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Assessing Visitors' Perspectives on Visitor Information Exchange Centres in the Digital Age: A Case Study of Tanzania's Northern Tourism Circuit

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Abstract

For decades, Visitor Information Exchange Centres (VIECs) have played a crucial role in facilitating access to destinations and in ensuring a smooth experience for visitors. Traditionally, these centres have provided information to visitors prior to their exploration of destinations' attractions. However, some studies argue that the rise of digital technology, particularly the invention of new communication infrastructures, the internet, and other web-based platforms, has diminished the traditional role of VIECs. To address this concern, this study involved 230 visitors to VIECs between June 2023 and August 2024 in Tanzania's Northern Tourism Circuit to assess their perspectives on the relevance of VIECs in the digital era. The study also assessed visitors' motivations and opinions on how to improve the competitiveness of these centres. The findings confirm a significant shift from using traditional VIECs as sources of information to relying on digital platforms. The majority of international visitors were particularly motivated by a few aspects of VIECs, such as cultural interactions, gaining knowledge about destinations, and exploring local lifestyles through multimedia content. However, a substantial number of respondents had no strong opinions, while the majority still considered traditional VIECs relevant. The study recommends further research to improve the competitiveness of VIECs.

Keywords: Visitors information exchange centres, digital era, tourism, Tanzania

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Introduction

Tourism has become an information-intensive activity that helps in utilising various kinds of information to facilitate communication between supply and demand (D'Ambra & Mistilis, 2010). Information search is one of the critical aspects of tourism that visitors conduct before, during, and after their journey (D'Ambra & Mistilis, 2010). Before travelling, visitors seek information to evaluate a destination's attributes, including making comparisons of destinations' attractions, activities, accessibility, accommodation and amenities, and use such information to make decisions on their trips. At this stage, the gathered information provides insights into which attributes of the destination align with personal needs and expected experience. Online platforms are considered to be the most useful sources of information at this stage. Studies indicate that a destination that aligns well with visitors' needs is mostly chosen (Karl et al., 2015). This is the destination that appears superior in delivering positive experiences and satisfaction when compared to other destinations. Likewise, visitors use local sources to search for information during their arrival at destinations to confirm the insights gained from online sources. At this stage, on-site destination sources become useful. The information search is also valuable after the trip for visitors to evaluate the experience and satisfaction gained during their trip, to plan for repeat visitation, or to share the experience with other potential visitors. In general, the type of information gathered at each stage provides visitors with valuable inputs that influence current and future travel decisions. Visitor Information Exchange Centres (VIECs) have traditionally facilitated information exchange between destination marketers and visitors for many decades. According to Richter (2022), VIECs are often the first place at a destination that the visitors consult during their vacations, creating a first impression of the destination's attractions, amenities, accessibility, accommodations, and other activities. According to Araña et al. (2016), a VIEC is a designated facility supposedly accessible to all people and operated by local staff to provide free information that increases visitors' understanding of the destination's products, services, and regulations. Other researchers (e.g. Draper, 2018; Lyu & Lee, 2015; Servidio et al., 2009) regard VIECs as tourism facilities designed to facilitate the dissemination of information about a destination to visitors at local levels. The visitors who use VIECs before exploring attractions usually benefit from first-hand information and face-to-face conversations with service providers which are believed to improve their experience (Amalia & Hanika, 2021; Draper, 2018; Singh & Munjal, 2021). Visitors prefer face-to-face conversations because they seek accurate and reliable information about the destination to be visited, and VIECs are viewed as trusted sources (Araña et al., 2016; Draper, 2018; Tlabela & Douglas, 2022). Studies have also shown that VIECs facilitate social and cultural exchange and mutual learning, making them valuable platforms for promoting social interactions (Tlabela et al., 2022; Tlabela & Douglas, 2022). Additionally, VIECs have often been used to promote local trade by being centres for selling locally-made products (Tlabela et al., 2022: 1787). As noted by Tlabela and Douglas (2022), VIECs offer visitors "an opportunity to learn about things which they might not have been aware of before travelling to destination or en-route to it". Due to these benefits, the sustainability of VIECs is viewed as critical.

