

Digital Promotional Tools and Tourism Development: Roles and Challenges in South Wollo Zone, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Despite global expansion in tourism digital marketing, adoption in emerging destinations remains uneven and underexplored. This study examines the roles and challenges of digital promotional tools in supporting tourism development in South Wollo Zone, Ethiopia. A qualitative descriptive design was employed. Purposive sampling was used to select 24 key informants from tourism offices, hotels, and Kombolcha Airport. Data collected via semi-structured interviews and document analysis were analyzed using thematic analysis. Digital tools significantly enhance destination visibility, brand image, and potential tourist inflows. However, practical contribution remains constrained by low digital awareness, inadequate infrastructure, and weak strategic implementation, highlighting a gap between potential and actual utilization. Digital promotional tools hold substantial promise for destination competitiveness, but realizing their full impact requires strengthening digital capabilities, improving institutional support, and fostering strategic stakeholder collaboration across the region.

Keywords: Digital promotional tools, Tourism development, Digital marketing, Destination visibility, Ethiopia, Tourism infrastructure.

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1. Introduction

Tourism has emerged as one of the most dynamic sectors of the global economy, contributing significantly to economic growth, employment, and international trade (Sofronov, 2017). It accounts for approximately 10% of global gross domestic product (GDP) and a substantial share of global employment opportunities (World Economic Forum, 2020), while also representing around 7% of global trade (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2019). In recent decades, the rapid advancement of digital technologies has further transformed the tourism industry, reshaping how destinations are promoted and how tourists' access and consume information (Chon & Hao, 2025; Tonino, 2020).

Digital promotional tools including social media platforms, websites, mobile applications, and search engines have become central to tourism marketing (Awad & Alharthi, 2025; Mallick, 2023). These tools enable destinations to communicate directly with potential tourists, enhance visibility, and build destination image (Buhalis & Law, 2008). The emergence of a digital economy has significantly influenced global service trade, particularly in international tourism, by facilitating information exchange and market connectivity (Kotler, 2002). As a result, tourism promotion is increasingly driven by digital platforms that support both business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) interactions (Kuflik & Wecker, 2015; Nath et al., 2019).

The growing reliance on digital media has also transformed tourist behavior. Tourists now actively engage with digital content during all stages of travel, including pre-trip planning, on-site experiences, and post-trip sharing (Fotis, 2015). For instance, a significant proportion of travelers use social media and online review platforms to plan their trips, with 55% engaging with travel-related social media content prior to travel (Carter, 2017) and 54% relying on review sites such as TripAdvisor (Expedia, 2017). Moreover, mobile technologies and smartphones have further enhanced accessibility to tourism services, enabling real-time information access and online bookings (Kwon et al., 2013; Da Costa Liberato et al., 2018). These developments demonstrate that digital promotion is no longer optional but a critical component of tourism competitiveness.

Globally, countries such as Malaysia and Australia have successfully leveraged digital platforms to attract international tourists (Chew et al., 2020; Mohsin, 2005; Tham et al., 2024), while others have lagged behind due to limited digital infrastructure and adoption. In developing countries, the effective utilization of digital promotional tools is often constrained by factors such as limited technological capacity, lack of skilled human resources, and insufficient strategic focus.

In Ethiopia, despite the country's rich endowment of natural, cultural, and historical tourism resources, the tourism sector remains underdeveloped, and digital promotion practices are still at an early stage. Previous studies have identified several challenges, including weak promotion, lack of skilled manpower, inadequate infrastructure, and limited knowledge of digital marketing (Desta, 2018). Similarly, Sundaram (2018) noted that tourism-related websites in Ethiopia often provide limited information and are not designed to meet user needs effectively. Other studies have also highlighted gaps in tourism product development and promotion, with attractions remaining poorly packaged and insufficiently promoted through digital platforms (Bayelegne et al., 2022).

South Wollo Zone, located in the Amhara National Regional State, represents a destination with considerable but underutilized tourism potential. The area is endowed with diverse cultural heritage,

historical sites, and natural attractions (Discover Amhara, 2011). However, despite these resources, the region remains relatively unknown in broader tourism markets. One of the major contributing factors is the limited use of digital promotional tools to effectively market and communicate its tourism offerings. Weak digital presence, low awareness, and inadequate promotional strategies have constrained the region's ability to attract and retain tourists.

