Improving the Tourists' Destination Choice through Tourism Information Centers in Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya.

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Abstract: *The study investigated the effects of Tourism information centers on tourists' destination choice of Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya. It was informed by the classic line of thought and the alternative line of thought models which focuses on Tourist Destination Choice. The research design used was descriptive survey and explanatory which enabled the researcher to gather data from the population. The target population was tourists visiting Maasai Mara National Reserve for the first six months of 2015. The simple random sampling techniques were used to select a sample of 232 tourists. Questionnaires were used to collect the relevant quantitative data, with crobanch alpha being used to determine the reliability of the scales used. The data collected was analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques such as frequencies, mean, and standard deviation and presented using tables and charts. The researcher also used inferential statistics (t-test) and employed Pearson correlation to show the relationships that exist between the variables. Multiple regressions analysis was also performed to show the causal effect. The coefficients of estimate analysis indicated that tourism information centers ($\beta_4 = -0.237$) with a p-value = 0.000 had a negative and significant effect on tourist destination choice. The study will be of great value because it will help the management of Maasai Mara National reserve to improve their destinations by the use of an appropriate tourism information centers, besides it will form a base of study for other researchers who may be interested in the same field of study. Again it will help other management of tourism sites to develop an image and engage in marketing strategies in order to create a positive attitude on its customers/tourists to ensure that their destinations are chosen. Also the customers/tourists will be enlighten on various tourists' destination choice by use of an appropriate tourism promotional campaigns. The study area was restricted to Maasai Mara National Reserve. The author recommends the management of Maasai Mara National Reserve to put more emphasis on tourists' destination choice in order to enhance customer satisfaction. This study would be of significance to service industries as it will point how tourists' destination choice can impact on their tourism site performance.*

Keywords: *Tourists' destination choice, Customer satisfaction, Marketing strategies, Tourism Information Centers.*

I.   Introduction

It is important in strategic marketing to follow a deep internal analysis in order to see tangibles and intangible factors and resources. Both resources are really important to take into account in marketing strategies; some aspects are related to evaluating the importance of the intellectual capital, for example. The distinctive capacities and skills and organization routines (Prahalad *et al.,* 2004) are also crucial in order to determine future strengths key term in marketing strategy or weaknesses very widely used term too and their impact on future business success.

The formulation of objectives and strategies oriented to market thinking in customers and competitors instead in manufacturing capacities, or in what the company can do are also important and are help to define competitive advantage (Kotler, 2000). A marketing strategy is made of several interrelated elements. The first and most important is market choice which is directly related to choosing the markets to be served. Product planning includes the specific products the company sells. The makeup of the product line, and the design of individual offerings in the line. Another element is the distribution system: the wholesale and retail channels through which the product moves to the people who ultimately buy it and use it.

The overall communications strategy employs advertising to tell potential customers about the product trough radio, television, direct mail, and public print and personal selling to deploy a sales force to call on potential customers, urge them to buy, and take orders. Finally, pricing, is an important element of any marketing program and is one of the most directed marketing elements in the creation of value for shareholders (Doyle, 2000). The company must set the product prices that different classes of customers will pay and

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determine the margins or commissions to compensate agents, wholesalers, and retailers for moving to product to ultimate users.

II.   Literature Review

Tourist Destination Choice.

Tourist destination choice has been defined as a transformation of motivation in purchasing action (Buhalis, 2000). The destination choice is made by alternative evaluation based on individual preferences and goals, while evaluation of tourist product is based on individual evaluative criteria. Factors that influence consumer behavior can be internal and external to the individual. Among the internal determinants are social and personal, while the external ones include confidence in the travel agency, the overall image of alternatives, previous travel experience, travel constraints (time, cost, etc.), degree of perceived risk, etc. Among the major influences of individual travel behavior are family, reference groups, social classes, culture and subculture that determine individual's personality, learning, motivation, perception (of alternatives) and attitudes.

Eilat and Einav (2004) add marketing strategy to be one of the factors that influence destination choice, which, according to him, is important for both developed and less-developed countries, while fashion, common border, common language, and distance are also important determinants especially in less-developed countries (Eilat & Einav, 2004).

To understand consumer behavior, it is necessary to examine the complex interaction of many influencing internal and external factors. Moutinho's (1987) study deals with determinants of behaviour, culture and reference group influences, the relationships between individuals and their environments, perceived risks, and family decision processes (Eliat, 2004). Numerous literature studies identify social, cultural, personal, and psychological factors that influence destination choice.