However, in today's world, where digital technology dominates information exchange, various researchers have noted a significant shift from the traditional use of VIECs to digital platforms. Digital sources, such as web-based platforms, social media, online social networks, online sales channels, and online bookings, are preferred because they are cheap, easily accessible, and provide prompt results (Kim, 2019). The researchers acknowledge that digitalisation has increased the demand

and supply of tourism products in recent decades (Vilcina & Bormane, 2022). As a result, many studies argue that the growing use of digital technologies has led to steady growth, greater profitability, and increased competitiveness of the tourism industry, making it more resilient to challenges (Draper, 2018; Fairer-Wessels, 2014; Banescu et al., 2021). For example, access to information about a destination's security status has also been made easier through digital technologies. In nature-based destinations, digitalisation has also promoted tourism activities tailored toward environmental education and ecological conservation by providing rules and regulations. In 2015, a survey indicated that 69% of European consumers purchased tourism products using digital platforms (Draper, 2018). The Northern Tourism Circuit (NTC) is one of the key tourism hotspots in Tanzania, attracting numerous visitors and contributing significantly to national GDP and international trade. Both leisure and business visitors travelling to Tanzania frequently explore the area's unique attractions. Therefore, a reliable source of information in the area is important for enhancing visitors' experiences, satisfaction, and loyalty. However, limited studies explore visitors' perception, particularly in Tanzania, regarding the relevance of VIECs in an era dominated by digital technology. To address this gap, an exploratory scoping study was conducted in the NTC to assess the relevance of VIECs in the digital era by exploring visitor motivations, perceived service quality, overall significance, and suggestions for improvement.

Literature review

Historical and evolution of VIECs

A few authors in the literature provide the historical foundations and evolutions of VIECs. According to Beldona et al. (2003), Ford and Peeper (2008), Kouloulas (2006), and Lee et al. (2016)VIECs have evolved, dating back to February 1896 in Detroit, United States of America (USA). At that particular time, VIECs were known as Conventions and Visitors Bureaus (CVBs) established to market tourist destinations in the USA (Beldona et al., 2003). As tourism performance improved globally in the 20th century, many destinations, particularly in Oceania and Europe, recognised the important role played by CVBs and adopted them (Ford & Peeper, 2008). Over time, CVBs were rebranded as Tourist Information Centres (TICs), Visitor Information Centres (VICs), or Visitor Information Exchange Centres, the concepts used interchangeably to date.

Theoretical foundations

Studies have shown that in tourism, consumer behaviour plays a key role in the demand and supply of tourism products. Consequently, consumer behaviour theory has become a foundation for studying visitor preferences and supply management (Moutinho et al., 2011). This theory provides robust models that explain how personal factors interact with destination or product attributes to influence purchasing decisions. Among the widely studied consumer behaviour models include the Howard and Sheth Model (Sheth, 2011), the Nicosia Model of Consumer Behaviour, the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell Model (Tešić & Bogetić, 2022), the Solomon Model of the Comparison Process (Prasad & Jha, 2014), the Reasoned Action Model, and the Planned Behaviour Model (Hagger, 2019). The practical applications of these models have led to the creation of a service quality model proposed by Grönroos (1984) and improved by Parasuraman et al. (1985) to accommodate a wide range of quality aspects. The service quality model provides a checklist of issues that consumers use to evaluate a product (Rahman et al., 2012). Some of these issues include the willingness and readiness of staff supplying the product to support a buyer, service accessibility and diversity, staff competencies, and staff politeness (Yarimoglu, 2014). A key issue applicable to all these models is the importance of information exchange between buyers and sellers. From a tourism perspective, information exchange helps visitors to uncover details of the destinations, specific products, and seller attributes, which in turn influence visitors' attitudes, preferences, and intentions to visit destinations, purchase the products, and participate in tourism activities (Jisana, 2014; Sotiriadis, 2020). All these theories emphasise the importance of reliable information sources in helping buyers to make informed decisions throughout the processes of buying, consuming, disposing of, and making future purchases (Jisana, 2014). Based on these theories, researchers have concluded that purchasing tourism products is often a subjective action driven by personal expectations and facilitated by the availability of relevant information (Krarup & Russell, 2005; Thøgersen, 2005). VIECs, therefore, serve as essential facilities that facilitate informed decisions by providing consumers with relevant information from the supply side before they make their vacation choices (Iannaccone et al., 2024). Overall, these theoretical insights help managers understand visitors' purchasing behaviours, enabling them to develop strategies that improve the design and functioning of VIECs and destination competitiveness (Araña et al., 2016).