Although previous studies in Ethiopia have examined tourism development and ICT integration, limited attention has been given to the specific roles and challenges of digital promotional tools at the local level. In particular, there is a lack of empirical evidence on how platforms such as social media, websites, and mobile applications contribute to tourism development in emerging destinations like South Wollo Zone. Moreover, the barriers that hinder their effective utilization remain insufficiently explored.

To address this gap, this study investigates the roles and challenges of using digital promotional tools for tourism development in South Wollo Zone, Ethiopia. Specifically, it aims to (1) examine the contributions of digital promotional tools to tourism development and (2) identify the key challenges affecting their effective use. By doing so, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on digital tourism in developing contexts and provides practical insights for policymakers, tourism stakeholders, and practitioners seeking to enhance destination competitiveness through digital strategies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This section reviews the theoretical and empirical literature relevant to digital promotional tools and tourism development. It synthesizes key concepts including tourism and tourism products, digital marketing and its components, brand awareness, and the challenges of destination promotion. Furthermore, it examines major theoretical models specifically the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Technology–Organization–Environment (TOE) framework—to provide a foundation for understanding the adoption and utilization of digital promotional tools in tourism. The review aims not only to summarize existing knowledge but also to critically evaluate gaps that justify the present study in the context of South Wollo Zone, Ethiopia.

2.2. Theoretical Literature

2.2.1. Concept of Tourism and Tourism Products

Tourism is broadly understood as a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon involving the movement of people outside their usual environment for leisure or business purposes (Sharpley, 2018; UNWTO, 2019). It encompasses both demand (tourist activities) and supply (services and infrastructure), forming what is often referred to as the “visitor economy.” The tourism industry therefore includes both direct services, such as accommodation and attractions, and indirect supporting services such as transportation and logistics (Koens & Postma, 2018).

A tourism product represents a combination of tangible and intangible elements—including attractions, services, experiences, and emotional value that together create a complete visitor experience (Mossberg, 2007). This multidimensional nature implies that effective promotion must go beyond physical features to communicate experiential and symbolic value. However, traditional promotion methods often fail to capture this complexity, highlighting the need for more interactive and dynamic digital tools.

2.2.2. Digital Promotional Tools in Tourism

The emergence of digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped marketing practices across industries, including tourism. The widespread use of the internet has enabled firms to interact directly with consumers, enhance service delivery, and access global markets (Javalgi et al., 2004; Zinkhan, 2002). Compared to traditional marketing channels, digital tools offer greater reach, interactivity, and cost efficiency.

From a marketing perspective, digital promotion extends the traditional marketing mix by transforming how firms manage product visibility, pricing communication, distribution, and customer engagement (Nesterenko et al., 2023; Smith, 2023). Seppänen (2025) further argue that digital technologies enhance organizational efficiency by enabling information sharing, collaboration, and data-driven decision-making across business functions. Despite these advantages, the literature often assumes a level of technological readiness that may not exist in developing contexts. This creates a gap between the theoretical potential of digital promotion and its practical implementation, particularly in emerging tourism destinations.

2.2.3. Brand Awareness and Digital Promotion

Brand awareness is a critical outcome of promotional activities, referring to the extent to which a brand is recognized and recalled by consumers (Bergkvist & Taylor, 2022; Rossiter, 2014;). It represents a prerequisite for consumer decision-making, as awareness must precede preference and purchase (Chi et al., 2009). Digital promotional tools play a significant role in enhancing brand awareness by enabling continuous interaction between organizations and consumers (Ahmed et al., 2017; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). Social media platforms, in particular, facilitate engagement, content sharing, and community building, thereby strengthening brand equity (Chavadi et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2020). However, the effectiveness of these tools depends on strategic use, content quality, and audience targeting. Without these, digital presence alone may not translate into meaningful brand recognition or tourism growth.

