A Tripartite Model for Effective Marketing of Remote Micro-Hospitality Establishments

Tenson Nkosana*

Hotel and Catering Services, University of Mpumalanga, Email, tenson.nkosana@ump.ac.za

Jane Skinner

Research Development Practitioner, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Email, skinnerj@cput.ac.za https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2976-8633

*Corresponding Author

Abstract

While it is common knowledge that COVID-19 and the subsequent national lockdowns have severely affected the hospitality industry in South Africa and across the world, there has been no previous research conducted into the effects felt by small hospitality businesses within remote and scenic areas of South Africa which were particularly badly affected. The study objectives were to reach an understanding of the optimum marketing strategies available for the recovery and growth of this uniquely valuable asset in South Africa's tourist landscape. The methods involved a triangulation between observation and in-depth interviews with 15 owners/ managers and a questionnaire survey involving 72 establishments. Emphasis was on Social Media Marketing (SMM). However, it was concluded that there are certain associated challenges with SMM within this specific market, along with unique advantages of alternative strategies which, it seems, are not always appreciated. A recovery and sustainability marketing strategy balancing and integrating the strengths of location, service quality, and SMM, along with a six-step flexible SMM adoption programme, based on the findings of the study, are presented, as an appropriate model both for a post-Covid response and for supporting a sustainable marketing strategy for these businesses going into the future.

Keywords: COVID-19; social media marketing; small hospitality establishments; location

Introduction

It is well known that the pandemic severely affected the tourism industry worldwide (Visser & Marais, 2021) and that it was red flagged as one of the 'super- spreaders' of the pandemic. In South Africa the industry was shut down from the beginning of lockdown 'alert level five'. Tourism did not qualify as an essential service and remained shut for levels 5, 4 and partially into level 3. Between March 2020 and December 2021, the industry experienced damaging impacts due to travel restrictions and the uncertainty that existed around the pandemic (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020; Sucheran, 2021; Visser & Marais, 2021). Small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) have been amongst the worst affected, experiencing more business closures, retrenchment of staff and selling of businesses than has been the case with larger establishments (Carlitz & Makhura, 2021). For this study, micro-hospitality businesses are taken to be businesses whose revenue is less than ten million rands annually, that do not belong to a franchise or hotel chain and are not located in an urban area.

At a global level, South Africa was the 5th worst affected country by COVID-19, while KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) was the second worst affected province in South Africa, having recorded 600 489 confirmed cases by the 26th of December 2021 as noted by SA Coronavirus, (2020). Businesstech (2020) reported that in KZN, approximately 24,3% of the hospitality businesses had permanently retrenched their employees due to the impact of COVID-19.

Mphahlele (2021) estimates that R700 million revenue loss was incurred due to the cancellation of the Comrades Marathon in 2021. This was direct revenue for these micro-hospitality establishments.

KZN is also known however for its uniquely beautiful and marketable tourist 'hotspots' served by small establishments in remote scenic areas. It was therefore selected as a suitable case study for investigating the recovery of this key sector of the South African tourist industry. Broad recovery strategies have been devised for the entire sector internationally, nationally and regionally. Key amongst these is the focus on effective marketing and rebranding for both the domestic and regional markets (Aydin, 2020). Aydin (2020) recommends a holistic approach for marketing small businesses in a climate of fierce competition in the sector, as do Alansari et al. (2018) who argue however that a 'one size fits all' strategy will not be adequate to stimulate a tourism recovery plan. External to what can be directly influenced is of course the location of existing businesses – but this feature is nonetheless open to imaginative exploitation within a recovery plan, while any lapses in the enduring significance of service quality in the industry and can be brought to light within a recognition of the concept of 'gaps' experienced between the expected and actual experiences of guests, first conceived within the SERVQUAL model.

The three components of the 'hospitality marketing mix' are widely held to be: the product–service mix, the presentation mix, and the communication mix (Basera and Mwenje, 2021; Bruhn and Schnebelen, 2017; Li et al., 2020). SMM is clearly deeply involved in each component of this 'mix', as are the more traditional marketing considerations of location and service quality – but finding the optimum balance for the successful marketing of businesses within the vulnerable group selected, required targeted research. It is against this background that the case study sought to explore the relationship between service quality, location and Social Media Marketing (SMM) for small businesses in less economically developed countries (LEDCs). The mixed research methods chosen involved a triangulation of interviews, questionnaires and observations. Each method was found to support and blend interchangeably with the others in successfully 'unpacking' the three dimensions which were the focus of the study. It is hoped that this study will have value not only for small hospitality businesses in the Midlands area of KZN, but for the recovery of comparable businesses in similar locations worldwide.

