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Research article

Marketing knowledge and skills as the key to transformational challenges of accommodation's small and medium-sized enterprises

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ABSTRACT

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in the tourism accommodation sector play a vital role in South Africa's economy. Yet, they face challenges in sustaining competitiveness within an increasingly digital and dynamic marketplace. This qualitative study examined how SMEs in accommodation utilise various marketing mediums, identify knowledge and capacity gaps, and adopt strategies to enhance visibility and attract customers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with SME owners and managers, the study employed an interpretivist paradigm to uncover rich, context-specific insights into marketing practices, challenges, and perceived effectiveness. Key themes were identified using thematic content analysis. Despite widespread recognition of marketing's critical importance, most participants lacked formal marketing training, dedicated marketing personnel structured marketing strategies. Limited financial resources further restrict their ability to hire professionals or allocate consistent marketing budgets. As a result, most SMEs rely on affordable digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and online booking portals like Booking.com to promote their services. While these platforms offer wide reach, interactivity and performance-tracking features, many participants lack the skills to fully utilise them. Word-of-mouth marketing remains the most influential promotional tool, highlighting the importance of service quality and positive guest experiences in driving referrals. The study findings emphasise the need for targeted training, collaborative initiatives, and accessible support resources to strengthen SME marketing capacity and support sustainable tourism development in South Africa.

KEYWORDS

SME; accommodation establishments; transformation; marketing skills and knowledge; challenges

Introduction

The tourism industry is among the fastest-growing industries globally, and it is a major contributor to the gross domestic product (GDP) of many countries (Hervie et al., 2021; Hlatshwayo & Thwala, 2025). The tourism industry is built on four sectors: accommodation, attractions, entertainment and transportation (Ferrell & Hartline, 2014; Thwala, 2022). This study focused only on the accommodation sector. Even though each of these four sectors is growing, accommodation is the fastest growing and a key element evident in all spheres of the industry (Chipunza, 2019). The growth of the tourism industry has resulted in the emergence of many types of accommodation, mainly small-scale (Small and Medium Enterprises, SME's) or specialist accommodations. SMEs are making a significant contribution to this industry with much more potential to be advanced (Chimucheka & Mandipaka, 2015). Accommodation is a fundamental component of the tourism experience, and it predictably accounts for around one-third of total trip spending (George, 2015). Coupled with this level of growth of the accommodation sector and changes, are the development of an ever-increasing competitive environment (Ndebele, 2025). Thus, the effective promotion of tourism establishments is a significant strategy for attracting higher visitor numbers, which can contribute to economic upliftment, community development and poverty relief (Ahmad & Arif, 2016). Added to this, tourists are constantly changing in a world of rapid technological evolution where their behaviour, media

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consumption, and expectations influence the application of marketing and tools, therefore, the modern-day tourism marketer must move with the trends and keep abreast (George, 2019; Ndhlovu & Thwala, 2024). Canovi & Pucciarelli (2019) stated that the success of tourism establishments is mainly dependent on how effectively and efficiently marketing and promotional strategies are executed. The authors further mentioned that the rise of web 2.0 and social media has meaningfully influenced and transformed the way in which establishments employ the internet for marketing and promotion purposes. Thus, tourism establishments should not solely rely on traditional media, but they must also explore and make use of interactive media to improve communication with their guests/tourists (Hlatshwayo & Thwala, 2025). Tourism marketers can choose from various tools to communicate with tourists, including advertising, digital marketing and social media, sales promotion, public relations, sponsorships, and marketing collateral (George, 2019). The number of choices available in the media world and the development of new technology create challenges and also opportunities for marketers to attract the right market, at the right time, with the right message. In today's age, SMEs adoption of internet technologies is vital for their ongoing survival in an increasingly competitive marketplace locally and globally (Hlatshwayo & Thwala, 2025; Chamboko-Mpotaringa et al., 2025). The motive for this, is that the Internet offers direct links with trading customers and suppliers by facilitating information transfer that brings with it certain efficiencies (Van Scheers, 2018a). Despite all the above mentioned, SMEs seem to grow slowly, close doors or struggle to survive.

