# Analysis of content preferences of packaged tours: A study of tourists in the Mahikeng, North West Province, South Africa

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**Abstract**

Most packaged tours are designed with exactly knowing the preferences of the customers and therefore the tour operators depend totally on pure luck for the packaged tours to sell or appeal to potential customers and customers. The aim and the purpose of the study was to identify the preferences of study in accommodation, transport, activities and attractions preferred while buying the packaged tours. The study is going to hopefully assist in providing a clear understanding on how to obtain knowledge on the preferences of customers before designing packaged tours. A few recommendations are provided in order to help anyone who is in tourism in crafting business to design saleable products or appeal to customers. The research methodology used in this study was quantitative research methodology. The population were the customers of Diano Tours, a tour operator located in the City of Mahikeng in the North-West Province.

The most preferred contents of packaged tours were found to be accommodation is hotels, attractions natural attractions, activities such as taking pictures and transports is buses and coaches. Preferences of customers differed from one person to another, and as such it was difficult to determine if all customers would be satisfied in every activity carried out during a tour. Embarking on research before designing tours and preliminary meetings will give tour operators' better ideas of what to include while designing packaged tours for local and foreign visitors.

**Keywords:** Preferences, packaged tour, customers, tour operator, appealing, design, content, Mahikeng.

## Introduction

Very little research has been carried out concerning content preferences of packaged tours and this made the research complex and also interesting. It is important to allude to the fact that the preferences of tourists have changed over time as compared to past centuries. Innovations and creativity have allowed for a variety and enhancement of offerings to develop in the designing of packaged tours. The expansion in the tour operating business is also a party to changes of the packaged tour environment. Tour operators play a key role in the tourism industry and have the power to influence customers' preferences, the tendencies of suppliers and the development plans in a particular destination (Miller and Twing-Ward, 2003:261).

The preferences of customers change from one person to another and this does contribute in a lot of complexity when it comes to the packaged tours concept. There are also various reasons that affect the preferences of customers as far as packaged tours are concerned. Holloway, Humphreys & Davidson (2009:539) point out that some of those reasons include the nature of the journey, whether it is a domestic or international destination to be visited, as well as the experience of individual tourists.

**Literature reviewed**

Package tours form a vital part of the tourism industry as it has potential sell products and services in bulk. Packaged tours as such, have not always been the preferred method of travel. It was mostly practiced by educational and church groups and was not recognized as a form of tourism. In more recent times, this trend has changed, albeit gradually, to make packaged touring a recognized form of touring and probably the most affordable way to travel (Katashaya, 2010).

**Packaging of trips**

There are different interpretations for the word packaging in terms of manufactured products and for tourism. In terms of *manufacturing*, packaging can simple mean packing a product in a box or container and in terms of *tourism*, packaging can mean the inclusiveness of some or all of the components of tourism. According to Packaging and Labelling (2005) and Mondi Packaging South Africa (2005) and supported by Hayes and Macleod (2007:59), packaging is generally a combination of two or more elements sold as a single product for an inclusive price, in which the costs of the individual product components are not separately identifiable. According to the Practical Guide to Destination Management (2007:107) and by Nick (2009), packaging is a method that is increasingly used in packaged holiday booking procedures that enable tourists to build their own packages out of transportation and accommodation options instead of predefined packages.

The above-mentioned author adds that the term is used in tourism as a popular synonym to describe inclusive tours. There are different types of packaged tours. Bourke and Resnick (2000:94) suggest that all-inclusive packaged tours are the best example of the concept of packaging and that all-inclusive packaged tours bring together several travel products into a comprehensive and complementary package. Hunt (2006) writes that packaging comes in all shapes and sizes and can be made to fit and satisfy every need of every tourist. According to Swarbrooke (2002:49), packaging could include the following elements in relation to an attraction product:

- Providing information and a sign to help visitors find the attraction.
- Attractive entrances to attract passing trade.
- Combining the attraction with other facilities and services to make it more attractive or accessible, for example inclusive rail travel and admission charges.
- Selling the product by making it part of a package offered by another organization with its own customer base, such as a tour operator or Coach Company

**Origin of packaged tours**

Touring was not a featured activity for previous generations. People remained and moved around in their immediate environs, and if spurred on by some special need, went further than the horizon, for example, the discoveries of Christopher Columbus. Packaged tours are not inventions created by some brilliant tourism entrepreneur but a way of selling touring that has evolved over time. There was previously no definite packaged tour in the sense that it is known today (Franklin, 2003:02). One tour, according to recorded history, that came closest to what is now known as a packaged tour, is a tour organized by Thomas Cook (Franklin, 2003:02). Lubbe (2003:20) explains that Cook invented the packaged tour in

1841 and adds that this came after 1822 when Robert Smart in England became the first travel agent to book passengers on steamer boats. Thomas Cook charted a train on 5 July 1841 to carry 570 people from Leicester to Southborough for a distance of about 32 kilometers to a temperature meeting (Sharma, 2008:170). This first tour featured a number of components that were to become the standard for later packaged tours.

