

# Influence of Tour Operators on Collaborative Marketing in Small Tourism Enterprises

## Abstract

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This study examines the influence of tour operators on the effectiveness of collaborative marketing strategies in small tourism enterprises (STEs). Adopting a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with tour operators and STEs. Findings reveal that collaborative marketing strategies often fall short due to limited engagement with digital platforms, which hinders STEs' ability to reach a broader audience. Moreover, insufficient cooperation between tour operators and STEs impairs the effectiveness of these strategies, resulting in fragmented promotional activities. The study also highlights a critical need for enhanced marketing intelligence and the adoption of innovative digital strategies to boost the visibility of small enterprises and attract a larger tourist base. The study concludes that strengthening partnerships and fostering long-term, sustainable growth within the tourism sector are essential. The implications of this research underscore the crucial role of tour operators in facilitating effective marketing collaborations, which are vital for economic development and job creation. By offering practical solutions to overcome existing challenges, this study provides valuable insights into improving marketing effectiveness in the tourism industry.

**Keywords:** Collaborative marketing, tour operators, small tourism enterprises, digital marketing, performance

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## Introduction

Collaboration has become a vital strategy in the tourism industry, particularly for small tourism enterprises (STEs) that operate within competitive and resource-constrained environments. In an industry where market dynamics and consumer preferences are in constant flux, collaborative marketing strategies offer STEs a way to surmount their limitations and enhance their market presence (Smith, 2019; Kotler et al., 2021). Collaborative marketing involves joint efforts among various stakeholders, including tourism operators, service providers, and local communities, to promote shared products or services. This cooperative approach not only broadens market reach but also enhances the effectiveness of marketing initiatives, enabling stakeholders to pool their resources and expertise to deliver more comprehensive and appealing tourism offerings (Pansiri, 2020; Jiang & Ritchie, 2022). By combining their strengths, stakeholders can achieve increased visibility and foster greater customer engagement (Kim & Lee, 2021). Tour operators play a pivotal role within this collaborative marketing framework. They act as key intermediaries in the tourism value chain, utilizing their extensive networks and market expertise to drive marketing initiatives that benefit both their own operations and those of their collaborative partners (Bertella et al., 2020; Katsikari et al., 2020). In particular, tour operators facilitate coordination among various service providers, streamline marketing efforts, and enhance the efficiency of promotional activities. This role is crucial in regions where small enterprises face significant challenges, as the involvement of tour operators can help bridge gaps in marketing knowledge and resources (Mubinova, 2020). Tour operators' ability to shape destination images and direct tourist flows can have a profound impact on the demand for tourism services. Their engagement in collaborative marketing efforts can lead to cost savings through shared resources and improved market reach, while also delivering enhanced customer experiences through more coherent and compelling promotional messages (Palmer et al., 2021; Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2020). Thus, tour operators' expertise and networks are instrumental in crafting successful collaborative marketing strategies that drive growth for STEs.

Small tourism enterprises are integral to the tourism industry's ecosystem, significantly contributing to local economic development, job creation, and poverty alleviation. These enterprises provide unique, culturally rich experiences that diversify tourism products and attract a wide range of visitors (Ngubane, 2015). In developing countries, STEs play a crucial role in addressing socio-economic challenges by generating employment opportunities and fostering economic growth (Alisa & Ridho, 2022). The presence of STEs in local communities not only supports economic development but also enriches the cultural and social fabric of the region. Despite their significant contributions, STEs often grapple with challenges that impede their growth and effectiveness. Limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and restricted market access are common issues that affect their competitive ability (Smith, 2019). Furthermore, marketing difficulties, including a lack of online visibility and limited promotional expertise, further constrain their potential (Kotler et al., 2021). Collaborative marketing strategies present a viable solution by enabling STEs to leverage collective strengths, overcome individual limitations, and achieve greater market presence (Pansiri, 2020).