Literature review

The tourism industry is traditionally made up by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), within a developing country context like South Africa, the activities of SMEs are crucial for promoting economic growth and alleviating poverty (Deen et al., 2016; Chamboko-Mpotaringa et al., 2025). Hatten (2016) highlighted that the most common criteria used to distinguish between large and small businesses is the number of employees, while Ahmad & Arif (2016) outlined the number of rooms to distinguish the accommodation establishment sizes. Therefore, in the tourism accommodation sector context, a small-sized establishment has up to 50 rooms and medium-sized has 51-100 rooms while a large establishment has over 100 rooms (Thwala, 2022). The accommodation sector is the fastest growing segment of the tourism industry in South Africa today as mentioned earlier, and SMEs carry with them a possibility of becoming future big companies (Chipunza, 2019). The reality of this, highly competitive sector is that owners and managers operate most tourism establishments with little or no formal training and qualifications, nor previous experience in managing and marketing a tourism organisation (Wang & Hung, 2015). As a result, some SMEs fail due to marketing-related concerns such as, lack of knowledge of the targeted market, and understanding the current trends, insufficient marketing skills, challenges in accessing appropriate technology and information, application of proper marketing strategies, inadequate resources and external pressures that detain them from marketing their products and services successfully (Van Scheers, 2018a). Given the diversity of marketing tools and media availability and the challenges experienced by tourism product owners, in many cases SMEs, biggest task is to optimise these tools (choice and content) and gain a significant market share from these selections. However, this is easier said than done, which links to the problem analysed in this study. The purpose of this study was to critically review the current application of marketing knowledge and skills by SMEs, to provide guidelines in making the best media choices that will lead to growth and success of the business. The competitive nature of the tourism industry moreover emphasises the need for effective marketing (Wang & Hung, 2015). The significant and rapid development of promotional tools and the difficulty in selecting the right mix of these tools add to the problem of being effective in their marketing (Chamboko-Mpotaringa, 2025). The lack of marketing training will have an influence on whether the establishment is marketed in the most professional, effective, and profitable manner (George, 2015). Added to that, Cant & Van Rooyen (2017) mentioned that the marketing activities of smaller accommodation establishments, such as guesthouses and self-catering units, is often done to a limited scope, if at all. These establishments are mostly run by entrepreneurs who execute their own marketing activities and do not have the marketing budget like those of bigger establishments and groups. There is evidence suggesting that the business survival and success of SMEs might be enhanced by paying greater attention to marketing issues, with specific reference to the effectiveness of those marketing strategies (Van Scheers, 2018b). Marketing is a core business function, but many SMEs fail to employ it effectively. Marketing factors such as the inability to meet customer needs and ineffective marketing of products, all have an impact on the success of the SMEs. Furthermore, due to business owners not having sufficient marketing experience, marketing is seriously neglected, and not enough financial provision is made for effective advertising, promotions and modern marketing techniques (Papagiannis, 2020). The lack of these marketing strategies will limit growth in a highly competitive environment.