Packaged tours were thus an important service offered by early travel agencies. The bulk of their business was handling travel and hotel arrangements for people making independent trips. The breakthrough for the pre-arranged packaged tour came with the arrival of the jet age, around 1958. Tour operators develop a variety of packages to cater for this class of tourist. Even back in the times of Thomas Cook, packages offered good deals in terms of price, convenience, reliability and consistency (Sharma, 2008:170). Franklin (2003:02) and Bhatia (2006:64) support this by saying that the development of an organized packaged tour had its roots in the mid-nineteenth century and can be associated with Thomas Cook. The breakthrough in transportation made it even easier for arranging packaged tours. This was because the arranging of packaged tours depends on the availability of transport. Designing packaged tours depends on developments in tourism products and tour operators have to align themselves with these developments. The nature of packaged tours is discussed below.

**Nature of packaged tours**

Packaged tours are inclusive in nature because they combine two or more components of tourism. They are either organized within the national setting of a country or include any number of foreign countries. Sometimes packaged tours can include or exclude the services of a tour guide. Heung and Zhu (2005:13) emphasize that tour security and safety, its trustworthiness, reputation and status are contributing factors in the selection of a tour operator. The six factors tourists consider when selecting a tour operator are:

- Interactive ability
- Tourist satisfaction
- Service quality
- Tour capability judgment
- Travel agency reflection
- Service characteristics.

**Characteristics of packaged tours**

Packaged tours normally consist of a combination of some or all of the components of tourism as previously discussed. Inclusive implies that one price is charged and individual components of the package are not separately priced. The view of Rosentraub and Joo (2008:759) is that the attractiveness of a packaged tour in itself is a feature that will draw tourists to buy a particular package. Packaged tours are capable of providing originality to a tourist because they can provide experiences that are not of an everyday variety (Weaver *et al*, 2009:585). The variety of packaged tours is also very important as people's preferences and motivations for travelling differ.

Wang *et al*. (2007:362) profess that one of the characteristics of packaged tours is that they typically involve various tourism and related industries. Such industries are for example local travel agencies,

airlines, restaurants, souvenir stores and local transportation companies. Morrison (2002:327) is of the opinion that packaged tours can be characterized as:

- Having companions
- Inclusiveness
- Having two or more components
- Having different types of transportation in one package
- Can include extras or optional activities
- Entertaining in nature
- Carrying special features

The characteristics of packaged tours can be used to appeal to customers. The choices or preferences of customers are influenced by these characteristics of packaged tours. The holistic nature of preferences is discussed in the following section.

**Preferences**

Tran and Ralston (2006:428) explain that the preference of a tourist is the act of choosing from a set of choices influenced by motivations. Kelly *et al.* (2007:379) explain that people's preferences vary or differ and packaged tours should be designed in such way that it will suit the preferences of the target market. Yeoman (2008) indicates that considering tourists' preferences is accepted as being good for business and public sector organizations, because it contributes towards designing products and services that match existing and emerging tourists' needs. Another way to express this idea is that packaged tours must be varied in their design. A preference is the most important factor affecting a person's choice of travel.

**Advantages and disadvantages of packaged tours**

It is universally accepted that every form of product has advantages and disadvantages. Following is presentation of advantages and disadvantages of packaged tours.

**Advantages of packaged tours**

There is no doubt that packaged tours have their own set of advantages. However, advantages differ according to an individual's preferences. This section deals with the advantages that derive from or are associated with packaged tours. The advantages of packaged tours should be considered and integrated into packaged tours to contribute towards customer satisfaction. The advantages of packaged tours are indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1  Advantages of packaged tours**

| |
|---|
| Preparation |
| Cost-effective and pattern expenditure calculations |
| Reliability |
| Avoiding hassles and decision making |
| The desire to save money |

| |
|---|
| The companionship of people with similar interests |
| The educational nature of touring |

Sources: adapted from Bourke and Resnick (2000:94); Mancini (2001:2-3); Morrison (2002:317); Manyane (2007:67)

## Disadvantages of packaged tours

Though the idea of packaged tours sounds interesting and appealing, they also have a number of disadvantages. Following is a discussion of the disadvantages of packaged tours and these are indicated Table 2.