Among the social factors are reference groups, family, roles and status. Reference groups - family, religion, ethnic groups, trade union, neighborhood etc. - can be classified by primary personal contact with a group and secondary occasionally, formal trade union and informal neighborhood. Personal factors include age, life cycle stage, occupation, economic circumstances, lifestyle and personality (Bonn *et al.*, 2005).

Psychological factors are perhaps the most complex and difficult to understand and consist of motivation (theories of human motivation: Marshall, Freud, Veblen, Herzberg, Maslow), perception, learning, beliefs and attitudes. Another important determinant of tourist's behaviour towards destinations and services is the tourist's self-image – what a person thinks he or she is and what a person wants to be. There is a relationship between self-image and product image that determines tourist's behavior towards destinations and services. Perception and cognition influence the evaluation and judgmental process. Attitude and intention, created by learning and experience are other important concepts in tourists' behavior discussions (Bonn *et al.*, 2005).

The importance of previous travel experience in the destination choice has got wide discussions between the researchers. Many of them consider previous experience on the destination to be a significant factor in the destination choice process. The relationship between tourists' choice behavioral attributes and destination loyalty has been investigated by a more recent study of Chen and Gursoy (2001). According to them the influence of past travel behaviour on destination choice and destination loyalty are not significant, however tourists with more travel experiences tend to be more confident about the destination they selected (Chen & Gursoy, 2001).

Tourism information centers on tourist destination choice.

Tourist Information Centers (TICs) have long been recognized as an efficient way for providing travel information to visitors. Most of the research on TICs has focused on developing profiles of TIC users, assessing differences between users and nonusers, and identifying the reasons for stopping. More recently, TIC research has examined the impact of the information provided by TIC on travel behavior. For example, Brettel (2011) reported that travelers who obtain information from TICs are highly likely to use it during their current and future trips. This research has suggested that information obtained at TICs positively influences length of stay and spending in the area.

To date, however, little research has examined the effects of information distributed at tourist information center on the decision-making process of travelers. Fesenmaier and Jeng (2000) suggested that travel decision-making can be described as a decision net, composed of bundles of sub-decisions which may vary in terms of decision timing and flexibility. These sub-decisions can be categorized into three basic levels: Core decisions which are planned in detail well in advance of the trip and are less of flexibility, which may include primary destination, length of stay, travel party/members, lodging /accommodation, travel route and travel budget.

Secondary decisions are considered before the trip but remain largely flexible to accommodate the possibility of change and which may include secondary destinations, activities and attractions. En route decisions are, in the main, not considered before the trip and actively seeking for alternatives, which may

include rest stops on the road, restaurants, where to go shopping, items to purchase and budget for gifts and souvenirs. Both secondary and en route decisions are contingent in nature, compared with core decisions that are planed well prior to the trip. Thus, the information distributed at TICs is expected to impact differently the different aspects of decision-making process (Jang & Feng, 2007).

This study focused on assessing the extent to which the effect of information obtained from TIC has on actual travel behavior. More specifically, the differences in the information use between those travelers who has visited TIC for the purpose of obtaining travel information and those who stopped by a TIC for any other reasons are main interest of this study. In the next section, previous research on TIC user and their information use are reviewed. Data and methods used for this study are then described, followed by empirical results. The implications of the results are addressed in the last section (Klenosky, 2002).

Understanding who stops at welcome centers has been an on-going interest of tourism researchers. Previous research on the differences between users and nonusers of TIC shows somewhat inconsistent results. There are no significant differences exist between welcome center users and nonusers on a number of demographic variables including family income, age, and the number of children in the household, as well as trip characteristics such as prior experience, primary destination, accommodation type, travel party size, and nights spent. (Kuusik, 2011).

Pike (2004) also indicated that with the exception of income levels, no significant differences in socio-demographic characteristics were found across the respective levels of influence. Welcome center visitors and non-visitors differed significantly in terms of demographic and trip characteristics. Significant differences in expenditures between the two types of travel groups were also indicated in their study. Truong (2005) also reported that non-stoppers tended to be younger and long-distance traveler. Stoppers reported a longer trip planning horizon, and were more likely to be on a vacation or leisure trip than a work or business trip.

Another issue that has drawn broad attention of researchers is the motivation for stopping at a tourist information center. Some studies reported that the use of restrooms is the most popular reason for stopping. Foster (2006) found that the majority of welcome center visitors stopped to use restrooms (62% of those surveyed); beyond this, approximately 25 percent of the respondents indicated they stopped at the welcome centers to stretch/exercise/sleep or to obtain sightseeing information.