The significance and effectiveness of the marketing of tourism products

According to Font and McCabe (2017), marketing is a set of processes for creating, communicating and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organisation and its stakeholders. Marketing is not about finding clever ways to dispose what one makes, but it is the art of creating genuine customer value, and the marketer's watchwords are quality, service, and value. Marketing is focused on customers; how to find them, how to satisfy their needs and how to retain them. Therefore marketing is customer or consumer-centric and an ongoing interactive process, which affirms that the fundamental aspect of meeting the objectives of stakeholders is satisfying customers and converting people's fluctuating needs into profitable opportunities (Cant et al., 2017; George, 2019). Solcansky & Simberova (2010), on the other hand, defined marketing effectiveness as the task of improving how marketers market with the aim of optimising marketing spending to attain better results for mutually short and long-term objectives. The ability to properly market a product, service or experience is thus more important than the product itself. Therefore, marketing for this study can be conceptualised as the ability of an accommodation SME to position itself in the minds of consumers to make a profit (Thwala, 2022). Accommodation establishments are selling an experience which is more challenging than selling a service or a product, therefore they should retain targeted customers by delivering on customer expectations and satisfaction. The marketing of these establishments is thus critical in achieving specific objectives; these include survival, profits, and growth, which are vital to the success of tourism products (Lamb et al., 2019; Mohale et al., 2025). Marketing is a fundamental business activity needed to ensure success, while marketing effectiveness provides stability, growth and long-term profit, increased consumer satisfaction, and create a competitive advantage (Thwala & Slabbert, 2018). Tourism marketers or product owners need to provide information that will create value and promote the anticipated experience so that customers buy from them and not from their competitors (Font & McCabe, 2017). Since tourism is an information-intense industry, it is important to understand changes in technologies and consumer behaviour that influence the distribution and accessibility of travel-related information (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Chamboko-Mpotaringa et al., 2025). It is, therefore, important that accommodation establishments, irrespective of their size, should stay updated on developments in the marketing sphere and reap the benefits from this.

Ever changing and development of marketing mediums

To reach the promotion objectives of any tourism product, a promotional mix should be developed. According to Lamb et al., (2019), a promotional mix refers to the specific mix of advertising, personal selling, sales promotion and public relations a company uses to pursue its advertising and marketing objectives. Knowledge related to the reach, frequency, and impact of each major media type is critical. Marketing is not a haphazard activity but should be well-planned. However, given the rapid development of the market and marketing mediums, it is a challenge to create the best and most appropriate promotion mix, especially in the case of smaller businesses with inadequate budgets, skills and, in some cases, knowledge (Papagiannis, 2020). Marketing mediums are going through significant changes daily. The distribution channels are changing, and traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television are being replaced by their digital counterparts. Devices such as laptops, tablets, cellphones etc. are the newest channels. Unlike previously, where publishers had traditionally been responsible for deciding what is consumed, it is now up to the customers to decide, since they have direct or near direct access to content producers. The limiting factor now is an over-abundance of content, and it is important to ensure that the content is viewed in a mix of messages. The mediums have also changed where the multi-media world provides the consumer with more choices, even the sources of content are changing and expanding (Rubiyanti et al., 2025). According to Gorlevskaya (2016), consumers used to spend 5-6 hours online per day. Thus, tourism marketers must develop creative solutions in their advertising and marketing strategies. In support of this, Papagiannis (2020) highlighted that in today's world, it is imperative that brands deliberate deeply and think creatively about solutions and content, they should be eager to adapt to changes. This will help brands break through the noise and content saturation on the Web and various platforms. The Internet and Mobile are currently the key media, with only Radio being stable over the last decade. Tourists are heavy internet users, and it is used in real-time (Rowless, 2014, Althagafi et al., 2025). Marketers can influence potential consumers with different marketing tools, and the mix will make the difference. Arnett & Wittmann (2014) stated that, for a business to be successful, marketing strategies should be adapted to environmental changes in the marketplace. Given the importance of marketing as a business activity, the marketing challenges experienced by SMEs needs to be explored and addressed.