**Table 2  Disadvantages of packaged tours**

| |
|---|
| Comprehensive character of package tours |
| Negative impacts of packages |
| Discipline during a tour |
| Unreasonable high expectations |
| Collective feature |
| Childish symptoms |

Sources: adapted from Mancini (2001:2-3); Manyane (2007:46)

## Methodology

The methodology used in this article is the quantitative method**.** This method is statistical and numerical and as such it will be able to address the study. Moreover, it is exploratory in nature.

## Sampling

Sampling is described as an attempt to learn something about a large group (referred to as the population) by looking at only a small part of it (referred to as the sample) (Seaton and Bennett, 2001:95). Sampling is used because accurate results can be achieved by researching a sample, provided the sample is representative of the population. In this study, the sample consists of 300 customers of Diano Tours who undertook an organised packaged tour. The sample is gender representative as it includes 150 males and 150 females. People included in the sample were adults from 18 years and older.

## Data gathering

The data collection tool most suitable for this type of research is a survey and the research instrument is a structured self-completing questionnaire. The questionnaire contains structured close-ended questions designed to obtain data applicable to the primary and secondary objectives, as well as Likert scale questions. The questionnaire was designed in such a way that no further input from the researcher during the questionnaire administration process was required.

All Diano Tours are escorted by a tour guide employed by Diano Tours. Tour guides were instructed regarding the questionnaires and the administration of the questionnaires. Questionnaires were provided to the tour guides who distributed it to the group of tourists. Tour guides then collected the completed questionnaires from the sample members at the end of the tour. The researcher then collected the completed questionnaires from the tour guides after every tour. This process was repeated until a total of 300 completed questionnaires were accumulated.

**Findings of survey**

**Tour practices and biography data**

In findings 55% of the participants were female and 45% were male and most of these respondents were between 21-40 of age at 50. 33%. Most the respondents were not married since the 70% of respondents indicated their marital status as single, they were also mostly students (59%) with tertiary education (87%).

In terms of packaged tour practices, at least 72% of participants have been on packaged tours and 43% of the respondents preferred a packaged tour that that lasted for three nights or more. Most of the respondents embarked on packaged tours with colleagues (43%) who found out about the packaged tour through school (43%).

**Component preferences**

The preferences of respondents in terms of the basic components of tourism included in packaged tours are: accommodation, attractions, activities and transportation. Hotels are the most preferred type of accommodation as indicated by 42,67% of the respondents and the least preferred type of accommodation is tents with only 1%.
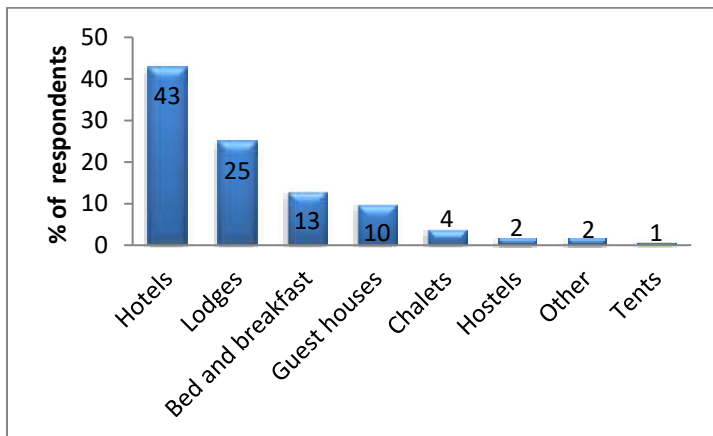


**Figure 1. Accommodation preferences**

In order to conduct an analysis of what types of attractions are preferred, five different types were used and these are:

(a) Natural attractions
(b) Cultural attractions
(c) Man-made attractions
(d) Events