Conceptual framework
The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT2) developed by Venkatesh et al. (2012) enabled an understanding of the complex elements now seen as being involved in technology adoption/ SMM adoption, these being: effort expectancy, performance expectancy, social influence, habit, hedonic motivation and price value. Each element proved to be involved in the levels of adoption noted in the behaviour of the businesses which were the subject of the research, to a greater or lesser degree. Micro enterprises had to balance the cost of using Facebook advertising or dedicated IT personnel against expected return in revenue, while the lack of awareness evident within some business behaviour as to the proven value of SMM, could also be better evaluated with reference to the UTAUT theory. This theory, along with the Technology-Organisation-Environment (TOE) Model (Tornatzky and Fleischer, 1990), which focuses on the organizational level of how businesses embrace new technology, enabled an understanding of the impact of the technological and environmental context where staff lack knowledge and training in IT, in the particular context of these small remote businesses. Finally, the SERVPERF model (Cronin and Taylor, 1992), provided the service focus vital for the hospitality industry, together providing a nuanced understanding of

the most promising routes for maximising marketing impact, at a time when the struggle to survive for this section of the South African tourist industry is fierce.

Literature review

Rogerson and Rogerson (2020) explain that the tourism industry works, along with all sections of the value chain (airlines, cruise ships, accommodation and support services) to promote the movement of tourists from one place to another, but also potentially, in the context of a pandemic, the same chain could promote the mass spreading of the Covid-19 virus. Covid-19 regulations adopted by the South African government (and by the countries providing our international tourists with the greatest spending-power) resulted in serious loss of revenue and in many cases zero cash inflows for this travel-based sector (Ma et al., 2020). The tourism industry, by its structure, has high fixed overheads in the form of rates, property bonds or rentals, and labour, which were all accumulating during the lockdown when businesses were not generating any revenue (Charles, 2020). For South Africa, the shutdown period for tourism lasted for approximately five months, between April and August, 2020 (Sucheran, 2021). Ninety five percent of businesses in the study were affected, 54% were forced to retrench their staff, tariffs were cut and two businesses closed permanently.

The devastating impact of Covid 19 led to the cancellation of major annual sporting events in the Midlands of KwaZulu Natal such as the Comrades Marathon, the Midmar Mile and the Duzi Canoe Tournament (Mphahlele, 2021) with a major impact on the number of tourists visiting the region, while the Midlands hospitality industry has always faced other significant challenges. Although the impact of COVID-19 is highlighted extensively by many scholars (Mphahlele, 2021; Dube-Ncube, 2020; Sucheran, 2021 and Charles, 2020), the micro-hospitality industry has always faced other challenges impacting business success. Crime is a significant concern. Dube-Ncube (2020), discusses how the sporadic, but often serious, protests on the N3 highway at the Mooi River Plaza have a very negative impact on the image of the Midlands as a tourist destination. These protests are characterised by criminal activities such as burning of trucks, looting and assaulting of not only commercial vehicles, but also private cars, which may involve foreign tourists. That the image of a destination can be seriously tarnished by such indirect activities is, not unexpectedly, confirmed by Basera and Mwenje (2021). Poor internet connectivity may seem less worrisome until its impact on SMM is remembered along with the dearth of skilled IT staff in remote rural areas in a time when SMM is of ever-growing significance (Author et al., 2016).

The challenges explained above of crime, poor internet connectivity and the subsequent cancellation of events due to the pandemic or crime all negatively affect micro-hospitality businesses. Wyllie and Tifflin (2020) highlight a higher crime rate across the province as a cause for hesitancy in regarding it as an ideal tourist destination. Micro-hospitality business amongst other things, adopt social media to broaden their marketing efforts to resuscitated dwindling business (Li et al., 2020). However, these efforts particularly in remote KZN, are hampered by poor network connectivity (Author et al., 2016) exacerbated by regular power cuts in form of 'load-shedding'. All three highlighted challenges become the push factors for micro-hospitality business to react with business promotional approaches which amongst others, include social media marketing and good customer service towards building a positive brand (Sangwan & Bhakar, 2018).

The exponential growth in popularity of social media as a hospitality marketing channel is highlighted by Seo et al. (2020) and can be traced back to its inception in the late 90s when the first social media platform (SMP) 'SixDegrees.com' was launched in 1996 (Li et al., 2020). Now SMP has become an unavoidable marketing tool since nearly all customers, and potential customers, are social media users (Seo et al., 2020). But Ristova and Dimitrov (2019) add that,

while SMPs are 'clusters of ready markets' they also need well-crafted strategies to influence the right customers for each business to capture the right markets. Costs of advertising on Facebook are high for small businesses, and the false posts on TripAdvisor have been calculated at 30% of postings (Calder, 2019). (All respondents to this study were on both platforms).