Research methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, effective for gathering in-depth information on a specific topic in order to understand how people feel and why they think in certain ways (Rahi, 2017). Additionally, the study was guided by the interpretivism paradigm. The interpretivism paradigm enables researchers to understand human experiences' and the subjective world comprehensively. It emphasises significant effort to fully comprehend participants' perspectives (Ugwu, et al., 2021). This paradigm aligns closely with the qualitative approach, facilitating the exploration of motivations, perceptions, experiences, and challenges related to the marketing mediums employed by tourism accommodation establishments. This exploratory research approach typically involves small samples to uncover insights into consumers' thoughts and behaviours. In this case, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 SME accommodation managers to explore their experiences with marketing mediums and the challenges they face. This method allowed for flexible yet focused discussions, enabling the collection of rich, context-specific data aligned with the study's objectives. A list of SMEs in the accommodation sector was compiled for businesses in Gauteng, Northwest, and the Free State provinces. These provinces were selected due to their high concentration of such businesses and their accessibility to the researcher, resulting in a list of 30 businesses. The list was developed using publicly available databases from the Tourism Business Council of South Africa, the Guesthouse Association of South Africa, and local municipalities based on predefined criteria for SMEs in tourism. From this list, a sample of 10 businesses per province was selected, leading to a total of 30 business owners being interviewed. The participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate in the research. The first respondents, whether by email or phone, who met the set SME criteria were included. This approach utilised simple random sampling, which enhanced the study's representativeness and improved the generalisability of the results. The relevant scientific and ethics committee reviewed and approved the research process and interview guide, which assigned an ethics clearance number: Institutional information removed-00735-20-A4. The in-depth interviews were recorded for reference purposes. The researcher asked permission to record the interviews from the participants before commencing with the interview, as per the ethics guidelines. The researcher followed the same questions for each interview to optimise the information obtained. The interview guide contained a critical review from the supply side that focused on owners' selection methods of promotion tools, the frequency of use, measurement of effectiveness, and the budget available for marketing purposes. The following sources were considered when developing the interview guide: Brace (2018), Aaker & Aaker (2016), George (2019) as well as Zostautiene & Vaičiulėnaitė (2010). All 30 SMEs selected participated in the research. Saturation was achieved at the 23 interviews, but since participants responded positively to the research request, all 30 were interviewed. *To ensure anonymity, each participant was assigned with a pseudonym. Pseudonyms were assigned as P1 to P30.* The qualitative results were captured in Word and analysed according to the identification of themes. The data from the 30 interviewees was recorded using a digital voice recorder, transcribed, and organised into categories. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The researcher had to review the transcribed notes and listen to the recorded interviews to become familiar with the data. This was done deductively. This step improved the researcher's comprehension of the valuable insights presented during the interview.

Results

The results provide an overview of the demographic characteristics of the participants as well as the establishments.

Demographic and establishment characteristics of participants

It was established that most participants were owners or managers of the establishments, with an average of between 6 and 10 years' experience. Their responsibilities include marketing, finance, guest management, human resource management and office administration. It was also found that only seven out of the 30 participants have a qualification in the tourism or hospitality field, which was alarming since the proper skill set can advance the business. In terms of the establishment characteristics, it was found that the establishments have existed for an average of 11-15 years, with a typical number of between 1 and 10 rooms and a bed occupancy of 80-85% per year. These establishments realised a total revenue for all available beds of approximately R500 000 with a typical rate between R550 and R650 per room. There are no standard sets for these establishments; some charge per person, some per room and some include breakfast and others do not include breakfast. It can be noted that each establishment is unique and follows its own strategy, pricing and management operations. This was found to be something that can create challenges in optimising the industry and assisting with general matters that these establishments might experience.

Theme 1: Dedication to marketing activities

Sub-theme 1.1: Responsible person/organisation for marketing activities

Twenty-one participants agreed that it is essential for their establishments to have a dedicated marketing manager, but only one establishment had a dedicated marketing manager. It was stated that marketing is crucial and has a lot of responsibilities, thus a dedicated person must be appointed for this role. However, financial instability was provided as a reason for not making such an appointment. This function is added to an existing position which makes it difficult to manage or effectively carry out. One of the participants (P3) said, *"Marketing is very important, it takes up all my time since we lost business due to COVID, I now spend most of my time doing marketing so, if there was a dedicated person, it would have been better". "To make our establishment work properly, I really need someone to do our marketing*". Another participant (P19) also said, "*I do marketing myself but I really wish I had someone dedicated for marketing to offload my workload*." A Marketing manager will handle and focus on marketing but there is no money to employ such a person. While the other 3rd participant also said "*marketing is essential but a small establishment like mine cannot afford to have one, I simply do not have the necessary means to hire staff specifically for marketing."* One participant mentioned that marketing is outsourced to someone on a part-time basis, whereas another participant said marketing is done in-house, together with the intern students who are doing their WIL/in-service training for a Marketing Diploma. For the rest of the establishments, marketing is done by the owners/managers of the establishments. Nine of the participants think it is not essential for a small business like theirs to have a dedicated marketing manager because of the size of the business. There are no funds to hire a separate person for that, and they believe they are doing well in the role of marketing their businesses via various online platforms and word-of-mouth (WOM). The overwhelming support for a dedicated marketer in the business is clear, but the means to appoint such a person is not available. SMEs should view marketing activities in a more co-operative manner.