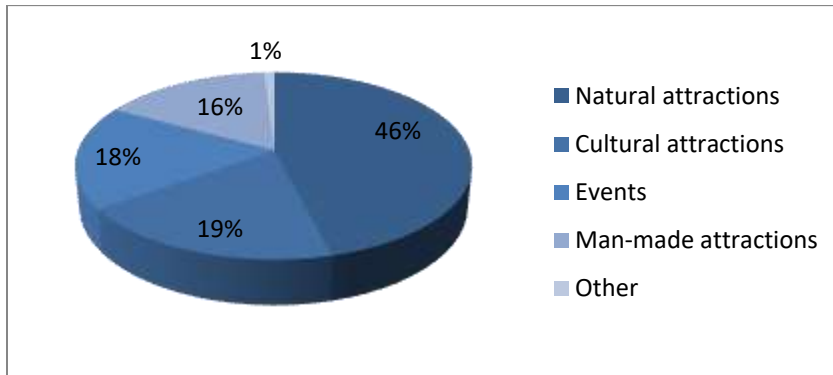**Figure 2. Attractions preferences**

In this component, activities were grouped into ten categories:

(a)  Taking pictures
(b)  Music events
(c)  Wildlife
(d)  Cultural activities
(e)  Sightseeing
(f)  Adventure activities
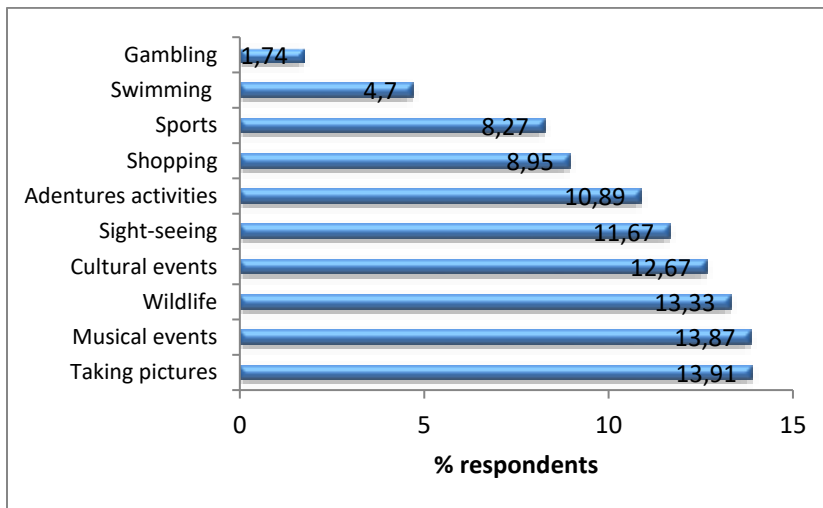(g)  Shopping
(h)  Sports activities
(i)  Gambling.



 **Figure 3. Activity preferences**
For the purpose of this analysis, transport was categorised as:

(a)  Buses or coaches
(b)  Trains
(c)  Ships
(d)  Aeroplanes
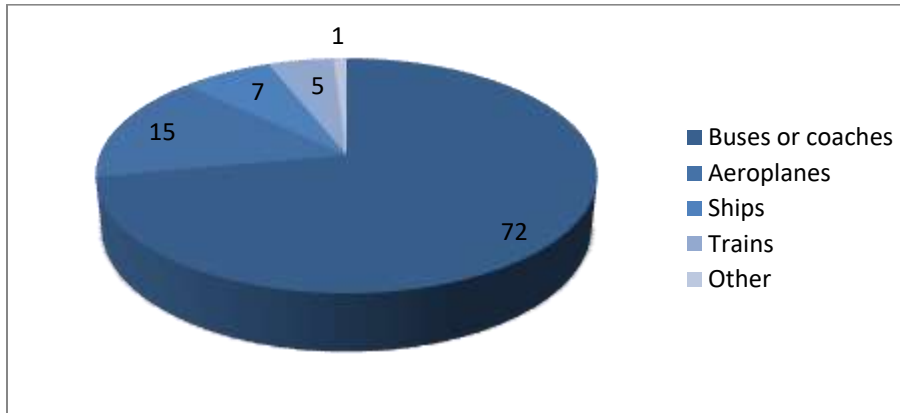
(e)  Other forms of transport.



**Figure 4. Transportation preferences**

The packaged tour practices of the respondents presented above revealed that the type of accommodation mostly preferred by the respondents is hotels. The type of attraction mostly preferred is natural attractions, taking pictures is indicated as the most preferred activity while on a packaged tour and the type of transport preferred by most is buses or coaches.

**Tour assessment**

Participants were assessed the packaged tours that they participated in terms of the following statements; *transport reliability, enjoyable activities, ideal accommodation, promises delivered, convenience of packaged tour, buy packaged tours again, knowledge tour guide, sufficient communication and attractions appealing.*

Most of the participants agreed that all of these tour assessment statements were on positive average of 60% and very few participants were negative to about these assessments at average of about 2.5 %. And shocking averages of about 14 % were not sure about all the tour assessment statements. However, it very important to note that among all the statements *transport reliability* received positive answers with 87%. *Promises delivered* is the statement that received the neutral answer with 23.33% and it also received most negative responses of about 12.67%.