The SM market is not only a growing one but a dynamic and ever-changing one. The adoption of social media by tourists has resulted in the formation of virtual travel communities (VTCs) making it possible for tourists to scan up-to-the-minute travel recommendations and to decide on a wide range of travel and hospitality options. Consumer generated content (CGC) on social media is used extensively in both by MEDCs and LEDCs (Assaker et al, 2020) with the latter catching up rapidly – but with still some way to go (Seo et al., 2020). CGC has resulted in the formation of travel review sites such as TripAdvisor, a platform where travellers post reviews on their experiences with a hotel or hospitality establishment (Ahani et al., 2019). According to Calder (2019) this site has become the most trusted source of travel reviews across the world.

Although its effectiveness in marketing is validated widely (Alansari et al., 2018; Assaker et al, 2020; Newman, 2013; Seo et al., 2020) SMM does not give a 'one-stop-shop' solution for effective marketing of micro-hospitality establishments. Mhlanga (2018) reminds us that it is only with excellent service quality and great customer experiences that hotels are guaranteed of return patronage. Similarly, Muchenje (2011) believes that service quality and its guarantee through star grading can still take precedence over many other marketing forms. This is supported by Fredrick (2019) who highlights that quality assurance in hotels creates loyalty and guarantees future business.

Godinho et al. (2018) propose hotel location as the underscoring factor for guests when deciding where to stay. They explain that, although guests' tastes differ, a hotel's location predetermines whether the guests are going to book or not, before looking at any other factors such as reviews and rates. For a guest looking for the three 'Ss' of much traditional tourism (sea, sun and sand), a beach hotel with sea views is still going to be what they will choose before looking at other factors – or to put it otherwise it is the three Ls (location, location, location) long appreciated by marketers of property, that make the initial difference. Masiero et al. (2019) agree on location being a generic marketing principle for hotels – if the location of the hotel is ideal, half the marketing effort has been done, the rest is to affirm and confirm what is already favoured. Godinho et al. (2018) agree that location itself is the most effective persuader or influencer when guests choose their holiday destination. Similarly, Masiero et al. (2019) maintain that location determines the choice of hotel be it for leisure, business or both combined. The value of professional photography and video design on SMM, highlighting unique locational features, is clearly indicated here.

Muchenje (2011) argues that marketing should be driven by service quality. Narangajavana and Hu (2008) elevate star grading as the most universally accepted measure and assurance of service quality in the hospitality industry. Besides being an effective quality-based marketing tool, Nunkoo et al. (2020) explain that star grading aids in classifying potential guests easily into their various service levels and budget categories, as the star grade and room rate are usually paired. While many scholars (Li et al., 2020; Newman, 2013; Ristova and Dimitrov, 2019; Seo et al., 2020) see SMP as the future of effective and sustainable marketing, beyond star grading – and there was some support for this within the data gathered for this research – it was not conclusive. The literature therefore indicates that, while there is agreement as to the significance of the three elements, thus confirming the value of the 'hospitality marketing mix' (Basera and Mwenje, 2021) no recent research has examined their interrelationship, and how this may be key to the recovery of this important segment of the

industry. Effective marketing often appears to be explained without demonstrating the linkages, interdependencies or relationships existing between quality assurance, location and SMM. An awareness that these three constructs are closely related and complement each other in complex ways, is what this study hopes to add to the understanding of optimal post-Covid recovery strategies for small businesses in the tourist sector.

Methods
The mixed methods research design adopted for this study involved initial exploration and observation of 15 representative research sites and interviews with these owners/ managers. This was followed by questionnaires designed in response to the literature, and the findings from the interviews, and distributed to 72 owners/ managers of the participating micro-hospitality establishments in the Midlands, KwaZulu-Natal. Issues of concern were the impact of Covid-19 on their business, their perception on location, service quality and social media as marketing tools as well as business recovery post the Covid-19 pandemic. The participants in the study were purposefully selected according to location (Midlands, KZN) and size (small hospitality establishments with a turnover of R10 million or less). The fifteen establishments observed and interviewed were five wedding venues, five restaurants, and five lodges and guesthouses. Interviews allowed for an interactive two-way communication with participants (n=15), while the researcher could gather further data effortlessly and investigate any gaps in the interview data through on-site observations. The interviews enabled the researcher to obtain detailed qualitative data with regards to managers'/ owners' perception concerning SMM effectiveness, location and service quality as marketing alternatives. Observations were continued remotely on participants' websites, social media pages and platforms. For quantitative data that could not be collected through interviews, purposive sampling was used to select a sample of 72 managers or owners of micro-hospitality establishments and questionnaires (n=72) were administered through a QuestionPro website and the link to the survey was shared with participants via email. All seventy-two establishments chosen completed the questionnaires. Ethical clearance had previously been obtained for the data collection. This study was undertaken during November and December 2021 when South Africa was in alert level 1 lockdown, and inter-provincial travel was allowed