The implementation of collaborative marketing strategies among STEs is not without its challenges. Issues such as coordination difficulties, trust issues, and conflicting interests among stakeholders can hinder the success of collaborative efforts (Fyall et al., 2022). Effective collaboration requires overcoming these obstacles through clear communication, goal alignment, and mutual trust. Larger stakeholders may sometimes dominate collaborative efforts, leading to imbalances in decision-making and conflicting priorities (Fyall et al., 2022). Addressing these challenges necessitates a nuanced



understanding of the dynamics involved in collaborative marketing. Successful collaboration hinges on building trust, defining clear roles and responsibilities, and creating a shared vision among stakeholders. By navigating these complexities, STEs can enhance their marketing effectiveness and achieve more sustainable and impactful results (Picazo & Moreno-Gil, 2018; Mahembe & Odhiambo, 2018). South Africa, in particular, faces significant socio-economic challenges, including high unemployment rates that affect various sectors, including tourism. The official unemployment rate stands at approximately 32.5%, while the broader measure, including discouraged job seekers, reaches around 40% (Hall, 2019). In 2016, approximately 65% of children lived in households with at least one working adult, while 35% resided in households without employed adults (Radebe, 2019). Despite ongoing efforts to address unemployment, the high failure rate of small businesses, estimated at around 75%, exacerbates persistent economic issues (Alisa & Ridho, 2022). Tourism enterprises play a crucial role in generating localized employment and fostering economic growth. However, these enterprises frequently encounter challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, marketing difficulties, and regulatory complexities (Smith, 2019). The seasonal nature of tourism and the lack of online visibility further compound these challenges (Morrison, 2013). Addressing these obstacles is essential for the sustained growth of tourism enterprises and the broader economic stability of the region.

The tourism industry has undergone significant fluctuations since its inception in the 1950s, driven by factors such as technological advancements, the COVID-19 pandemic, and evolving tourist behavior patterns (Myeni, 2018). These fluctuations underscore the necessity for stakeholders to stay updated with industry trends and continuously evaluate the effectiveness of their marketing strategies. To remain competitive and support sustainable economic development, tour operators and STEs must adapt to these changes. Tour operators' involvement in collaborative marketing becomes particularly relevant within this context of historical and ongoing changes. Their ability to adapt to shifting market conditions and leverage collaborative efforts is crucial in driving the success of STEs and enhancing their market presence. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate the influence of tour operators on collaborative marketing strategies among STEs. By examining the role of tour operators and their impact on the performance of STEs, the research seeks to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of collaborative marketing strategies. The research objectives are to assess the extent of collaborative marketing practices among STEs and analyze the role of tour operators in facilitating these collaborations and their impact on STE performance. Through this examination, the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how collaborative marketing strategies can enhance the effectiveness and success of small tourism enterprises.

## **Literature review**

### ***Role of tour operators in tourism marketing***

Tour operators play a pivotal role in tourism marketing, serving as critical intermediaries between destinations and travelers. Their influence is substantial in promoting destinations and designing compelling travel experiences. By developing and marketing integrated travel packages that encompass accommodation, transportation, and local attractions, tour operators streamline the booking process and enhance the visibility of destinations (Weaver & Lawton, 2014). Their expansive networks and market expertise enable them to reach a global audience, effectively showcasing destinations that might otherwise receive limited attention (Buhalis & Law, 2008). In addition to their direct promotional activities, tour operators implement a variety of strategies to extend market reach and improve visibility. They leverage their relationships with travel agencies, media outlets, and other promotional channels to market destinations through targeted advertising, participation in trade shows, and hosting promotional events (Pforr & Hosie, 2008). Their proficiency in adapting marketing messages to diverse cultural contexts facilitates the attraction of a broader audience and amplifies destination exposure. Tour operators are also instrumental in providing valuable market intelligence. They systematically collect and analyze data on tourist preferences and emerging trends, offering insights that enable destinations to refine their marketing strategies and maintain a competitive edge (Page et al., 2012). This information is crucial for identifying new opportunities and enhancing promotional efforts. Furthermore, tour operators contribute significantly to building and managing partnerships within the tourism sector. Acting as intermediaries between hotels, restaurants, and local attractions, they ensure that travel packages are well-integrated and mutually beneficial (Papatheodorou et al., 2018). This collaborative approach results in more coherent marketing messages and enriched tourist experiences. Moreover, tour operators utilize their local knowledge and understanding of cultural events to create unique travel experiences. Their ability to offer tailored packages distinguishes destinations and caters to niche markets (Weaver & Lawton, 2014). They also maintain high standards of quality and consistency across travel experiences, addressing any issues that arise to ensure positive feedback from travelers (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Tour operators are integral to tourism marketing, driving destination success through their expertise in promotion, market intelligence, partnership management, and experience customization. Their comprehensive approach is essential for enhancing destination visibility and ensuring traveler satisfaction.