VIECs in the digital era and the challenge ahead

Various researchers agree that the introduction and the growth of digital technologies in recent decades has caused many visitors to shift from using VIECs as main sources of information to digital sources (Lyu & Lee, 2015; Richter, 2022). According to Richter (2022), most of the traditional functions of VIECs, which include distributing printed materials such brochures, flyers, destination maps, books, and local newspapers or magazines, seem to be redundant because, with digital media, such kind of information can be searched easily and such digital media can provide prompt results. These researchers argue that a person can search and access destination information almost anywhere within a short time. The researchers see this shift as a serious setback to VIECs. However, consumer studies highlight that destinations often encompass complex attributes that cannot be fully conveyed through online media (Tlabela & Douglas, 2022). For instance, at destinations, visitors seek experiences facilitated by meaningful interactions with local service providers and the availability of novel services to facilitate experiences beyond expectations (Araña et al., 2016). The studies argue further that while online content may partially offer these elements, on-site information sources may reveal a broader range of opportunities to further improve these experiences and boost visitor

satisfaction (Draper, 2018). According to Richter (2022), for VIECs to exist they have the potential to adapt to new challenges by assuming new functions or modernise the existing ones to suit new visitors' needs. However, a few studies have explored visitors' opinions on the potential for VIECs to transform and remain competitive.

Rethinking VIECs in the digital era

Various researchers argue that VIECs must adapt to digital challenges to remain competitive. To facilitate this adaptation, it is essential to explore different perspectives on the evolving needs of visitors and how VIECs can address these needs to meet new challenges. As the literature suggests, visitors are drawn to a place by attractions, concluding that "without attractions, there is no tourism" (Gunn, 2014: 24). In contrast, Lew (1987) argued that "without tourism, there are no attractions" (p. 554). Gunn's view is based on the notion that visitors follow existing attractions, while Lew suggests that existing tourism activities can trigger the discovery or formation of new attractions as visitors' interests continue to evolve. According to Benur & Bramwell (2015), tourist attraction is anything that stimulates visitors' interest to see, touch, or experience something new. Ngwira & Kankhuni (2018) add that the image of a place, or anything that popularises that place, can act as an attraction that draws visitors. According to Ngwira & Kankhuni (2018), any physical or cultural element of a place that triggers visitors' curiosity and ultimately satisfies their needs is considered a visitor attraction. Given these perspectives, VIECs can remain competitive by creating new goods and services that appeal to modern visitors rather than merely serving as information providers. On the other hand, some researchers propose that VIECs can adapt by shifting their focus from purely providing information to creating new experiences. Others advocate for a blended approach, where VIECs may function both as information providers and experience facilitators (Bănescu et al., 2021). According to the researchers (e.g. Bănescu et al., 2021; Pine & Gilmore, 2013), visitors do not merely purchase goods or services; they seek memorable experiences facilitated through a complexity of novel activities, products or services. As a result, the concept of "experience" has emerged as a central theme across all tourism activities (Neuhofer, et al., 2014; Pine & Gilmore, 2013). According to researchers (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Hoarau & Kline, 2015), the experience is shaped not only by service providers and their customers but also by the broader social and physical environment in which it is created. It can emerge at any point within the service chain, even in moments outside the direct control of destination management organisations (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015). Luo et al. (2021) argue that people go on vacations because they desire pleasurable experiences. Thus, researchers suggest that to stay competitive, VIECs must become an integral part of the visitor experience at the destination or become an attraction by themselves that creates memorable experiences beyond visitors' expectations. Visitor experience is described as an intangible and dynamic phenomenon, heavily influenced by personal feelings and subjective judgments (Andrades & Dimanche, 2014; Tlabela & Douglas, 2022). Cutler & Carmichael (2010) state that people seek memorable experiences facilitated through interactive behaviours which may occur if there are face-to-face or direct conversations. Consequently, Andrades & Dimanche (2014) emphasise the importance of co-creating such experiences with visitors and local communities be actively involved from the outset. Arana et al. (2016) further suggest that to maximise VIECs' effectiveness in the digital era, any attempt to improve them should be tailored to visitors' preferences. Thus, gathering visitors' views to understand their motivations and preferences for improvements is essential for redesigning VIECs in the digital period.