Table 1: Sample distribution of Micro-hospitality establishments (Respondents)

Type of establishment	Frequency	Percent
Lodge	23	31,9
Restaurant	9	12,5
Hotel	6	8,3
Wedding venue	12	16,7
Guesthouse	6	8,3
Backpackers	4	5,6
Support Services	12	16,7
Total	**72**	**100,0**

Source: Authors

Although the distribution of respondents was not even, as highlighted in Table 1 above, all types of micro-hospitality businesses were broadly covered. Lodges topped the list with 23 establishments participating while backpackers were the lowest with only four establishments participating in the study. All the respondents had been in business for over three years. The interviews were conducted between 20 November and 20 December 2021. The interviewees (n=15) were drawn from owners and managers of these micro-hospitality businesses. Interview sessions took thirty minutes on average, although there were also owners who spoke with passion for up to an hour. Interviews were transcribed. Data gathered was analysed using

thematic analysis after transcribing it from audio into themes. The results below present these themes, along with quotations from respondents' responses.

Results and discussion
Quantitative data on the results of Covid 19

A little less than a third of the respondents (31.9%) indicated that their establishment were lodges, with similar levels of restaurants, wedding venues and support services (average = 15.3%). The smallest groupings consisted of hotels, wedding venues and backpackers (average = 7.4%) (p = 0.001). All the respondents involved in the study (*n=72*) confirmed that they are located in the Midlands of KZN. 37.5% were star graded by the South African Grading Council. The graded establishments were distributed as follows: 5 star= 22.2%; 4 star= 40.7%; and 3 star= 37%. 79.2% of the respondents confirmed that they had been severely affected by Covid-19. 70% of the respondents had to retrench some of their staff members when they lost business due to continued lockdown. 2.8% of the respondents of those observed, closed and/or sold their businesses due to the effects of Covid-19. This aligns with the findings of Dube-Ncube (2020) who highlighted that small businesses were severely affected with some temporarily closing operations. Although 27.5% of the participants interviewed, and those that respondent to questionnaires, confirmed that they received grants from the government's Temporary Employee/Employer Relief Scheme (TERS) when tourism businesses were shut down during Alert Levels 5 and 4 in 2020, Visser and Marais, (2021) argue that not all establishments could access this as some had their applications rejected because of missing supporting documents. Those who got the grant, according to Sucheran (2021) managed to cover part of the employees' salaries while those that were turned down had no income for the whole lockdown period. The majority of the businesses (94.4%) had bookings cancelled (p < 0.001) This supports the findings of Mphahlele (2021) who highlighted that about R700 million losses were incurred when the Comrades marathon was cancelled. These establishments had to refund guests while some requested guests to postpone their travel until travel regulations would be relaxed. The scenario for florists was slightly different as they recorded an average of 7% business increase from funerals.

Qualitative data on the impact of Covid-19

Participant 1 had this to say:

> When the lockdown was announced we thought that is was just for a few weeks but when extensions started to follow, postponed bookings started to be cancellations, and cancellations meant we had to refund people money that we had already used in business operations. It was just a big mess. We came up with an option for them to postpone indefinite but some people did not want that but their money back. We started assisting our staff to complete UIF claims as we could not pay them.

The above predicament was reported by 70% of the participants. Cancellations of bookings included those necessitated by the cancellation of major sporting and other events in KZN, such as the Comrades Marathon and the Midmar Mile, as noted by Dube-Ncube (2020), resulting in these small businesses losing much of their revenue and being forced to draw on their savings, as well as turning to government for support. Mphahlele (2021) estimated that hospitality businesses in KZN lost about R700m in tourism revenue after the Comrades Marathon cancellation. Charles (2020) described the continued lockdown extension as a 'bleeding to death' of the South African tourism sector. Participant 15 had this to say:

> Due to Covid-19, we dropped our rates from per person to per cottage rate to attract bookings. Our rates were also dropped by between 25%-50%. We really had no option as bookings were not coming through and everyone else had dropped their rates. Easter was a total write off. From end of March to early July we had no business at all. We had to let go 20% of our staff as we could not pay them.