2.2.4. Digital Marketing and Internet-Based Promotion

Digital marketing refers to the use of internet-based platforms and technologies to promote products and services and engage with customers (Minculete & Olar, 2018; Yasmin et al., 2015). It encompasses a wide range of activities, including e-commerce, online communication, and digital content distribution (Bala & Verma, 2018; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). The internet, as a global network of interconnected systems, provides a platform for real-time communication and global market access (Quelch & Klein, 1996; Vermesan & Friess, 2014). Its scope extends beyond technology to include

patterns of use and regulatory frameworks that shape digital interactions. While these features create significant opportunities for tourism promotion, they also require adequate infrastructure, policy support, and user competence—conditions that are often limited in developing regions.

2.2.5. Components of Digital Promotional Tools

Digital promotional tools consist of multiple interconnected components, each contributing differently to marketing effectiveness:

- Search Engine Optimization (SEO): Enhances website visibility and traffic through higher search engine rankings (Jusuf, 2023; Killoran, 2013).
- Online Advertising: Delivers targeted promotional content through digital platforms, although its effectiveness varies and often requires large-scale implementation (Beauvisage et al., 2024).
- Websites: Serve as central communication platforms and significantly influence consumer perceptions and decisions (Veltri et al., 2023; Yan et al., 2018).
- Social Media Marketing: Enables interactive communication, user engagement, and brand promotion across platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram (Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshmi, 2012; Voorvelde et al., 2018).
- Email Marketing: Facilitates direct and personalized communication with customers (Hartemo, 2016; Huang & Shyu, 2009).
- Mobile-Based Promotion: Expands reach through smartphones and mobile applications (Kumar & Mittal, 2020; Tong et al., 2020).

While these tools offer diverse opportunities, their effectiveness depends on integration, strategic alignment, and user adoption. In many cases, studies treat these tools in isolation rather than as part of a holistic digital ecosystem, limiting understanding of their combined impact.

2.2.6. Challenges of Digital Tourism Promotion

Despite the advantages of digital promotion, destinations face numerous challenges. Image-related issues are particularly critical, as negative perceptions are difficult to reverse and can significantly affect tourist decisions (Papadopoulos & Hamzaoui-Essoussi, 2015). External factors such as economic instability, technological changes, and global crises further complicate destination marketing efforts. Additionally, adapting to rapidly evolving technologies, managing customer expectations, and competing in increasingly saturated markets remain major challenges (Aaker & McLoughlin, 2010). Poor service quality and negative tourist experiences can also generate unfavorable word-of-mouth, undermining promotional efforts (Wang et al., 2017; Wei et al., 2024). These challenges are more pronounced in developing regions, where limited resources and institutional capacity hinder effective digital marketing implementation.

2.2.7 Technology Adoption Theories

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) explains user adoption of new technologies based on perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Davis, 1989; Taherdoost, 2018). It suggests that individuals are more likely to adopt digital tools if they perceive them as beneficial and easy to use. TAM has been widely applied in studies of ICT adoption and provides a useful framework for

understanding digital marketing usage in tourism contexts. However, TAM focuses primarily on individual-level factors and may not fully capture organizational and environmental influences, particularly in developing regions.

Empirical studies consistently highlight the importance of digital marketing in enhancing business performance and brand awareness. Kano et al (2022) found that digital marketing provides cost-effective and efficient promotional opportunities, particularly for small firms. Similarly, Indumathi (2018) demonstrated that digital tools such as websites, social media, and SEO significantly contribute to brand building. Elvera et al (2025) further confirmed that digital marketing activities positively influence brand awareness, perceived quality, and customer loyalty. These findings suggest that digital promotion is a critical driver of competitive advantage. In the Ethiopian context, Reda (2018) found that e-marketing significantly influences the performance of tour operators, although gaps remain in understanding its impact on brand awareness. Despite these contributions, existing studies tend to focus on national-level analysis or specific tools, leaving a gap in localized, context-specific research. In particular, there is limited empirical evidence on how digital promotional tools function in less-developed tourism destinations such as South Wollo Zone.