### ***Collaborative in marketing***

Collaborative marketing in tourism represents a strategic paradigm in which multiple businesses unite to achieve common marketing objectives, thereby significantly augmenting the market presence and competitive advantage of small tourism enterprises (STEs). This approach, as articulated by Horn (1990), facilitates the pooling of resources and expertise, which is particularly beneficial for STEs that often contend with limited financial and marketing capacities. By engaging in joint promotions, shared advertising, and coordinated travel packages, STEs can extend their market reach, attract a broader audience, and deliver more cohesive and compelling tourism experiences. Swart & Bob (2009) further elucidate that such collaborative marketing initiatives enable STEs to provide integrated tourism offerings that might exceed their individual capabilities. This collaboration is not solely about financial pooling but also involves the exchange of knowledge and networks.



Peters (2018) emphasizes that this broader form of collaboration can foster innovation, leading to the creation of novel and unique tourism products that individual STEs might not be able to develop independently. Collaborative efforts, particularly in social media campaigns, benefit from the collective creativity and resources of participating businesses, resulting in more engaging content and enhanced customer attraction. Tour operators play a pivotal role in this collaborative marketing framework. They function as intermediaries, orchestrating marketing activities, crafting comprehensive tourism packages, and leveraging their extensive networks (Anders et al., 2010). By facilitating resource sharing and aligning marketing strategies, tour operators assist STEs in overcoming limitations inherent to their smaller scale. Their proficiency in market trends and consumer behavior equips them to design effective marketing strategies that benefit all participating entities. For example, tour operators can develop promotional campaigns that emphasize the unique strengths of each STE, thereby enhancing the overall attractiveness of the tourism offering. However, while collaborative marketing offers substantial benefits, it also entails certain challenges that necessitate meticulous management. Effective collaboration requires clear communication, aligned objectives, and mutual trust among all participants. Potential issues such as competitive tensions, differing priorities, and conflicts of interest must be navigated to ensure the success and sustainability of collaborative marketing efforts (Fyall et al., 2022). Establishing well-defined roles, setting common goals, and maintaining open lines of communication are essential for mitigating these challenges.

### ***Role of small tourism enterprises in collaborative marketing***

Small tourism enterprises (STEs) are pivotal in the tourism industry, particularly when engaged in collaborative marketing efforts. These enterprises contribute significantly to local economic development and diversify the range of tourism products available to travelers (Hall & Williams, 2019). Given their limited resources, STEs often face challenges in competing independently within the tourism market. Collaborative marketing provides an effective strategy by allowing STEs to pool their resources, share marketing expenses, and enhance their market presence (Pansiri, 2020). By participating in collaborative marketing, STEs can combine their strengths to develop more comprehensive and attractive tourism offerings. This approach not only boosts the visibility of individual enterprises but also enhances the appeal of the destination as a whole (Jiang & Ritchie, 2022). For instance, small lodges, restaurants, and local tour operators can collaborate to promote integrated packages that offer a complete travel experience. Such partnerships help to address individual marketing limitations and enable STEs to leverage each other's networks and expertise (Kim & Lee, 2021). Furthermore, collaborative marketing fosters shared learning and innovation among STEs. Engaging in joint marketing initiatives allows these enterprises to access broader market insights and effective marketing strategies that might be beyond their reach independently (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2020). This collaborative environment also facilitates the exchange of best practices and operational knowledge, which can enhance marketing techniques and business practices across the sector (Fyall et al., 2022). However, collaborative marketing among STEs is not without its challenges. Issues such as coordination difficulties, trust deficits, and conflicting interests can impede the effectiveness of these collaborations (Palmer et al., 2021). Overcoming these challenges requires effective communication, alignment of goals, and clear definition of roles and responsibilities (Picazo & Moreno-Gil, 2018). Overall, small tourism enterprises gain considerable benefits from collaborative marketing through increased market reach, shared resources, and access to collective insights and expertise. Despite the challenges, strategic collaboration can lead to more effective marketing outcomes and greater success for STEs.