The two establishments that reported that they were not severely affected by Covid-19 pandemic explained that level 5 and 4 happened in their low season and they started to pick up with essential services bookings before the country moved to alert level 3. Participant 2 had an unexpected spin-off from the covid regulations. He had this to say:

> We were fortunate to get a long term booking for military personnel who were posted to enforce lockdown regulations here in the Midlands, particularly Howick. We had 100% occupants for bed only, as they were on self-catering option. We did not lay off any of our staff. I think we were so lucky to have business when everyone else was shut down without any form of income to cover operational costs such the high overheads we have in this industry.

The above scenario represents only 5% of the total participants however. The majority of the respondents endorse the findings of Bama and Nyikana (2021) that Covid 19 impacted harshly on domestic tourism in South Africa, with a particular mention of SMMEs. The uncertainty of the industry was becoming a huge challenge for the small hospitality establishments. Participant 14 had this to say of the situation in 2020:

> We had a huge debt to settle now from cancellations, wage bill, operational overheads yet no income was coming in or a promise of when this narrative will change. It was a devastating period for us as we were really struggling. We did not have much in savings which made it worse.

That this situation had still not been satisfactorily addressed was evident from the observations undertaken by the researcher at the end of 2021. Results from the observations carried out confirm what has been illustrated in the data and highlighted by various scholars (Charles, 2020; Dube-Ncube, 2020; Mphahlele, 2021), that business has slowed down due to Covid-19 and that it is on a slow recovery path. Ten of the fifteen observed establishments were operating without full staff capacity due to slow business. Thus a careful recovery plan and process are essential if they are to survive, reach full capacity again, and expand in the future. Operations were all trimmed down as evidenced by limited menu offerings, gardens and maintenance often neglected as well as sections of the restaurants closed, such as the bars. The tripartite approach selected for the study thus revealed a lack of awareness, amongst those on a recovery path, of the specific and interlocking values that could be achieved through an awareness of each as key marketing and rebranding assets.

Location as a marketing tool

All of the respondents are situated in the KZN Midlands, and 77.5% agreed that location plays an important role in customer preferences, meaning that 22.5% did not see this as important for them. The majority view aligns with findings from Lado-Sestayo et al. (2020) study which claims that there is a positive connection between hotel location and profitability, hotels located in popular and preferred areas can always expect higher occupancy than those in less attractive areas. Participant 3 explained this aspect in relation to the current study:

It is really a privilege to be in the beautiful Midlands. Our location markets our businesses before we can spend a cent on trying to sell hard our tourism products. This is due the good climate, a wide range of tourist activities one can do as well as country shopping for healthy foods such as cheese, homemade food items and raw honey. Remember the Midlands is a popular region for weddings and we have so many wedding venues around here. Some of us have full occupancy every weekend because of people attending weddings in the area. It is definitely an advantage for us being located in the Midlands.

Nkosana et al. (2016) also confirm that tourists favour the Midlands due to its good weather and mild seasons, wide ranging attractions (such as the Mandela capture site, Howick Falls and rock art) and activities such as canoeing, hiking, biking and bird watching. The 22.5 % that did not agree to location having a major impact on their customers' booking preferences, cited service quality and professional marketing as the key pull factors in their business success model. Of these, four respondents were 5-star establishments while 3 are not graded and 1 is a 3-star establishment. The 5-star establishments boast of their service quality that is highly customised and also that their niche market focuses on foreign clients who often come in groups for holidays. Participant 4 had this to say, which includes some of the negative aspects of the region, over which hotels have no control:

We have developed and maintained a 5-star service that attracts high-end guests. The unique thing about our service is that we have managed to personalise it for our repeat guests. We do not really see us being in the Midlands as a bonus for us or as a marketing means. The only thing our guests compliment the Midlands as a location is the tranquility and peace they enjoy, peaceful nights, nature walks, horse trails and bush picnics. But we have a serious problem of strikes and burning of trucks on the Mooi River toll plaza on N3 which normally result in the road being closed for hours- the gateway for our clients from Johannesburg by road.

It is interesting that while highlighting service quality, this respondent does recognise the locational advantages of being in the Midlands, as their guests enjoy the tranquility, bush experience and activities in the Midlands, confirming that location plays an important role. This corresponds with Masiero et al. (2019), who believe in a holistic approach to effective marketing. It is also noteworthy that the issue with strikes around Mooi River was raised by five other respondents who had concerns about the safety of their guests when passing through this area, suggesting a personalised response and warning system such as can be provided by WhatsApp to give accurate up-to-date information to individual guests and warnings in times of unrest, along with assurances of the highest levels of security at the venue and of its distance and immunity from such actions.