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1. Study Area

The study was conducted in South Wollo Zone, which is located in the central highlands of Ethiopia within the Amhara National Regional State. Geographically, the Zone lies between 10°10'N and 11°41'N latitude and 38°28'E and 40°5'E longitude, with an average elevation of approximately 3,295 meters above sea level. The area experiences an average annual temperature of 22.2°C, while the lowest temperature can reach 2.6°C. South Wollo Zone covers an estimated area of 17,067.45 square kilometers and has a population of approximately 4.5 million people (CSA). It is bordered by East Gojjam to the west, South Gondar to the northwest, North Shewa to the south, and Afar and Oromia regions to the east (Wikipedia). The population is predominantly Amhara, with Amharic serving as the primary language. The Zone is endowed with diverse tourism resources, including cultural, historical, and natural attractions (ANRSPC, 2017). Major urban centers include Dessie, which serves as the administrative capital, and Kombolcha, where Kombolcha Airport is located. The study specifically focused on key tourism stakeholders, including the South Wollo Zone Culture and Tourism Department, Dessie City Culture and Tourism Office, Kombolcha Airport, and selected standard hotels such as Lucy, Golden Gate, Four View, Time, and Melbourne Hotels.

3.2. Research Design and Approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach within a descriptive research design to explore the roles and challenges of digital promotional tools in tourism development. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and practices related to digital promotion (Hastie & Hay, 2012). The descriptive design was used to systematically collect and interpret data about existing conditions and practices (Kim et al., 2017). Given the limited empirical evidence on digital tourism promotion in the Ethiopian context, this approach allowed for rich, context-specific insights. The study followed a thematic analysis approach,

guided by the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection continued until no new insights emerged.

3.3. Data Sources and Collection

The study relied on both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with key informants who have direct involvement in tourism and digital promotional activities. In-depth interviews are particularly suitable for qualitative research as they allow for detailed exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences. The interviews were designed to assess both the roles of digital promotional tools in tourism development and the challenges affecting their use. A total of 24 key informants participated in the study, including tourism officials from South Wollo Zone and Dessie City, marketing professionals from Kombolcha Airport, and representatives from selected hotels. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in Amharic to ensure clarity and depth of responses. The participants interview takes 30-45 minutes length. The data was conducted in 2023/24. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and confidentiality was strictly maintained. The use of in-depth interviews enabled the researcher to gather rich and contextualized insights into digital promotional practices.

Secondary data were collected through document analysis, which included reviewing official reports, tourism promotional materials, digital platforms, and websites of relevant institutions. Additional sources included published and unpublished documents such as journals, articles, manuals, and previous research works related to digital tourism promotion. These sources provided important background information and helped triangulate the primary data.

3.4. Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who possess relevant knowledge and experience in tourism and digital promotion. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research to ensure that information-rich cases are included. The sample consisted of 24 key informants drawn from different tourism-related institutions, including the South Wollo Zone Culture and Tourism Department, Dessie City Culture and Tourism Office, Kombolcha Airport, and selected hotels. The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which suggests that data collection should continue until no new themes or insights emerge. In this study, saturation was reached when additional interviews did not provide new information.

3.5. Data Analysis

After the data collection completed the interview data was translated and transcribed by the help of google translation from Amharic language to English. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a widely accepted method in qualitative research. The process involved transcribing the interviews, organizing the data, and coding responses into meaningful categories. These categories were then grouped into broader themes based on recurring patterns across participants. The thematic approach allowed the researcher to systematically interpret the data and relate the findings to the research objectives, particularly in identifying the roles and challenges of digital promotional tools in tourism development.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and used solely for academic purposes. To protect anonymity, codes were used instead of real names. The researcher also ensured that no harm or coercion occurred during the study and that participants were fully informed about the purpose and significance of the research.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Introduction

This study aimed to examine the roles and challenges of digital promotional tools in the development of tourism in South Wollo Zone, Ethiopia. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through in-depth interviews and document analysis. The findings were analyzed thematically, allowing the identification of key patterns related to the opportunities and constraints of digital media use in the tourism sector.