Sub-theme 1.2: Third-party assistance

The use of third parties for marketing efforts was supported by 13 participants. This included tour operators, travel agencies and corporate agencies around their area who assist with the marketing of their businesses. They mentioned that there are companies that book for their contractors for either short or long-term periods. One of the participants (P10) said, "*We have third party companies that book their clients into our guesthouse; we give them a better rate to encourage them to book their customers with us and earn a commission*". The majority (N=17) do not make use of third parties at all, two participants gave the reason that their business is too small for any extra marketing expenses, and another said she does not make use of third parties because they want commission.

Theme 2: Marketing effectiveness

This theme deals with questions related to the effectiveness of the marketing mediums/efforts currently in use. It is important to discuss the marketing tools used by the participating establishments and analyse how effective were these selected marketing mediums/tools.

Sub-theme 2.1: Move to online tools

Twenty-two participants indicated that Social media seems to be very important, with specific reference to sponsored advertisements on Facebook, Instagram and X. Their reasons for choosing social media platforms relates to cost effectiveness, convenience and budget constraints. Another reason mentioned is that a lot of people are currently utilising social media, so it is more effective to promote on these platforms and reach a larger number of audiences. A number of establishments (N=14) also indicated that they use online booking platforms such as Booking.Com, Travel Ground, TripAdvisor, Trivago, Expedia, Lekkerslaap, Safari Now etc., as well as their own business website. Booking.com is predominately used by these establishments, based on the broader audience reach and access to international visitors. Added to this it hosts a good review process, which makes it the highest-rated booking app as opposed to others (rated 8.5/10 on average). Other online portals were chosen based on their popularity and high rankings. These online accommodation booking sites are cost effective and only get a commission once the booking is confirmed. They are also very effective in reaching a large group of potential visitors as opposed to other marketing tools. Other marketing tools used were print media such as pamphlets, brochures, flyers, business cards, billboards and Correx/Chromadek boards. Interviewees mentioned that they also advertise their product on the radio and make use of third parties such as travel agencies and tour operators. All of the participants mentioned that, above all the selected marketing tools, they rely on Word-of-mouth marketing (WoM) from their customers. With this, they emphasised the importance of providing good service to ensure positive WoM recommendations.

Sub-theme 2.2: Word-of-mouth recommendations are the optimal marketing tool

A number (N=11) of participants indicated that using online booking platforms is the most effective tool. In this regard, Booking.com has the highest ranking followed by Travel Ground and Airbnb. Their reasoning is effectiveness based on the number of bookings and enquiries, which include international bookings. Added to this, these systems provide monthly statistics and feedback on how many travellers visited the establishment online, this gives an indication of how effective these marketing tools are. Once the set-up is done the client does all the work with active searches. One participant (P6) shared that *she has been using Booking.com for more than 6 years and it is reliable and effective*. She mentioned that she gets most of her clients from this platform. Nine of the participants indicated that social media, with specific reference to Facebook, is the most effective marketing tool for them as a lot of people are active on this platform. This is based on the number of possible followers and also the current bookings and referrals received through this platform. They mentioned that they receive a number of enquiries and bookings on their Facebook pages. People can easily like and share their page making it easier for others on their timelines to see as well, so the communication reaches a significant number of people in a shorter period. One participant (P5) noted, "*living in a digital era is clear where people are always on their phones, they always have data and airtime, so it is easier to reach them using digital marketing than printed marketing".* To support this statement, one of the participants mentioned that *Facebook pages are important as they create awareness to the younger market who are glued to their phones*.