Service quality as a marketing tool
The study also sought to explore the relevance of assured service quality (star grading) as a pull factor for hospitality businesses in the Midlands. As indicated above, 38.3% of the total respondents and those that were observed (23 respondents), are star graded. Of the 23 graded establishments, four were 5-star, while nine were 4-star and ten were 3-star. Fewer establishments were 5-star due to the very strict minimum requirements for 5-star standards, including the highest quality of service, quality furnishings and customer care, a spacious reception area and spacious rooms, along with a variety of room classes (Basera and Mwenje, 2021). Respondents who were not star graded (61.7%), cited inflexibility within the grading

minimum requirements as a deterrent for them to star grade. 46% of these believed that the subscription rate was high as compared to the benefits they get from being graded. Participant 7 had this to say:

> Grading is like a scam really, they tell you how to furnish your rooms, charge you a high yearly subscription fee and then you need to go and market yourself at your own cost as a graded establishment. We were 4 stars graded and opted out – now we can free style when it comes to decorating our rooms. We have built-in fireplaces, as you know the Midlands can be very cold, and our guests love fires. Each and every room is tastefully and differently furnished, something we always fought about with the grading council.

Ungraded respondents also cited the advantage of being close to successful wedding venues as a guarantee for business (location) and their successful marketing strategies as bringing in their business. Most ungraded establishments (81.1%) indicated that they will not be grading any time soon but that they will intensify marketing as well as constantly improve on quality. Participant 8 had this to say:

> We do lose out on some bookings who enquire if we are graded or not. For some tourists, star grading is still an important and reliable guarantee for a good service and a memorable stay. Most of our customers look at our reviews on TripAdvisor and google before they book. They book with us because of our excellent reviews and proximity to most attractions in the Midlands, and of course the wedding venues around us.

This participant brought in a new dimension with regards to what the tourists nowadays value when making destination choices. This aligns with Assaker et al. (2020) who claim that review sites have become the modern point of reference for tourists when it comes to reliable information about service quality when deciding on a place to book. Although it is clear from the above that the majority of the participants are not in support of star grading, those that applaud it (38.3%) are very successful establishments experiencing high occupancies. Participant 11 had this to say:

> We are a 5-star graded signature lodge and our rates are very high. Our room rates start from R2500 per night to about R4875 per night sharing. Our average occupancy for 2021, including the worst months of covid-19, was 74%. Grading is really an important factor to secure international bookings as it gives them confidence in our services. Remember South Africa is synonymous with anti-tourism woes such as high crime, and poor road infrastructure particularly in the rural areas. So grading comes in handy for us as a testimony of our international standards.

Results from the study highlight two major aspects: firstly, those that are not graded, and who did not see much value in star grading, corresponded with those who were not doing well or who were not amongst those enjoying the greatest business success. Secondly, those that are graded affirm the importance of grading and most of the participants are very successful establishments that have carved specific niches in international markets with dedicated overseas clients in an older age group, less attuned to social media, who see star grading as an assurance of international quality – while grading was no longer found to be important to family

oriented middle range establishments. These clearly need to find the most cost-effective ways to sell their special assets via SMM

Social media as a marketing tool

Social media was used as a marketing tool by all the participants. 100% of the participants confirmed that they have at least one social media platform that they subscribe to for marketing purposes. 15.3% of the total participants have a professional and dedicated marketing manager. 25% of the participants had acquired the services of a professional online marketing company to manage their social media and other online marketing initiatives. 41.6% are owner managed establishments and social media is handled by the owners who post only once in a while. They did not acquire the services of a specialist or hire a specific marketing manager. However, 92.5% of the participants affirm that social media is an effective marketing tool for their businesses. Participant 5 had this to say:

> We find social media being very effective in marketing our lodge. We have taken an approach of a soft sell rather than a hard sell. What this means is that we use social media to tell our story and stimulate interest around our lodge and often guests engage with us from that point. We post either a photo of a new born calf or our dogs, and conversations start from there. Sometimes we introduce our horses, farm life, our scenic gardens or views around our property. In this manner we are giving our guests a reason to want to come to the Midlands and not a 'we need the business' approach in marketing. We do feel that the department of tourism should avail financial support for integrating our marketing strategies so that there is a link with marketing approaches by provincial department and the national department of tourism.

Observations of SMM activity confirmed that all of the establishments observed have active Facebook pages although the degree of activity differed from one establishment to the other. There is an indication that few are making maximum use of the opportunities available on SMM. There is however a general pattern characterised by more formalised pages that are very active belonging to those establishments that have dedicated SMM personnel. This confirms Canovi and Pucciarelli's (2019) claim that for social media to be effective as a marketing tool, activities on the platforms need to be done professionally by competent personnel.