About 10 percent of those surveyed in their study indicated that they stopped specially to obtain information about travel routes. Results of other research (Muha, 1977; Tierney and Hass, 1988; Gitelson and Purdue, 1987; Fesenmaier, Vogt and Stewart, 1993), on the other hand, have shown that obtaining travel information was the major reason for stopping at TICs (Zahra, 2012).

As a further step to understand the behavior of TIC users, a substantial number of studies have been conducted to evaluate the level of information use, types of information obtained, and the effect of information on travel behavior. According to previous research, most of travelers have been reported to use information obtained from TIC, and the types of information obtained at the welcome center are centered to new areas, attractions, and special events (Jeng, 2000).

Information provided at TICs also known to have effects on the length of stay at the destination and spending. Holman (2011) for example, found that one third of respondents spent additional money, 21 percent stayed longer than originally planned, and 29 percent visited places not planned prior to visiting the welcome center as the result of the information obtained at TIC.

III. Materials And Methods
The study was conducted at Maasai Mara National Reserve in Narok County. The research design used was descriptive survey and explanatory which enabled the researcher to gather data from the population. The target population was tourists visiting Maasai Mara National Reserve for the first six months of 2015. The simple random sampling techniques were used to select a sample of 206 tourists. The respondents were randomly selected after considering factors such as accessibility and the significance of the study information to the researcher. Therefore, the target population provided the required sample size for the study. Questionnaires were used to collect the relevant quantitative data, with crobanch alpha being used to determine the reliability of the scales used. The data collected was analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques such as frequencies, mean, and standard deviation and presented using tables and charts. The researcher also used inferential statistics (t-test) and employed Pearson correlation to show the relationships that exist between the variables. Multiple regressions analysis was also performed to show the causal effect.

IV. Results and Discussion
4.6 Tourism Information Centers on Tourist Destination Choice
The study sought to determine the contribution of tourist information centers on tourists' choice of Maasai Mara as a tourist destination. To achieve the objective the respondents were requested to indicate their

level of agreement/disagreement on a five-point likert scale in the questionnaire. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 4.4 Tourism information centers

		SD	D	U	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev
I use tourism information center because they provide physical location that provides tourist information to visitors who tour the place or area locally	Freq.	29	5	82	60	30	3.28	1.18
	%	14.1	2.4	39.8	29.1	14.6		
I use tourism information center because they provide direct interaction with their tour guide	Freq.	1	25	116	31	33	3.34	0.906
	%	0.5	12.1	56.3	15	16		
I use tourism information center because they provide relevant information on the national reserve	Freq.	4	15	100	55	32	3.47	0.909
	%	1.9	7.3	48.5	26.7	15.5		
Tourism information centers							3.39	0.767

Source: Survey Data, 2017

In order to find out if the respondents use tourism information center because they provide physical location that provides tourist information to the visitors who tour the place or area locally, the respondents were asked for their views on this and the results showed that 14.6% (30) of the respondents strongly agreed, 29.1% (60) of them agreed, 2.4% (5) disagreed, 14.1% (29) of them strongly disagreed while 39.8% (82) of the respondents were neutral. The item realized a mean of 3.28 and a standard deviation of 1.18. Consequently, it is undefined whether the respondents use tourism information center because it provides physical location of the destination choice.

In regards to whether the respondents use tourism information center because they provide direct interaction with their tour guide. Of the total respondents, 16% (33) of the respondents strongly agreed, 15% (31) of them agreed, 12.1% (25) disagreed, 0.5% (1) strongly disagreed and 56.3% (116) of the respondents were neutral. This position was further confirmed by the 3.34 mean and standard deviation of 0.906.

In relation to whether the respondents use tourism information center because they provide relevant information on the national reserve, the results indicated that 15.5% (32) of the respondents strongly agreed, 26.7% (55) agreed, 7.3% (15) disagreed, 1.9% (4) strongly disagreed while 48.5% (100) were neutral. The results summed up to a mean of 3.47 and standard deviation of 0.909. The results imply that the tourism information center is used by most of the respondents because it provides relevant information on the national reserve. However, there is still a significant percentage (48.5%) of tourists that doubt whether it is used because it provides relevant information on the national reserve. There is thus need to raise awareness among the tourists on how they can make use of tourism information centers.

Generally, the results on the tourism information centers summed up to a mean of 3.39 and a standard deviation of 0.767. The mean indicates that the respondents were undecided on most items with respect to the tourism information centers. On the other hand, the standard deviation indicated that there were fewer variations in the responses.