Another participant also said, "*At this stage, Facebook has been beneficial for us as we try to promote on our Facebook page and encourage our guests to like and share our page. For example, we hosted a lucky draw and one of the conditions was that guests had to like our Facebook page". This was considered free advertising and very effective*. The traditional website still seems to be effective with seven participants who indicated this platform as being the most effective. This seems to be more official and maybe more trustworthy; they see this through the number of bookings made, quotations requested, as well as enquiries made on a regular basis. One of the interviewees mentioned that "*for him, Google ads is also an effective marketing tool, because the messages pop up as advertisements whenever people are online, so they get to see the product being advertised while busy with their other things online".* Three participants mentioned that their most effective marketing tool is radio and printed media such as posters, billboards and local newspaper because they still believe that there are many people who listen to the radio and also read newspapers. To support this, one of the interviewees (P8) *also indicated that they believe billboards/Chromadek boards create awareness as people always see these boards while travelling, therefore they will be the first place that comes to mind when those people need a guesthouse/B&B/place to spend a night/weekend.* All the participants indicated that, in addition to their listed most effective marketing tool, word-of-mouth recommendations/marketing is still the best and a very strong marketing tool that comes as free marketing done by their customers on their behalf because of the great service they received. They also mentioned that they give their customers the best service and always make sure they satisfy all clients, so they recommend them to friends and family. Customer satisfaction is important to them because it also ensures repeat visitation. One of the interviewees (P1) said "*Our customers recommend us because we always give the best service. People who had a good and positive experience with us spread the word for us quicker because they tell it as it is and people believe hearing more than experiencing, so if your guest can advertise for you because you gave them great service, or a great stay, they recommend you that is the best way*."

Sub-theme 2.3: Budget limitations

There is no budget or a very limited budget allocated to marketing–only five participants have with 5%, 10%, 15%, 30% of their budget allocated to this management function. Others said they do not have a budget in a percentage form, but they have to put aside the money for monthly and annual subscriptions for third parties such as signage in town, online portals, agencies' fees, Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA) fees etc. one participant (P27) lamented, "*It is very difficult to do marketing, even for a small establishment, if there is no budget allocation"*. Added to this, the majority of the participants do not have a long-term marketing plan, nor do they plan for marketing; marketing is just done whenever there is money available without planning for it. This is problematic and against all the principles of marketing. It might be considered as one of the weak points of SMEs. Therefore, it is extremely important that businesses have a dedicated marketing budget to spend online and offline to bring in new customers and retain existing customers. An SME enterprise should ultimately work to realise a return on investment with their marketing budget because, when done correctly, it should always remit positive results. These findings underscore the need for SMEs to adopt a more strategic marketing approach. They should leverage cost-effective digital tools, maintain consistent service quality to enhance WoM and prioritise allocating a dedicated marketing budget to ensure sustainable growth and customer retention.