All the participants (100%) have an active Facebook page, 56.7% have an Instagram account. All participants (100%) subscribe to TripAdvisor, 67,5% have a WhatsApp platform for bookings and enquires, 26.7% have Twitter accounts while 23.3% are on Pinterest. Most of the participants (91.7%) found Facebook to be the most effective and user-friendly social media platform to market their business. This aligns with findings of Wiese et al. (2020) who found that Facebook had gained popularity ahead of all other social media platforms in terms of business marketing online. Although Alansari et al. (2018) find Twitter to be an equal contender in terms of social media marketing, while only 11.7% of the participants in this study find Twitter to be effective in advertising their businesses. Participant 9 (5-star lodge owner) had this to say:

> Social media is the new game changer in the field of online marketing. The good thing about it is that it is timeless. Unlike TV adverts, if you miss its time slot you will never see it but with social media once you go online you will see feeds with content of what has been posted. We have set up a robust marketing strategy, which of course costs us a lot of money. We have a dedicated inhouse marketing team responsible for driving

the marketing strategy that includes social media. These are qualified content developers, with professional photography and the necessary tools, competent in marketing, and conversation starters. We also have a social media activity monitoring tool to see how well we are doing on all platforms. So, proper social media marketing is not cheap, and is not easy, as many would want to think. It is an investment rather than an option for marketing.

This evidence suggests that, given that having a dedicated SMM marketing manager is beyond the reach of many small establishments, it is important that they find strategic ways to develop their SMM presence and optimise its use despite this. The above mixed opinions were confirmed by Seo et al. (2020) who explain that many businesses fail to do well in social media because they do not want to invest in such a strategy and run it properly. They note that businesses just seem to want to see many followers, many 'likes' and many comments, but do not put in place strategies to turn followers into clients or 'likes' into bookings.

Chu et al. (2020) highlight unwise use of social media platforms, characterised by posting randomly without clear intent or strategy. The absence of a systematic administration of social media platforms results in hospitality businesses failing to capitalise on special offers that can be created and posted around special calendar events such as Easter, Mothers' day and many public holidays (Coleman et al., 2019). This pattern, which was clearly evident in the data gathered from both interviews and observations in the current study, was observed by De Pelsmacker et al. (2018) as synonymous with businesses that have failed to put in place a proper SMM strategy that would include hiring a competent SM manager, and professional creation of content – both photographs and write ups, regular systematic posting, and availability of the SMM manager to respond to online engagements.

The findings therefore confirm the findings of the Global Digital Report (2020) that LEDCs are catching up with MEDCs as far as SMM goes – but also that there is a randomness and lack of understanding accompanying many of the adoption strategies by small establishments. The following table illustrates the marketing development strategies recommended for small hospitality businesses to ensure the maximum effectiveness of their SMM.

Table 2: Proposed framework for effective social media marketing

STEP 1: Strategy formulation- SMM	STEP 2: Selection of SM platforms and training	STEP 3: Service quality development and standardization
• Develop a clear SMM strategy that will serve as a guideline on how the enterprise will make use of SM for marketing. • Develop SMART marketing objectives, and identify the target market. • Avail funds (budget) for SMM	• Select suitable SM platforms for your sector and those that will be best for your targeted market. • Create the SM pages for your business professionally • Engage a SMM / executive, responsible for SMM. Smaller businesses can engage a part-time SM marketing company or specialist to assist with SMM on a weekly basis. • Offer support such as training the appointed SMM Manager for their new role	• Establish service quality standards in all areas of the business • Accommodation establishments should consider star grading to assure quality and increase booker preference • Standards set for the establishment should be maintained in order to receive good reviews on platforms such as TripAdvisor, Google reviews and Booking.com
STEP 4: Develop a link between social media marketing and service quality	STEP 5: Identify and mitigate SMM challenges in time	STEP 6: Constantly develop services and products
• Service quality should be linked to social media marketing so that they can complement each other	• Businesses should use SM to scan or look out for challenges experienced	• A budget should be allocated for necessary product/ service reinvention

• There should be no discrepancy or variance on what is posted on social media and what guests experience upon arrival at the hotel or establishment.	by guests and address them timeously • The process of addressing these challenges should be guided by standard operating procedures (SOPs) for uniformity and quality service.	• Businesses should focus on reinventing the products to correct what has been highlighted as problematic. • Management's commitment to research and investment in SMM as well as service quality maintenance.

Source: Researcher's own compilation as adapted from the literature reviewed and empirical data collected from the present study and from earlier research.