Methodology

This survey was conducted between June 2023 and August 2024 in the Northern Tourism Circuit (NTC) of Tanzania (see Figure 1).

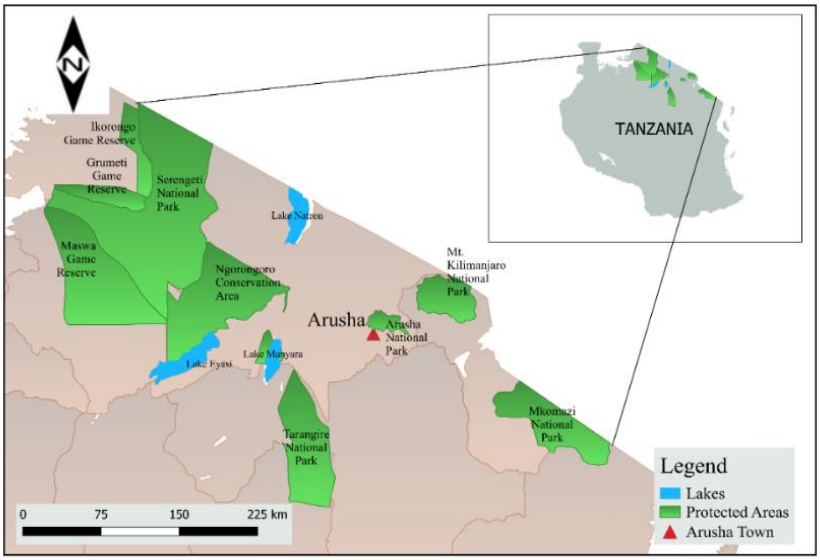

Figure 1: The Map of Tanzania's Northern Tourism Circuit

The circuit is one of the tourism hotspots in Tanzania which encompasses the country's most popular Protected Areas (PAs), including the Serengeti National Park (SENAPA), Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA), Mount Kilimanjaro National Park (KINAPA), Lake Manyara National Park (LMNP), Tarangire National Park (TNP), Arusha National Park (ANAPA), and Mkomazi National Park (formerly Mkomazi Game Reserve). Geographically, each PA is distinct, except NCA and SENAPA, which are interconnected and share ecosystems. The coordinates for each park are as follows: SENAPA at 2°16′45″S, 34°47′48″E; NCA at 3°12′36″S, 37°27′36″E; KINAPA at 3°04′S, 37°22′E; LMNP at 3°30′0.00″S, 35°49′58.80″E; TNP at 3°50′S, 36°0′E; ANAPA at 3°15′S, 36°50′E; and Mkomazi at 4°17′58″S, 38°23′22″E. Other notable attractions include Ikorongo Game Reserve, Grumeti Game Reserve, and Maswa Game Reserve. Additionally, the area features several water bodies, such as Lake Natron which is famous for having high population of flamingos, and Lake Eyasi and Lake Manyara, which contribute to the visitor experience. Moreover, the existence of various ethnic groups increases the area's attractiveness through cultural tourism or community-based tourism. In this area, various forms of tourism are practised, including nature-based tourism, ecotourism, mountain climbing, and cultural tourism. Wildlife viewing or game driving are primarily the dominant tourism activities in PAs, followed by climbing the famous Mount Kilimanjaro. Other mountains such as Meru and other ranges such as Pare and Usambara, which are part of the Eastern Arc Mountain ranges, are popular for hiking lovers. The map showing NTC and its popular attractions is presented in Figure 1.