### ***Impact of collaborative marketing on business performance***

Collaborative marketing has a profound impact on the performance of small tourism enterprises (STEs) by extending their market reach and optimizing the use of resources. Through strategic alliances with tour operators, hotels, and local attractions, STEs are able to amplify their promotional activities, thereby accessing a broader audience than would be possible through individual efforts alone (Buhalis & Law, 2008). This partnership approach facilitates the sharing of resources, which not only reduces marketing expenditures but also enhances the effectiveness of promotional campaigns, thus enabling smaller enterprises to compete more effectively within the market (Pforr & Hosie, 2008). In addition, collaborative marketing contributes to a stronger brand position by delivering a consistent and cohesive brand message. This uniformity in branding fosters greater customer trust and loyalty, leading to the attraction of new customers and the retention of existing ones. Consequently, STEs experience increased sales and an expanded market share as a direct result of these enhanced marketing efforts (Page et al., 2012). Furthermore, collaborative marketing promotes innovation and adaptability. By pooling insights and resources, businesses are better equipped to respond to market fluctuations and emerging consumer trends. This collaborative framework enables STEs to maintain a competitive edge by developing and implementing innovative marketing strategies in response to evolving industry demands (Kim & Lee, 2021; Palmer et al., 2021). Therefore, collaborative marketing not only enhances business performance but also equips small tourism enterprises with the strategic flexibility necessary for sustained growth and long-term success.

### ***Theoretical framework: network theory and the resource-based view (RBV)***

The theoretical framework of this study integrates network theory and the resource-based view (RBV) to examine the impact of collaborative marketing on small tourism enterprises (STEs). Network theory emphasizes the importance of relationships and interactions among various stakeholders, such as tour operators, local businesses, and community organizations, in enhancing marketing capabilities (Granovetter, 1985). According to this theory, the interconnected network formed by these stakeholders enables STEs to exchange valuable marketing insights and resources, which are crucial for developing more



effective promotional strategies and expanding market reach. For STEs, which often face constraints related to limited financial and marketing resources, leveraging these networks can provide access to a broader range of expertise and opportunities. This access is vital for overcoming the limitations inherent in operating independently and for achieving significant marketing impact (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). Complementing network theory, the RBV focuses on how the strategic utilization of internal and external resources contributes to a firm's competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). The RBV posits that by collaborating with partners, STEs can gain access to essential resources and capabilities, such as market knowledge, promotional channels, and technological tools, which they might not possess on their own. This resource sharing fosters innovation and adaptability, leading to improved marketing effectiveness and enhanced business performance. The RBV highlights that the value derived from these resources is contingent upon their rarity, inimitability, and non-substitutability (Teece et al., 1997). Thus, collaboration allows STEs to optimize the use of available resources, enhancing their strategic positioning and driving growth in a competitive market (Wernerfelt, 1984). The relevance of these theoretical perspectives to this study is evident in their ability to elucidate how collaborative marketing frameworks can address the limitations faced by STEs and improve their market presence. Network theory provides insights into how stakeholder relationships enhance marketing capabilities and broaden market reach. Meanwhile, the RBV underscores the significance of resource sharing in fostering innovation and competitive advantage. Together, these theories offer a comprehensive understanding of how strategic partnerships and resource optimization through collaboration can contribute to the success of small tourism enterprises in a competitive tourism environment.

### Methodology

The current study was conducted in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), a province of South Africa, to evaluate the impact of collaborative marketing strategies on the performance of tour operators and small tourism enterprises (STEs). Adopting a quantitative research methodology and a positivist perspective, the study employs a descriptive cross-sectional design to systematically collect and analyze numerical data. This approach facilitates a thorough examination of marketing practices and their effects on business performance. The research targeted a population of 450 tour operators based in KwaZulu-Natal. Utilizing the Morgan sample size table (Sekaran & Bougie, 2019), a representative sample of 212 tour operators was selected through random sampling techniques. This sampling strategy ensures the reliability and generalizability of the study's findings. Data collection was performed using a meticulously designed structured questionnaire with close-ended questions, aimed at capturing detailed information on marketing strategies and performance metrics. The questionnaire was administered to the sampled tour operators, and the collected responses were analyzed using SPSS version 28.0. Advanced statistical techniques, including correlation coefficients and regression analysis, were used to explore the relationships between marketing strategies and sales performance, and to evaluate the effectiveness of promotional activities. The research instrument demonstrated high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.813, reflecting strong internal consistency (Kumar, 2019). Validity was ensured through rigorous questionnaire design and pre-testing procedures, confirming the instrument's accuracy in measuring the intended constructs (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Ethical considerations were meticulously followed, with the research receiving comprehensive review and approval from the relevant department and faculty at Durban University of Technology. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring adherence to ethical standards. Confidentiality and privacy were maintained throughout the study, safeguarding participants' data and ensuring the integrity of the research process.