4.2 Roles of Digital Promotional Tools in Tourism Development

The findings reveal that digital promotional tools play a significant role in enhancing tourism promotion in South Wollo Zone. Across all respondent groups including tourism offices, hotels, and airport personnel there was a strong consensus that digital platforms serve as effective tools for information dissemination, customer engagement, and global outreach. Table 1 summarizes the main themes and sub-themes generated from the participant data following with interpretation and discussion.

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes on the Roles of Digital Promotional Tools.

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Evidence from Participants
Information dissemination and tourism visibility	Rapid dissemination of tourism information	"It assists us in disseminating information about various tourism activities... so that customers around the world are informed before they come for any service."
Information dissemination and tourism visibility	Accessibility of tourism information	Respondents emphasized the ability of digital platforms to make tourism-related information available to customers before their visit.
Customer interaction and two-way communication	Immediate customer feedback	"We used to get feedback by phone... now, thanks to digital media networks, we can get rapid response."
Customer interaction and two-way communication	Continuous engagement	"Our Facebook presence is vital since it provides a forum for exchanging information with our international customers."
Market expansion and global reach	Geographical expansion	"Social media isn't bound by geography. We can reach a person from anywhere in the globe..."

Market expansion and global reach	International and diaspora markets	Respondents highlighted the ability to communicate with customers beyond the local market.
Cost-effective tourism promotion	Reduced promotional costs	"It is free and can reach a large portion of our target audience in a short time."
Cost-effective tourism promotion	Efficient audience targeting	Respondents emphasized the ability to reach a large audience quickly.
Destination branding and image building	Organizational/destination visibility	Respondents described social media as an important mechanism for maintaining an online presence.
Crisis communication and stakeholder engagement	Communication during problems	"Social media has helped us in dealing with communication problems."
Crisis communication and stakeholder engagement	Stakeholder engagement	Respondents identified digital platforms as spaces for communication and information exchange with customers and other stakeholders.

Source: Author' elaboration.

4.2.1. Information Dissemination and Tourism Visibility

The findings indicate that one of the most important roles of digital promotional tools is the rapid dissemination of tourism-related information. Respondents from tourism offices, hotels, and airport-related organizations emphasized that digital platforms enable tourism information to reach potential customers before they arrive at the destination. As one participant explained, "It assists us in disseminating information about various tourism activities... so that customers around the world are informed before they come for any service." This illustrates how digital platforms reduce geographical and informational barriers by allowing tourism organizations to communicate information about their products and services rapidly and to geographically dispersed audiences. The finding is consistent with previous research emphasizing the role of digital technologies in increasing the visibility and accessibility of tourism destinations and products (Buhalis, 2000; Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011).

4.2.2. Customer Interaction and Two-Way Communication

A second major role concerns the transformation of tourism communication from predominantly one-way information dissemination toward interactive and participatory communication. Respondents emphasized that digital platforms allow tourism organizations to receive customer feedback almost immediately. One respondent explained, "We used to get feedback by phone... now, thanks to digital media networks, we can get rapid response." Similarly, another participant described Facebook as important because it provides a forum for exchanging information with international customers. These findings suggest that digital platforms enable tourism organizations not only to communicate with customers but also to listen and respond to them. Such two-way interaction can improve organizational responsiveness and contribute to customer engagement and service improvement (Gupta, 2018).

4.2.3. Market Expansion and Global Reach

The findings further demonstrate that digital promotional tools expand the geographical reach of tourism organizations. A respondent emphasized that "social media isn't bound by geography. We can reach a person from anywhere in the globe..." This perception highlights the capacity of social media to connect local tourism businesses and destinations with potential visitors beyond their immediate

geographical markets. This is particularly relevant for South Wollo because digital platforms can provide opportunities to communicate with international tourists as well as diaspora communities. Thus, digital promotion can potentially contribute to the international visibility and market diversification of the destination.

4.2.4. Cost-Effective Tourism Promotion

Cost-effectiveness also emerged as an important role of digital promotional tools. One respondent stated, “It is free and can reach a large portion of our target audience in a short time.” This suggests that digital platforms are particularly valuable for tourism organizations operating under financial constraints because they can reach substantial audiences without requiring the level of expenditure associated with conventional advertising. The finding supports previous research that identifies digital marketing and social media as relatively inexpensive mechanisms for tourism promotion (Hays et al., 2013).