Tourist Destination Choice

Tourist destination choice as a result of using Destination Marketing Organizations was captured through three items namely: (1) it was easier for me to choose Maasai Mara; (2) am satisfied with the choice I made to come here, and (3) I intend to visit the national reserve again. Table 2 presents the customers' responses.

Table 2: Tourist destination choice as a result of TICs at Maasai Mara National Reserve.

		SD	D	U	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev.
It was easier for me to choose Maasai Mara	Freq.	1	1	55	79	70	4.05	0.819
	%	0.5	0.5	26.7	38.3	34		
Am satisfied with the choice I made to come here	Freq.	0	2	102	54	48	3.72	0.831
	%	0	1	49.5	26.2	23.3		
I intend to visit the national reserve again	Freq.	6	109	91			4.41	0.55
	%	2.9	52.9	44.2				
Tourist destination choice							4.0599	0.56662

Source: Survey Data, 2017

The study sought to find out if it was easier for the tourists to choose Maasai Mara. Results indicated that 34% (70) of the respondents strongly agreed, 38.3% (79) of them agreed, 0.5% (1) disagreed, 0.5% (1) strongly disagreed while 26.7% (55) of the respondents were neutral. The results summed up to a mean of 4.05 and a standard deviation of 0.819. This means that it was easier for the tourist to choose Maasai. This could be because there was sufficient information on the destination choice in destination marketing organization and that the tourism marketing campaigns were also effective in marketing the destination.

In a bid to establish whether the respondents were satisfied with the choice they made on visiting Maasai Mara, the respondents' were asked to respond accordingly. 23.3% (48) of the respondents strongly agreed, 26.2% (54) of them agreed, 1% (2) disagreed and 49.5% (102) of the respondents were neutral. The item realized a mean of 3.72 and standard deviation of 0.831. The results imply that most (49.5%) of the respondents were satisfied with the choice of visiting Maasai Mara. It could be that their expectations of the destination choice were met.

In order to find out if the respondents intend to visit the national reserve again, the respondents were asked for their views on this and the results showed that the item realized a mean of 4.41 and a standard deviation of 0.55. This means that the tourists enjoy their visit of Maasai Mara and they intend to visit the national reserve again.

In general, the results on the destination choice summed up to a mean of 4.0599 and a standard deviation of 0.56662 indicating that the respondents were agreeable. The standard is less than 1 hence there were less variations in the responses.

The study exhibited a medium relationship between tourism information centers and destination choice ($r = -0.316$, *p*-value $< .01$).

Hypothesis Testing
Hypothesis 4 (H_{o4}) stated that tourism information centers have no significant effect on the destination choice.

Findings showed that tourism information centres had coefficients of estimate which was significant basing on $\beta_4 = -0.237$ (p-value = 0.000), thus reject the null hypothesis and conclude that tourism information centers have a significant effect on the destination choice. This suggests that there is up to 0.237 unit decrease in destination choice for each unit increase in tourism information centers. The effect of tourism information centers is more than 4 times the effect attributed to the error, this is indicated by the t-test value = 4.453.

V. Discussion

Tourism information centers had a negative and significant effect on destination choice ($\beta4 = -0.237$). Contrary to the results, Jang and Feng (2007) espoused that information distributed at TICs is expected to impact differently the different aspects of decision-making process of destination of choice. Similarly, Brettel (2011) reported that travelers who obtain information from TICs are highly likely to use it during their current and future trips. This meant that information sought from TIC positively influenced length of stay and spending in the area. Besides, Zahra (2012) notes that travelers stop at TICs mainly to obtain travel information. This infers that TICs are effective in delivering information on destinations hence they have an influence on the travelers' destination choice. Additionally, as opposed to study findings, Holman (2011) posits that 29 percent of the respondents visited places not planned prior to visiting the welcome center as the result of the information obtained at TIC. From prior studies, it can be safely concluded that TICs influences destination choice.

Limitations and Further Directions.

Although this thesis has contributed to knowledge intended for this kind of research, some limitations are worth bringing to attention in regards to the research topic, method, theory and empirical data, with an aim of pointing out further research opportunities. Whereas valuable insights from this study have been achieved, there is need for further research on the influence of tourism information centers on destination choice since there was a lot of uncertainty in the responses.

