator services.

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