4.2.5. Destination Branding, Crisis Communication, and Stakeholder Engagement

Finally, respondents identified digital platforms as tools for maintaining organizational visibility, managing communication problems, and engaging stakeholders. One participant noted that “Social media has helped us in dealing with communication problems.” This suggests that the role of digital platforms extends beyond conventional promotion to include reputation management, stakeholder communication, and crisis-related communication. Taken together, the findings indicate that digital promotional tools contribute to tourism development through a combination of information dissemination, interaction, market expansion, cost efficiency, branding, and stakeholder engagement.

4.3. Challenges of Using Digital Promotional Tools

Despite the recognized benefits, the study identified several critical challenges that hinder the effective use of digital promotional tools in South Wollo Zone. Table 2 below shows the themes and sub-themes that generated from the participants with evidence of participants verbatim.

Table 2: Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes on Challenges of Using Digital Promotional Tools.

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Evidence from Participants
Skills and digital competency gaps	Lack of technical skills	“The first is skill gap to utilize the media. The other is technology gap.”
Skills and digital competency gaps	Limited digital literacy	Respondents consistently identified difficulties in effectively using digital media.
Infrastructure and equipment limitations	Shortage of computers and equipment	Respondents reported shortages of computers and inadequate technological resources.
Infrastructure and equipment limitations	Outdated or slow systems	Respondents reported problems associated with slow systems and limited technological capacity.
Internet connectivity and technological instability	Unreliable internet	“It was too difficult to prepare and deliver information at the right time due to internet fluctuations.”
Internet connectivity and technological instability	Difficulty with timely content delivery	Respondents associated internet fluctuations with delays in preparing and delivering information.

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Evidence from Participants
Organizational and attitudinal barriers	Restrictive institutional attitudes	"We were allowed internet, but Facebook was restricted. This is a misinterpretation of social media usage."
Organizational and attitudinal barriers	Resistance to digital innovation	Respondents referred to institutional misunderstanding and undervaluing of digital media.
Management and human-resource constraints	Limited management support	Respondents identified inadequate managerial support as a constraint.
Management and human-resource constraints	Limited human resources	Respondents identified insufficient personnel as an obstacle to effective digital promotion.
Management and human-resource constraints	Employee turnover	Respondents identified employee turnover as a challenge.
Strategic communication limitations	Absence of structured digital strategy	Respondents noted the absence of structured communication strategies.
Negative online interactions	Irrelevant comments	"Few uninformed audiences post unrelated comments... but these were rare."
Negative online interactions	Need for content moderation	Respondents' experiences indicate the need to monitor and manage online interactions.

Source: Author' elaboration.

4.3.1. Skills and Digital Competency Gaps

The most prominent challenge identified by participants was the shortage of technical skills and digital competencies. As one respondent stated, "The first is skill gap to utilize the media. The other is technology gap." This finding suggests that the challenge is not simply whether tourism organizations have access to digital platforms, but whether their employees possess the knowledge and skills required to use these platforms effectively. Consequently, training and capacity-building programs are important for translating technological access into effective digital promotional practices.

4.3.2. Infrastructure, Equipment, and Internet Connectivity

Infrastructure-related constraints represented another major barrier. Respondents reported shortages of computers, slow technological systems, and inadequate equipment. In addition, unreliable internet connectivity affected the timely production and dissemination of digital content. One respondent explained, "It was too difficult to prepare and deliver information at the right time due to internet fluctuations." This finding is particularly important because the effectiveness of digital promotion depends heavily on reliable and continuous connectivity. Therefore, infrastructure limitations can directly reduce the ability of tourism organizations to maintain a consistent online presence.

4.3.3. Organizational and Attitudinal Barriers

The findings also reveal that organizational culture and institutional attitudes can constrain digital promotion. One respondent explained, "We were allowed internet, but Facebook was restricted. This is a misinterpretation of social media usage." This illustrates a tension between the availability of internet access and institutional willingness to permit the use of specific digital platforms. Such restrictions may

reflect limited understanding of the strategic value of social media and may constrain employees' ability to engage customers through appropriate channels.