Discussion

The discussion section critically interprets the findings of this study, contextualising them within the broader literature. The interviews showed that the primary challenge was the absence of a dedicated individual to manage marketing efforts. Participants indicated that budget constraints made it financially unfeasible to appoint such a person. Consequently, the SME owners and managers were responsible for marketing and managing other activities, such as guesthouse-related activities, a workload described as overwhelming for a single individual. Furthermore, participants acknowledged that they lacked the necessary marketing training and were often unsure about what actions to take and when. Among the 30 participants, only five reported having an allocated budget for marketing. This lack of a dedicated budget significantly undermines marketing effectiveness, as forward planning, a critical element of successful marketing strategies, becomes impossible without financial resources. The observation that marketing is only undertaken when funds are available is particularly concerning and contradicts established principles of marketing effectiveness. Most participants also admitted to the absence of long-term marketing plans, with ad hoc and unstructured marketing activities driven by the availability of funds rather than strategic planning. This approach reflects a common weakness among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Papagiannis (2020) identified budgetary constraints as a significant factor contributing to small businesses failure. Thus, businesses must establish a dedicated marketing budget for online and offline activities to attract new customers and retain existing ones (Dombay, et al., 2010). Importantly, marketing should not be viewed merely as an expense but as an investment (George, 2019). Small business owners must achieve a positive return on investment (ROI) from their marketing efforts, as effective marketing should yield tangible benefits. Additionally, Zostautiene & Vaičiulėnaitė (2010) emphasised that collaborating with a marketing consultant or an individual with expertise in the field can help transform negative ROI into positive outcomes. Such expertise can provide businesses with strategic guidance to optimise their marketing efforts and achieve sustainable growth.

SMEs regarded their current social media and online strategies as effective due to their cost-effectiveness and convenience. Participants identified their current marketing tools, including social media platforms such as Facebook (specifically through sponsored ads), Instagram, and X. These platforms are considered cost-effective and convenient because updates and changes can be made at a low cost and implemented immediately, reaching a significant audience. However, the most popular platform among participants is online booking portals, particularly Booking.com. This platform is perceived as effective for securing bookings, appealing to international tourists, and providing monthly user profile statistics, making it both reliable and efficient. George (2019) highlighted that millions of people use the Internet daily, making it a significant potential target market for tourism businesses. Papagiannis (2020) emphasised that social media platforms like Facebook enable companies to interact directly with customers by promoting offers, gathering feedback, and running localised ads or sponsored updates. For small tourism businesses, digital marketing offers advantages such as lower costs and greater efficiency than traditional marketing tools while enhancing customer relationships and experiences (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). The Internet allows organisations to access a global market (Wahdiniwaty et al., 2025); for instance, a prospective traveller from Germany planning a trip to Johannesburg can view comprehensive information about a guesthouse, including prices, availability, photographs of rooms and amenities, and scenic views. Digital marketing also enables quick and seamless transactions; with just a few taps, consumers can book flights, reserve hotel rooms, or download holiday brochures. Furthermore, digital marketing operates within a 24/7 economy, allowing businesses to engage customers at any time (George, 2019). Papagiannis (2020) also noted the importance of adopting the right mindset for online marketing, encouraging small business owners to develop traits and strategies that maximise the effectiveness of their online marketing efforts and drive business growth.

The findings also underscore the significance of word-of-mouth (WoM) marketing. Godin (2005) described WoM recommendations as "sneezing," where "sneezers" act as influential individuals who share their experiences with colleagues and friends, thus creating awareness and interest in a product or service. Making products and services remarkable and worth discussing can amplify their reach. Tourism organisations can formalise this process by encouraging customers to share their experiences, such as "liking" a Facebook page or sharing testimonials in promotional materials like brochures and advertisements (George, 2019). Ahmad & Saber (2015) noted that WoM communication is the most influential marketing channel for small hotels and guesthouses, as it strongly impacts consumer purchase behaviour, especially for experience goods like hospitality services. Since intangible services such as guesthouse stays cannot be evaluated before purchase, customers often rely on WoM from trusted sources such as friends and relatives to mitigate risk. Positive WoM increases purchase intentions by reducing the perceived risks associated with decision-making (George, 2019). Positive WoM enhances a company's reputation and brand image and helps reduce promotional expenditures (Cant et al., 2017). Studies suggest that WoM marketing drives 20-50% of

all purchasing decisions, with its influence being particularly strong for first-time purchases, such as travel and holiday experiences (Bughin, et al., 2010). WoM is often considered more credible than traditional forms of promotion and is regarded as one of the most powerful marketing tools. George (2019) emphasised that consumers are likely to recommend tourism offerings only if they experience consistent value-for-money quality. In an era where consumers are exposed to countless marketing messages daily, fostering positive WoM becomes increasingly crucial (Traupel, 2017). Accommodation establishments should develop robust WoM strategies to promote customer loyalty, reduce negative feedback, and enhance customer retention and acquisition. Moreover, WoM has evolved to include electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM), facilitated by the rise of social media. eWoM involves disseminating information through electronic channels such as social networking sites, booking platforms, mobile applications, and blogs, further amplifying its impact (Eid & El-Gohary, 2013).