Beyond the three main focus points of location, quality and SMM there were a few encouraging examples of original entrepreneurial approaches included in the findings, such as one wedding photographer who found promoting, through SMM, the wedding venues where she worked was a win-win situation for both herself and the wedding venues – while a lodge struggling to keep afloat resorted to renting out the restaurant to their former Operations Manager who had been recently retrenched due to slow business. The owners now receive a negotiated rental income from their former employee who has now become an entrepreneur as a result of the challenges faced by the industry. Overall, therefore a triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative data with the literature indicates a synthesis within the findings supporting the usefulness of adopting a tripartite marketing model.

Theoretical framework
It was clear that quality underpins all hospitality businesses and is especially significant for those recovering from lockdown, endorsing the value of the SERVPERF contention that any gaps between expected service quality and the client's experiences need to be identified quickly, the gap(s) filled, and the client informed. This suggests fast responses to criticisms from clients, which can be achieved by dedicated SMM responses – one respondent advocating WhatsApp above the more universal but expensive Facebook postings, for this purpose. The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT2) is also strongly indicated by the increasing uptake of SMM, with some variations in choice of platform, depending upon the needs of the business in question – this overlapping with the Technology Organisation Environment (TOE) model which enabled an additional focus on the business environment in understanding the success potential of the technology adopted.

Conclusion
The study therefore confirmed how severely Covid-19 affected the small hospitality businesses in the Midlands, with impacts ranging from significant loss of revenue and staff retrenchments to business closures. The evidence from the current study is that, despite some vibrant exceptions (often at the high end of the market) recovery is still slow with a lack of any clear awareness of the need to balance and weigh the strategies open to these small businesses for rebranding, especially a lack of a clear understanding of the current opportunities offered by SMM. While the three elements of location, service quality and social media were interrogated separately as effective marketing tools, it emerged that each was supported by the others, and that none were seen as clearly superior or as inessential. Those who preferred star-grading as a marketing tool were often the top-end establishments. Location was recognised as very important even by those who did not see it as their principal marketing advantage. (It is recognised of course that location cannot be altered by established businesses, but it is clearly a factor which can be much enhanced by professional photographs appearing on the most popular social media sites, while choosing the best location is an essential consideration for new businesses seeking to start an enterprise). Social media use generally required upgrading.

It can therefore be concluded that the overlapping benefits of the three marketing strategies form a tripartite approach that small hospitality businesses need to be aware of in the unique context of their own businesses. The objectives of this study were met in that the intertwined effectiveness of each of these three tools were illuminated, providing encouragement and insights to those hospitality businesses still struggling to recover from the impact of the virus – or opening up in the still uncertain present. The findings enable awareness of the pitfalls and a minimising of the threats. It is hoped that South African entrepreneurs may be encouraged to view the tripartite approach as an effective marketing tool to revive their businesses after the negative impacts of Covid-19, while the insights that have emerged will have value also for small hospitality businesses operating in similar contexts in other LEDCs.

Implications/ recommendations

It may seem that the authors have involved 'tried and trusted' hospitality marketing insights by suggesting a recovery/ rebranding strategy involving quality service, location and (nowadays) social media marketing. However, the findings of this study suggest that, while they may be aware of each of these key factors, small businesses are not using them optimally and/or are not taking their own situation sufficiently into account in the unique post-Covid situation that they face. Some practical examples of lessons learnt from the findings include the following:

If a choice is to be made as to whether to adopt star-grading or not – the table suggests that it will depend largely upon the targeted clientele. It would be wise to consider star grading if the owner is keen to attract foreign tourists of a mature age group – but probably not if the clientele consists largely of young families. In a situation of limited funding for upgrading, the model will provide awareness of the current strong pull of SMM and of the need to handle it professionally – so that the decision may be to prioritize hiring new computer-literate staff, or up-skilling present staff members. This should come before more 'nice to have' expenditure on, for instance, upgrading décor. For business owners considering a location in a rural area, the literature, and the findings of the study, suggest strongly that location is a key initial factor – but that it may involve both being close to important attractions, and not far from known dangers. This model will help entrepreneurs in establishing an informed balance between the pros and cons, and the strategies needed to maximise the one and to minimise the other.

General recommendations for small hospitality business owners and entrepreneurs in the post-Covid era suggested by the research therefore include formulating an SMM strategy, and monitoring its effectiveness through online SMM monitoring tools; making use of locational advantages and amplifying the attractiveness of your location by 'hot spotting' these to bigger attractions in the area; and setting, maintaining and delivering on service quality standards. Small businesses will also benefit from subscribing to local industry associations such as the Midlands Meander Association.

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