**Tour rating**

Respondents were asked to rate the packaged tour statements in terms of excellency. The statements included the following: *packaged tour, value of tour, quality of service, level of professionalism, punctuality of packaged tour, responsiveness of staff, sufficient security, and price justified the service. Packaged tour* was the most positively rated statement with 86%. And the table further indicates that *punctuality of packaged tour* and *responsiveness of staff equally* received negative evaluations of 6% (4% + 2%).

**Enjoyment level of packaged tours**

This section provides the findings relating enjoyment levels of the tour were measured, the statements that measured food enjoyment levels included the following *food, companions, daily program, and leisure time, stop and rest time, fair attention*. Food level of enjoyment was higher than all other aspects. It was selected most enjoyable by 28% and enjoyable by 59%, this is all positive reaction added to (28% + 59% =87 %). Stop and rest time received most negative reaction from the respondents (9.33% + 3.67 % = 13%).

Respondents were given a section whereby they were asked to indicate things they liked most about the tour and things they least enjoyed while on packaged tours. Activities which were included in the tour were the most liked with frequency of n=71 and punctuality was indicated at least enjoyed in the packaged tours that the participants undertook n=37.

## Reasons for buying packaged tours

People buy tours for different reasons and as such even the preferences of people differ even if their reasons for buying packaged tours are similar. The following variables were used to determine why people buy packaged tours. The reasons included the following: *learning, exploring, relaxing, pleasure, outing, wildlife, networking, appealing, good price, recommendation and religious.* Learning was the most reason why people bought the packaged tours at the time of study from Diano Tours n=124.

## Discussion

In this study the results show that the preferences of customers differ in the packaged tours selected. However, it is very important to indicate that there were no previous studies which were carried out on this topic that could be accessed.

## Summary of findings

The customers of Diano Tours, a tour operator based in Mahikeng in North West, South Africa, were used as respondents in the study.

## Tourists' preferences in terms of packaged tours
*The primary objective of the study was to determine the preferences of tourists regarding the content of packaged tours.*

The most crucial inferences made from this study were that preferences differ from person to person and it was a challenge to identify the preferences that are exactly the same. This is also influenced by other factors such as biographical variables (age, marital status, gender, educational level and occupational status). It is important to note that reasons for travelling are also related to what customers prefer. One customer may prefer different things on two different tours because of the reasons for travelling. For example, if the purpose of travelling is business, this purpose in itself affects customers' preferences of the tour. If the purpose of travelling is pleasure, the same customers will have different expectations.

It is also important to note that this can be a very complex matter to handle. Another complication is that even on the same tour, whether for business, pleasure or other reasons, different customers have different preferences and therefore expectations.

**Accommodation preferences**
*Secondary objective 1: To determine the type of accommodation tour operators should select and what exactly their customers prefer.*

Regarding accommodation, the study showed that the preference of most tourists is hotel accommodation, with 42,67% preferring it over other types of accommodation. In the same sense, the least preferred form of accommodation was tents. There were no significant relationships recorded in selecting a preferred type of accommodation and the biographical descriptors. Furthermore, accommodation was still listed among the things tourists enjoyed both least and most. There is a clear contradiction on the type of accommodation selected by a tour operator. However, there is a recommendation later on in this chapter on how to deal with things such as these or how to avoid them to ensure accommodation does not ruin the total experience. The customers' preference regarding accommodation is influenced by their educational level. Customers who belong to the same level of education prefer a given type of accommodation.

**Transportation preferences**
*Secondary objective 2: To determine the type of transportation tour operators should include and what specifically customers prefer.*

The most preferred type of transport is buses and coaches as indicated by 72% of respondents. It can thus be said that most customers are comfortable using this type of transportation. This mode of transportation also makes it easy for operating the itinerary or daily programme of a packaged tour. Even if a different mode of transport is used for a packaged tour to reach a destination, a certain type of transportation, such as a bus or coach will still be needed to travel to places in and around a destination.

**Attraction preferences**
*Secondary objective 3: To determine the attractions tourists prefer and what tour operators should include in their package tours.*

According to the findings it is clear that in terms of attractions as included in a packaged tour, people prefer to visit natural attractions as indicated by 46% of respondents. The attractions preference is influenced by their occupation level. However, it can be concluded that most people travelling together have similar interests or almost similar preferences as far as attractions are concerned.