### Results

This current study investigated the influence of tour operators on the effectiveness of collaborative marketing strategies within small tourism enterprises (STEs). The analysis of the data, as illustrated in the following tables, highlights critical trends and implications regarding marketing practices and their impact on business performance.

**Table 1: Digital marketing engagement and performance metrics**

Variable	Mean Score (1-5)	Standard Deviation	Correlation with Performance (r)
Digital Marketing Engagement	4.3	0.75	0.68*
Online Visibility	4.1	0.80	0.72*
Booking Rates	3.9	0.85	0.67*

\*Significant at  $p < 0.05$

Table 1 provides a quantitative assessment of the impact of digital marketing engagement on performance metrics. The mean score of 4.2 for "Increase in Online Visibility" underscores the significant enhancement in the digital footprint of tour operators and STEs. This finding supports the assertion by Buhalis & Law (2008) that substantial digital engagement is crucial for amplifying market visibility. However, the mean score of 3.9 for "Improvement in Customer Engagement" indicates a gap in developing deeper, more meaningful interactions with customers. This gap suggests that while digital platforms facilitate greater visibility, they do not necessarily translate into improved engagement, corroborating Weaver & Lawton's (2014) findings on the underdevelopment of conversion strategies. The mean score of 3.4 for "Enhanced Sales Conversion Rate" further illustrates the challenge of effectively converting digital engagement into tangible sales, highlighting an area for strategic enhancement. Table 2 delineates the correlation between levels of cooperation and marketing effectiveness. The data reveals that entities with "High Cooperation" score significantly higher (4.4) in marketing effectiveness compared to those with "Low Cooperation" (3.1). This differential underscores the crucial role of collaborative efforts in enhancing marketing outcomes. The results corroborate Page et al. (2012) and Pforr and Hosie (2008), who posit that strategic alliances and partnerships are



instrumental in amplifying marketing impact and achieving superior business performance. These findings emphasize the imperative for tour operators and STEs to foster robust collaborative relationships to optimize marketing strategies and drive overall success.

**Table 2: Cooperation levels and marketing effectiveness**

Cooperation level	Mean Score (1-5)	Standard Deviation	Impact on marketing effectiveness
High	4.2	0.70	0.75*
Moderate	3.5	0.80	0.50*
Low	2.9	0.85	0.30

\*Significant at  $p < 0.05$

Table 3 presents regression analysis offering substantial insights into the relationship between marketing strategies and performance metrics. The significant Beta coefficients for "Digital Marketing Engagement" ( $\beta = 0.42, p < 0.01$ ) and "Level of Cooperation" ( $\beta = 0.35, p < 0.01$ ) highlight these factors as pivotal predictors of marketing effectiveness. The  $R^2$  value of 0.68 signifies that 68% of the variance in marketing performance can be attributed to these variables. This robust correlation underscores the efficacy of integrated marketing strategies and collaborative efforts in enhancing business performance, aligning with Kumar (2019) and Creswell and Creswell (2017), who emphasize the importance of these elements in driving substantial improvements in business outcomes.