This study employed a cross-sectional design, using both qualitative and quantitative data. The data was gathered at a single point in time through a questionnaire survey. The survey involved a total of 230 respondents, including 160 international visitors and 70 domestic visitors. Respondents were selected using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling. Purposive sampling ensured gender inclusiveness and age restrictions, including only respondents aged 18 and above who visited the centres. Convenience sampling included respondents in the 18 and above age category who were willing to participate and readily available for the survey. The survey also involved only respondents who visited any of the VIECs in the Northern Circuit. At the outset, the researcher distributed 255 survey questionnaires, but twenty-five questionnaires were not returned, resulting 230 completed questionnaires. Tour drivers assisted in distributing the questionnaires after seeking respondents' consent. The study aimed for an equal number of domestic and international participants. However, domestic visitors were less inclined to participate, resulting in completed surveys from 77 male and 83 female international visitors, and 38 male and 32 female domestic visitors. The survey included closed-ended questions, with some open-ended items, and most of the responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale. The research data was coded and analysed descriptively. Quantitative data was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 27) and R (Version 4.4.0). Descriptive statistics, including percentages, Chi-square (χ^2), and p-values, were used to draw inferences from the analysed data. Similarly, the qualitative data was analysed thematically using percentages of responses based on idea convergence and respondent frequencies.

Results

The analysis focused on exploring the motivations of visitors to VIECs, examining their perceptions of the quality of goods and services offered in the centres, assessing the perceptions of the overall significance of VIECs, and gathering their suggestions for improving VIECs to enhance their competitiveness in the digital era. The discussion of findings is presented in the next sub-sections.

Visitor motivation

The study examined visitor motivations at VIECs, focusing on products that have been traditionally offered. A questionnaire was used to assess visitors' intentions to engage in various activities at the centres. It focused on collecting brochures, flyers, leaflets, magazines, or site maps, as well as purchasing souvenirs and locally crafted products. Additionally, it explored visitors' interest in learning about local culture, watching documentaries about local attractions on television, and participating in tour briefings. A closed-ended question was included to determine whether these activities motivated visitors to visit the centres. Other motivations include service novelty, social interactions, and indoor sports. This exploration aimed to capture visitors' views on whether visiting VIECs is still motivated by the traditional services or if they need something new. Both international and domestic visitors were involved. Based on the results presented in Table 1, the analysis reveals a diversity of preferences among international and domestic visitors. Regarding the collection of brochures and related materials, the findings revealed that the majority of visitors, over 88% of international visitors and over 98% of domestic visitors were not motivated by these aspects, while a small percentage of both international and domestic visitors showed interest in this service. Based on the results, only 11.3% of international visitors and 1.4% of domestic visitors visited different VIECs to collect brochures and related materials. The statistical significance (p = 0.013) suggests that international visitors rely more on these resources to familiarise themselves with local attractions, transportation options, and available activities. In contrast, domestic visitors exhibited less interest in printed informational materials because they may already have prior knowledge of the area.

Concerning map reading, a large proportion of visitors with 85% of international visitors and 98.6 of domestic visitors were not motivated by this service. This is perhaps because most visitors rely on digital materials, tour guides, or companions who are familiar with the destinations. On the contrary, a notable 15% of international visitors were motivated by map reading compared to only 1.4% of domestic visitors (p = 0.002). These findings highlight the fact that international visitors are unfamiliar with local geography; thus, they depend on VIECs for navigation assistance. Domestic visitors, on the other hand, are likely more accustomed to relying on friends' recommendations, or they are already familiar with the destination routes. In respect of cultural learning, there is a stark contrast in cultural learning motivation between domestic and international visitors.

A vast majority of international visitors (88.1%) sought to learn about local cultures in VIECs while only 2.9% of domestic visitors did so. The $\chi 2$ value (4.773) and P-value (0.029) confirm a significant difference, suggesting that cultural exploration is a strong motivator for international visitors. Moreover, the results revealed that receiving destination briefings before departing for field activities was the most universally preferred service in the centres with over 97% of domestic visitors and 98% of international visitors favouring this service. Additionally, the research examined the influence of multimedia content or watching TV documentaries on wildlife and domestic socio-economic activities as a motivation to visit VIECs. Overall, a large proportion of respondents reported being motivated by multimedia content or documentaries before they visited a destination. Among them, all domestic visitors (100%) favoured multimedia or TV documentaries as a motivational factor while 96.3% of international visitors had done the same, with only 3.8% stating otherwise. However, respondents reported that although this is a motivating factor, these modern services are lacking in most of the visited VIECs. They also noted that even in VIECs that offered TV shows, the screen sizes were very small, limiting visitors' comfortability and watching experience. Additionally, they reported that some PAs lacked VIECs altogether. Statistical analysis ($\chi^2 = 2.695$, $p = 0.101$) indicates that the difference between domestic and international visitors is not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). This suggests that wildlife documentaries are a common motivational factor across both groups, with no strong variation based on visitor origin.