4.3.4. Management Support and Human-Resource Constraints

Participants further identified limited management support, inadequate human resources, employee turnover, and insufficient institutional capacity as barriers. These challenges indicate that effective digital promotion requires organizational commitment rather than depending exclusively on individual employees. High staff turnover can also result in the loss of digital skills and institutional knowledge, making it difficult to develop sustained digital promotional practices.

4.3.5. Lack of Structured Digital Communication Strategies

Another challenge concerns the absence of systematic digital communication strategies. While organizations may have access to social media platforms, the lack of clear plans regarding content development, audience targeting, posting schedules, customer response, and monitoring can limit their effectiveness. Thus, the findings indicate a distinction between having digital platforms and strategically managing those platforms.

4.3.6. Negative Online Interactions and Content Management

Finally, respondents identified occasional negative or irrelevant online interactions. One participant noted that "Few uninformed audiences post unrelated comments... but these were rare." Although this issue was not considered widespread, it demonstrates the need for content monitoring and moderation. Tourism organizations therefore need mechanisms for responding to inappropriate comments while maintaining constructive engagement with online audiences.

The findings demonstrate that the digital promotion challenge in South Wollo is multidimensional. While tourism organizations increasingly recognize the promotional value of digital platforms, their ability to convert this potential into effective tourism development outcomes is constrained by interconnected human, technological, organizational, and strategic factors. The findings therefore suggest that improving digital tourism promotion requires more than providing access to social media platforms; it requires investment in digital competencies, reliable infrastructure and connectivity, supportive institutional policies, adequate human resources, management commitment, and structured digital communication strategies.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

This study examined the roles and challenges of digital promotional tools in the development of tourism in South Wollo Zone. The findings demonstrate that digital media has become an essential component of modern tourism promotion, offering significant advantages in terms of communication efficiency, global reach, cost-effectiveness, and stakeholder engagement.

The study concludes that tourism organizations in South Wollo Zone recognize the importance of digital promotional tools and have begun to adopt platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. These tools are primarily used for information dissemination, customer interaction, and promotional activities. However, their utilization remains limited and inconsistent, with irregular content updates and lack of strategic planning.

Despite their potential, digital promotional tools are not fully leveraged due to several challenges, including lack of technical skills, inadequate infrastructure, poor internet connectivity, and limited organizational support. Additionally, misconceptions about digital media and absence of clear guidelines further hinder effective implementation.

Thus, while digital tools offer substantial opportunities for tourism development, their impact in South Wollo Zone remains constrained by systemic and institutional limitations. Addressing these challenges is essential for maximizing the benefits of digital tourism promotion.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study recommends that tourism stakeholders in South Wollo Zone invest in capacity building and training programs to enhance digital skills among employees. Strengthening human resource competence is critical for effective utilization of digital platforms.

Moreover, there is a need to improve digital infrastructure, including access to reliable internet, modern equipment, and technological resources. Government and private stakeholders should collaborate to address these infrastructural gaps.

Tourism organizations should also develop clear digital marketing strategies and guidelines, including content scheduling, audience engagement practices, and performance monitoring systems. Establishing a structured approach will enhance consistency and effectiveness.

In addition, organizations should assign dedicated digital media personnel responsible for managing online platforms, responding to customer inquiries, and monitoring feedback. This will improve responsiveness and strengthen customer relationships.

Finally, greater emphasis should be placed on multi-stakeholder collaboration, integrating efforts from government, private sector, and tourism institutions to promote coordinated digital tourism development.

5.3. Future Research Directions

This study was limited by its qualitative design and focus on a specific geographic area. Future research could adopt quantitative or mixed-method approaches to measure the effectiveness of digital promotional tools more comprehensively. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to assess changes over time.

Comparative studies across different regions or countries would provide deeper insights into best practices and contextual differences. Furthermore, future research should explore methods for

evaluating the performance and impact of digital tourism marketing, which remains an underdeveloped area in the literature.

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