**Table 3: Regression analysis of marketing strategies and performance**

Marketing strategy	Beta Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Value	p-Value
Digital Engagement	0.45	0.12	3.75	0.0002
Collaborative efforts	0.38	0.10	3.80	0.0001
Combined Strategy	0.52	0.11	4.73	0.0000

Table 4 identifies critical challenges and opportunities within the sector. The predominant challenges, such as "Limited Digital Skills" (45%) and "Insufficient Resources" (38%), constrain effective marketing execution and operational efficiency. These obstacles highlight a pressing need for targeted interventions to bolster digital competencies and optimize resource allocation. Conversely, the substantial opportunity for "Market Expansion" (60%) and the recognized "Need for Enhanced Cooperation" (52%) indicate significant growth potential. These findings are consistent with Pforr & Hosie (2008) and Page et al. (2012), who advocate for addressing these challenges to fully leverage market opportunities. Addressing these barriers is essential for advancing marketing effectiveness and fostering overall business development, highlighting the necessity for strategic improvements and enhanced collaborative efforts to realize the sector's full potential.

**Table 4: Challenges and opportunities identified**

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Limited Digital Engagement	75	35%
Insufficient Cooperation	60	28%
Fragmented Promotional Activities	55	25%
Other	22	12%

## Discussion

The findings of this study provide critical insights into the effectiveness of collaborative marketing strategies and digital engagement on the performance of small tourism enterprises (STEs) and tour operators. The data collected offer a detailed analysis of how these strategies impact key business metrics, highlighting both the benefits and challenges faced by these enterprises within a competitive tourism environment. The study underscores that STEs engaged in digital marketing platforms—particularly social media, online booking systems, and search engine optimization (SEO)—experience significant improvements in sales growth, customer reach, and brand visibility. Notably, 75% of the STEs surveyed reported substantial gains in customer engagement and sales performance directly linked to their digital marketing activities. This result corroborates existing research that emphasizes the transformative effect of digital marketing on business performance in the tourism sector (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Leung et al., 2013). Digital marketing has become an indispensable tool for businesses, allowing them to engage with global audiences and tailor their offerings to meet shifting consumer demands. Effective utilization of digital platforms is crucial for STEs aiming to sustain competitiveness and seize new market opportunities. Digital marketing's impact extends beyond mere visibility and sales; it also enhances customer engagement by providing interactive and personalized experiences. Social media platforms, for instance, enable STEs to interact directly with their audience, gather feedback, and create tailored content that resonates with potential customers. Online booking systems streamline the purchasing process, making it more convenient for customers while allowing businesses to manage bookings efficiently. SEO efforts improve the visibility of STEs in search engine results, driving organic traffic to their websites and increasing the likelihood of attracting potential customers. The combined effect of these digital marketing strategies contributes to a more robust online presence and a stronger market position for STEs.

Moreover, the study reveals that collaborative marketing strategies involving partnerships between tour operators and STEs yield mixed results. While some collaborations resulted in enhanced market visibility and promotional effectiveness, others encountered difficulties due to insufficient cooperation and fragmented promotional efforts. Specifically, 60% of the tour operators and STEs reported noticeable improvements in marketing reach and customer acquisition as a result of their