Table 1: Visitor motivations for VIECs

Motivation		Total	Country origin		Test Statistics	
			Domestic	International	$\chi 2$	Value
Collecting brochures, flyers and maps	No	211(91.7%)	69(98.6%)	142(88.8%)		
	Yes	19(8.3%)	1(1.4%)	18(11.3%)	6.198	0.013
Buying souvenirs and local products	No	197(85.7%)	66(94.3%)	131(81.9%)		
	Yes	33(14.3%)	4(5.7%)	29(18.1%)	6.103	0.013
Learning about local cultures	No	87(37.8%)	68(97.1%)	19(11.9%)		
	Yes	143(62.17%)	2(2.9%)	141(88.1%)	4.773	0.029
Multimedia content or documentaries about destination attractions and local lifestyles	No	6(2.6%)	0(0%)	6(3.8%)		
	Yes	224(97.4%)	70(100%)	154(96.3%)	2.695	0.101
Briefed about destination	No	4(1.7%)	2(2.9%)	2(1.3%)		
	Yes	226(98.3%)	68(97.1%)	158(98.8%)	0.736	0.391
Other (e.g. novelty, social interactions and indoor sports)	No	25(10.9%)	1(1.4%)	24(15%)		
	Yes	205(89.1%)	69(98.6%)	136(85%)	9.258	0.002

Regarding motivation for novelty, social interactions, and indoor sports, a substantial majority (over 89%, $p = 0.002$) of all visitors favoured these aspects. The breakdown shows that 98.6% of domestic visitors and 85% of international visitors favoured these aspects, highlighting strong demand across both groups. This suggests that VIECs should prioritise offering novel, unique, and engaging services that facilitate learning, enjoyable experiences, and social interactions. Visitors explicitly expressed their interest in seeing VIECs evolve into big hubs that can provide such enriching experiences, reinforcing the need for service modernisation and diversification to enhance visitor satisfaction and engagement. However, visitors strongly expressed concerns about the limited space in most of the centres, which restricts these activities, comfort, and the overall visitor experience.

Perceived service quality

To examine the visitors' perceived quality of services in VIECs, the researcher used a Likert scale of 5 points (1 = very bad to 5 = Excellent) for aspects such as availability of information variety, staff friendliness and support, ease of service access, variety of services offered, novelty, and goods or service uniqueness. Results in Table 2 indicate the notable differences in perceptions between international and domestic visitors. Both international and domestic visitors generally rated the variety of information positively. Among international visitors, 75% found the information moderately fair, while 24.4% rated it as good or excellent. Domestic visitors had a slightly lower perception, with 70% rating the information as moderately fair and only 20% considering it good or excellent. However, domestic visitors also had a small percentage (10%) rating the variety of information as bad or very bad, whereas international visitors had almost no negative responses. A significant difference ($p < 0.001$) suggests that international visitors perceived the information variety as better. The implication is that, while most of international visitors found the information as moderately fair to excellent, domestic visitors had a slightly lower perception, with a small percentage rating it as bad or very bad. This difference suggests that some international visitors may find the information more comprehensive and relevant to their needs, while domestic visitors perceive gaps in its variety. This could indicate a need to tailor the information provided to better serve local visitors and those that serve international visitors separately