On a geographical dimension, this study was primarily limited to tourists visiting Maasai Mara national reserve, therefore generalize action might be a challenge. For this reason, further empirical investigations in different regions and countries are required. Additionally, a further study needs to be conducted using more variables that may be relevant to this study.

VI. Conclusion

The negative influence of TICs on destination could be as a result of uncertainty among the tourists with regard to whether the TICs provides physical location of the destination choice, if they are provided with direct interaction with their tour guide and whether TICs provide relevant information on national reserve. There is thus need for further research on the same to ascertain if the negative relation between TICs and destination

choice holds. This research results indicates that there is a direct and positive relationship between marketing strategies and destination choice therefore forming a basis for other studies.

VII. Recommendation

Marketing strategies needs to develop an image that will position their destination in the marketplace as an attractive site for vacation, recreation or even business. This can be achieved by tourism information centers. In tourism information centers, there is need to sensitive potential tourist that they can make use of the centers to obtain relevant information on their destination choice. Preferably, they need to be made aware that they can obtain information on the physical location of their destination choice as well as direct interaction with the tour guides. Taking this into consideration, travelers will be able to have ease of access to travel information in their current and future trips.

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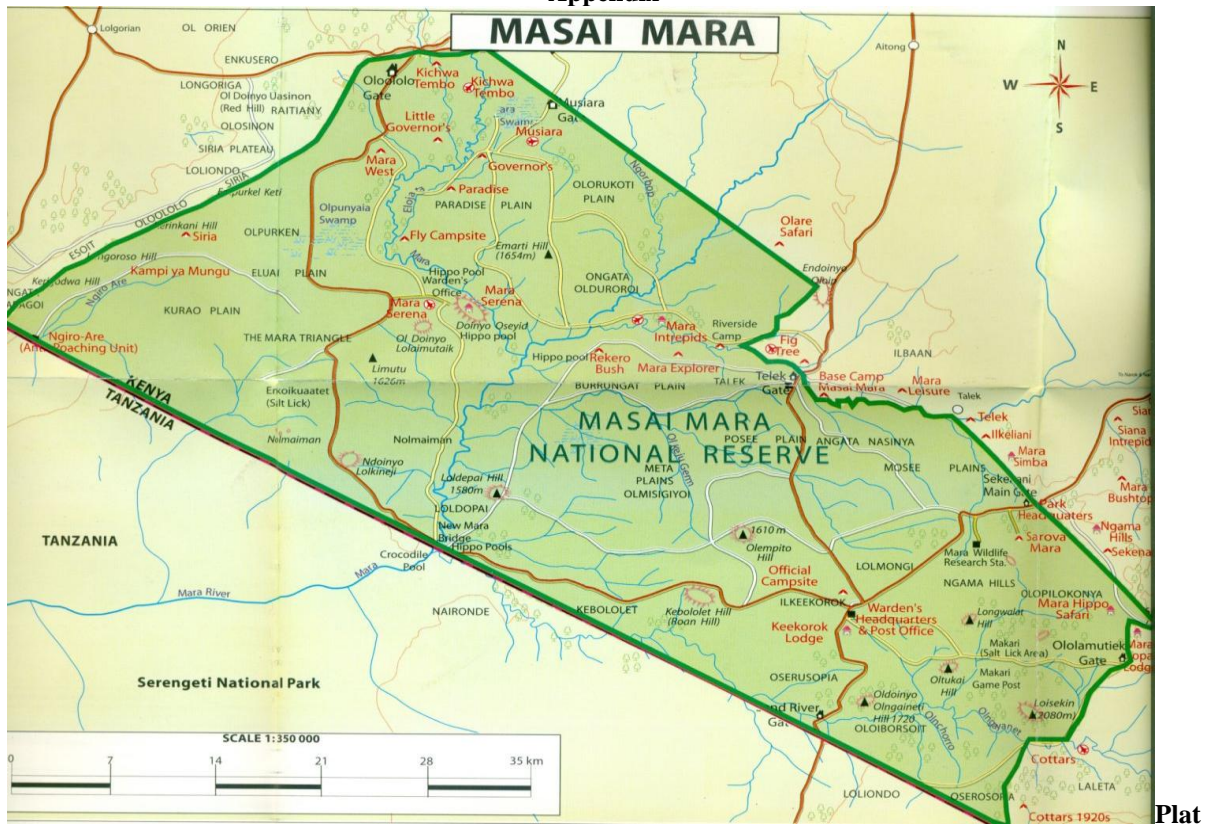
Appendix

e 1: Map of Study Location (Maasai Mara National Reserve)

Source; Google maps (2017)

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