Conclusion

The growth of SMEs continues to face significant challenges, with marketing emerging as a critical barrier. Numerous studies have identified a lack of marketing skills, strategic decision-making, and effective implementation as key reasons for SME failure. Interestingly, despite these issues being consistently highlighted over the years, a clear and sustainable solution remains elusive, a concern that warrants urgent attention. This review of marketing knowledge and skills led to four key conclusions. First, a significant gap exists between the recognised need for a dedicated marketing professional or organisation and the financial ability to afford such a resource. The study also underscores the value of third-party assistance, such as social media platforms, travel agencies, and tour operators. Marketing is undeniably critical; however, many SME owners lack the knowledge, skills, and time to perform these tasks effectively. Addressing this gap requires providing SMEs with accessible training opportunities, mentorship programs, and support mechanisms tailored to their budgetary constraints. Second, word-of-mouth (WoM) remains a highly effective marketing medium that should not be underestimated, even amidst the rise of digital tools. WoM's impact directly relates to the quality of service provided by accommodation establishments. This highlights the importance of selecting and training staff to interact with customers, ensuring they deliver exceptional service that fosters positive recommendations. Continuous staff development in service delivery is essential for maximising WoM's marketing potential. Third, due to their cost-effectiveness, online platforms have emerged as a popular and flexible option for SMEs. These platforms, which often charge commissions only upon confirmed bookings, align well with SMEs' limited marketing budgets. However, to fully leverage these opportunities, SMEs need training on optimising their use of online platforms to enhance visibility and competitiveness. Practical, targeted training in digital marketing could address these challenges and significantly improve SMEs' marketing capabilities. Finally, there is a pressing need for practical, government-supported initiatives to empower SMEs. For example, a free series of online seminars titled "How to Optimise Marketing for SMEs" could provide invaluable insights and resources. Such initiatives would help bridge the knowledge gap and enable SMEs to navigate the complex marketing landscape effectively. While marketing remains a persistent challenge for SME growth, strategic interventions focused on training, resource allocation, and leveraging cost-effective tools can drive significant improvements. Although the initial target sample size was 40 businesses, several owners declined to participate, citing stress and the negative impacts of COVID-19 as reasons for their unwillingness to be interviewed. Consequently, the final sample size comprised 30 SMEs. Despite this reduction, the sample size was sufficient for qualitative research purposes, as data saturation was achieved. Future research should include businesses from additional provinces in South Africa that were not covered in this study to enhance the generalizability of the findings to a broader population.

This study makes an important contribution to the tourism and SME marketing literature by providing empirical evidence on how marketing knowledge and skills influence the competitiveness of accommodation SMEs in South Africa. It identifies specific knowledge, capacity, and resource gaps that hinder the effective use of traditional and digital marketing tools. The findings reveal that although SME owners recognise the importance of marketing, most lack formal training, dedicated marketing personnel, and structured marketing plans. The study also shows that while SMEs increasingly rely on cost-effective digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Booking.com, many lack the skills to maximise their benefits. Furthermore, it confirms the continued importance of word-of-mouth marketing as a key driver of business success. The study offers practical recommendations, including targeted training, mentorship, collaborative marketing initiatives, and government-supported capacity-building programmes. Its key contribution lies in demonstrating that strengthening marketing knowledge and skills is essential for enhancing the sustainability, competitiveness, and growth of accommodation SMEs and supporting the broader transformation of South Africa's tourism sector.

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