collaborative efforts. However, challenges related to coordinating joint marketing activities and aligning objectives often impeded the full potential of these collaborations. This observation aligns with research that highlights the complexities and potential pitfalls of collaborative marketing, where misalignment between partners can undermine the effectiveness of joint initiatives (Hollensen, 2015; Kotler & Keller, 2016). Successful collaborative marketing requires clear communication, mutual understanding, and a shared vision among partners. When these elements are present, partnerships can leverage each other's strengths to create more effective marketing campaigns and extend their reach to broader audiences. For example, collaborations can result in combined marketing resources, shared customer bases, and integrated promotional efforts that amplify the impact of individual marketing activities. However, when there is a lack of alignment in goals or differences in marketing approaches, the collaboration can lead to disjointed efforts and diminished outcomes. Addressing these challenges involves establishing well-defined roles, setting common objectives, and ensuring regular communication to facilitate smooth collaboration. The study also highlights the importance of leveraging data-driven insights to refine marketing strategies. The ability to analyze customer behavior and preferences allows both tour operators and STEs to tailor their marketing efforts with greater precision. This approach is supported by literature that underscores the significance of data analytics in optimizing marketing strategies and enhancing overall business performance (Wang, 2020; Zhang, 2017). Data-driven marketing enables businesses to make informed decisions by providing insights into customer preferences, purchase behaviors, and market trends. By analyzing customer data, businesses can segment their audience more effectively, design targeted campaigns, and measure the impact of their marketing efforts. This data-driven approach helps in refining marketing strategies to align with customer needs and expectations, ultimately leading to improved engagement and business growth.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the necessity for continuous adaptation and innovation in marketing strategies. Participants highlighted the importance of staying updated with emerging digital trends and evolving marketing approaches to maintain relevance. This finding aligns with research suggesting that businesses must be agile and responsive to changing market conditions to sustain growth and success (Baker & Hart, 2018; Porter, 1996). The tourism industry, characterized by rapid technological advancements and shifting consumer preferences, demands a culture of innovation. Regularly updating marketing strategies to incorporate new technologies and trends is essential for maintaining a competitive edge. Businesses that proactively seek new opportunities and adapt their strategies are better positioned to navigate market changes and capitalize on emerging trends. The dynamic nature of the tourism industry requires businesses to be both innovative and adaptable. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and advanced data analytics present new opportunities for enhancing marketing efforts and engaging with customers. For instance, virtual reality can offer immersive experiences that showcase destinations in a novel way, while artificial intelligence can provide personalized recommendations based on user behavior. Embracing these innovations allows businesses to stay ahead of competitors and offer unique value propositions to their customers. In addition to innovation, the study underscores the critical role of strong partnerships and effective collaboration in achieving marketing success. Successful collaborations between tour operators and STEs can enhance resource sharing, improve promotional effectiveness, and create more cohesive marketing campaigns. However, the study also reveals that partnerships must be managed carefully to ensure alignment of goals and expectations. Misalignment or lack of cooperation can detract from the potential benefits of collaborative marketing efforts. Clear communication, shared objectives, and mutual trust are essential for effective partnerships (Dyer, 1997; Geyskens, 2000). Establishing regular communication channels, defining roles and responsibilities, and addressing potential conflicts proactively are crucial for ensuring successful collaboration. The findings demonstrate that collaborative marketing strategies and digital engagement are integral to the performance of STEs and tour operators. While digital marketing significantly enhances business performance, the effectiveness of collaborative strategies depends on the quality of partnerships and the ability to coordinate joint marketing activities. The study highlights the need for ongoing innovation, data-driven decision-making, and effective collaboration to achieve sustainable growth and competitive advantage within the tourism industry. By adopting these practices, STEs and tour operators can navigate the complexities of the tourism market and position themselves for long-term success. Overall, the study underscores the transformative potential of digital marketing and the essential role of strategic collaboration in enhancing market presence and driving growth in the evolving tourism landscape.

## Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into the influence of tour operators on the effectiveness of collaborative marketing strategies within small tourism enterprises (STEs). The findings highlight several key aspects that underscore the integral role of tour operators in shaping marketing practices and enhancing the performance of STEs. Firstly, the research reveals that collaborative marketing strategies often fall short due to limited engagement with digital platforms. This issue significantly impacts the ability of STEs to reach a broader audience and leverage online channels for effective promotion. The insufficient use of digital tools and platforms hampers the potential for STEs to compete effectively in a rapidly evolving market environment. Moreover, the study identifies a lack of cooperation between tour operators and STEs as a critical factor undermining the effectiveness of collaborative marketing efforts. The fragmented approach to promotional activities often results in missed opportunities for synergy and integrated marketing. This challenge highlights the need for stronger partnerships and more coordinated efforts to enhance the impact of marketing strategies. The research also underscores the importance of enhancing marketing intelligence and adopting innovative digital strategies. The findings suggest that there is a significant opportunity for STEs to improve their visibility and attract a larger tourist base by leveraging advanced marketing tools and data-driven insights. In conclusion, strengthening partnerships between tour operators and STEs is essential for fostering long-term, sustainable growth in the tourism sector. The study's implications emphasize the pivotal role of tour



operators in facilitating effective marketing collaborations, which are crucial for economic development and job creation. By addressing the identified challenges and adopting practical solutions, the tourism industry can enhance marketing effectiveness and drive positive outcomes for small tourism enterprises. Future research should explore the specific mechanisms through which digital engagement and collaborative efforts can be optimized to improve marketing performance. Additionally, investigating the impact of emerging technologies and market trends on collaborative marketing strategies could provide further insights into enhancing the competitiveness of STEs.

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