**Activities preferences**
*Secondary objective 4: To determine the activities tourists prefer and what tour operators should include in their package tours activities preferred also differ.*

According to this study, taking pictures is the most preferred activity. This indicates that tourists want to create a memory by taking pictures to remember the places and times experienced; as indicated by 13,91% of respondents. Although taking a picture in most cases is just a secondary activity, it is preferred by most tourists. The itineraries of packaged tours should ideally incorporate picture stops at selected meaningful places with sufficient time provided.

**Recommendations**

The problem statement stated that packaged tours are complex and tour operators design them without being knowledgeable about the preferences of tourists. In most cases, tour operators end up losing potential customers because they design packaged tours that are not contributing towards profitability. That is why it was crucial to research this topic. The following aspects are recommendations addressing this problem.

A preliminary meeting with customers can work very well, especially where a tour will be taken by groups such as schools, religious groups and social clubs. First, tour operators should have an idea of the packaged tour they want to design for a selected target market or group. For example, if a tour is designed for a school, the tour operator should meet the teachers or organizers and get to know what their expectations and preferences are.

The tour operator should also know the reasons why people want to travel as this will make it easier to design packaged tours. Petrick, Li and Park (2007:01) state that research will help tour operators understand how tourists make decisions which will help tour operators to know their customers' preferences and how to satisfy them. The packaged tour designer should involve potential customers in selecting activities and attractions to be included. Even better, tour operators should design a packaged tour, even if it is on paper, and let potential tourists take part in the design, editing, adding or removing of things they prefer in the tour. Tour companies should also employ people who have knowledge and are devoted to the tourism industry.

Feedback from customers after a tour enables a tour operator to determine if customers were satisfied and whether their expectations were met. This can help a tour operator to correct mistakes and avoid mistakes in upcoming tours. Research will also help tour operators to understand their customers' behaviour. It will be wise of tour operators to make sure there is sufficient time for taking pictures because it seems appealing to tourists. Followed by music events, this too can be incorporated into a packaged tour. Sometimes it can be the main reason for travelling, such as attending the International Jazz Festival in Cape Town. However, one tourist can prefer more than one activity in one packaged tour. Activities enhance and add value to a packaged tour.

A statistical analysis of the places visited, accommodation and other tour variables should be done after a tour in order to design better subsequent tours. This will help tour operators to know if the attractions are highly regarded or liked by the customers. It is important to ensure that packaged tours are relevant to what is happening around destinations. For example, if a tour is visiting Gauteng around Easter, it would be very appropriate for a tour operator to include a stop at the Rand Easter show. This can be very appealing on its own. This can be done if the tour designer is familiar with the calendar of local events at intended destinations.

**Future research**

This study investigated the content preferences of tourists concerning packaged tours. There are more research prospects that could be considered:

- There should be continued research on the content preferences as content changes take place or as new content is added to packaged tours.

- The reasons that make the customers buy packaged tours and why they would not buy packaged tours should be further explored.
- Researching the satisfaction levels of tourists on existing packaged tours should be investigated to measure the possible success of packaged tours.
- To design a model for what a basic packaged tour should at least contain.
- To identify the skills development tour operators' need to design the marketable packaged tours.
- To investigate the working relationship between tourism service providers to design and sell more packaged tours.
- To determine the impact of packaged tours on the tourism industry in South Africa.

**Limitations**

There were a number of limitations to this study. The data collection was carried out in North West because the company that was researched is based there and the researcher is based in Gauteng. Customers complained of being too tired to complete the questionnaires after the tours and sometimes the arrival times of the packaged tours were awkward. The distance was a challenge. Finding the most recent information from secondary data sources on the subject was also a challenge because there were very few secondary data sources on South African tour operators that address the subject.

**Conclusion**

A packaged tour is seen as the most efficient way of selling tours and plays a very important role in the tourism industry. Different companies come up with new packaged tour designs to ensure that packaged tours are appealing to tourists. There should be more packaged tour initiatives to attract different tourists from all walks of life and all ages and interests.

The content of packaged tours should be carefully considered to ensure that packaged tours are reasonably priced and marketable. Tour operators should be dedicated to know the preferences of their customers to make it easier to design desired packaged tours. This means that tour operators should know their customers' travel needs and wants very well.

However, it cannot be denied that there are many challenges concerning the design and content of packaged tours, because of the differences in terms of what different people prefer. This study researched the preferences of tourists regarding the content of packaged tours. Tour operators in South Africa could use these results and findings.

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