Table 2: Perceived quality of services currently provided at VIECs

Perceived service quality	Visitor's origin	Frequency (Per cent)					Mean	SD	P Value
		Very bad	Bad	Moderately fair	Good	Excellent			
Variety of information	International	1(0.6%)	0(0%)	120(75%)	25(15.6%)	14(8.8%)	3.65	0.55	
	Domestic	4(5.7%)	3(4.3%)	49(70%)	13(18.6%)	1(1.4%)	3.57	0.84	<0.001
Staff friendliness and support	International	0(0%)	0(0%)	9(5.6%)	55(34.4%)	96(60.0%)	4.42	0.7	
	Domestic	0(0%)	0(0%)	6(8.6%)	26(37.1%)	38(54.3%)	4.46	0.65	0.742
Ease of finding a service	International	2(1.3%)	134(83.8%)	18(11.3%)	6(3.8%)	0(0%)	2.18	0.5	
	Domestic	3(4.3%)	53(75.7%)	10(14.3%)	4(5.7%)	0(0%)	2.21	0.61	0.354
Variety of services	International	41(25.6%)	73(45.6%)	42(26.3%)	4(2.5%)	0(0%)	2.06	0.79	
	Domestic	21(30%)	32(45.7%)	13(18.6%)	4(5.7%)	0(0%)	2.00	0.85	0.393
Goods or service novelty	International	138(86.3%)	22(13.8%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	1.06	0.54	
	Domestic	55(78.6%)	13(18.6%)	2(2.9%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	1.03	0.21	0.317
Goods or Service uniqueness	International	139(86.9%)	20(12.5%)	1(0.6%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	1.07	0.54	
	Domestic	58(82.85%)	10(14.3%)	2(2.9%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	1.09	0.22	0.306

In terms of staff friendliness and support, both visitor groups rated staff friendliness and support highly, though with no significant difference ($p = 0.742$). Among international visitors, 94.4% rated staff friendliness and support as good or excellent, with 60% giving an excellent rating. Domestic visitors had similar positive perceptions, with 91.4% rating staff support as good or excellent. Notably, there were no negative ratings as very bad or bad in either group. These findings indicate that staff performance in terms of customer care is high for both groups. Staff friendliness and support suggest a key strength of VIECs as both groups appreciated them. The positive perceptions highlight the effectiveness of VIEC staff in delivering customer service, which is crucial in enhancing visitor experiences and destination marketing. Concerning service access, most international and domestic visitors found it difficult to locate services within VIECs, and there was no significant difference ($p = 0.354$) between international and domestic visitors. This is probably due to limited spaces in most VIECs. This is shown by the majority of the respondents where over 85% and 80% of international and domestic visitors respectively rated it as very bad or bad. Very few respondents rated this aspect as good, and none rated it as excellent. The slightly better perception among domestic visitors could suggest that they are somewhat more familiar with local service structures, but overall, the difficulty in navigating services is a major issue for both groups. The findings highlight accessibility challenges that may negatively impact the visitor experience. Additionally, visitors expressed concerns about the lack of modern facilities in most of the visited VIECs, highlighting it as a barrier to visitor satisfaction and VIECs modernisation.

Similarly, as Table 2 shows, the variety of goods and services was rated poorly by both groups with no significant difference ($p = 0.393$). Among international visitors, 71.2% rated service variety as very bad or bad (Mean = 2.06 and SD = 0.79), while 75.7% of domestic visitors had an even slightly worse perception rating it very bad or bad (Mean = 2.00 and SD = 0.85). Only a small fraction of visitors found the variety of services to be good, and none rated it as excellent. These findings suggest that VIECs offer limited service options that fail to meet diverse visitor needs. Additionally, service novelty had the most negative ratings, with 86.3% of international visitors (Mean = 1.06 and SD = 0.54) and 78.6% of domestic visitors considering it very bad (Mean =1.07 and SD = 0.54). No a single respondent who rated this aspect as good or excellent, which is an indication that visitors perceive VIECs as lacking fresh, innovative, or unique services. The lack of significant differences ($p > 0.05$) may suggest that both groups view VIECs offerings as outdated and undifferentiated. Similar to service novelty, service uniqueness was also rated very poor, with 86.9% of international visitors and 82.85% of domestic visitors considering it very bad. Like service novelty, no respondents rated service uniqueness as good or excellent. The implication that can be suggested from these findings is that VIECs are perceived as offering generic and predictable experiences. To differentiate themselves from other information sources (such as online platforms), VIECs should introduce exclusive services, localised experiences, and culturally distinctive elements that differentiate them.

Perceptions on overall significance

Table 3 presents findings on the perceived overall significance of Visitor Information Exchange Centres (VIECs) according to respondents. The analysis focuses on the perceived contribution of VIECs to visitors' overall experience, trip satisfaction, and general relevance in the digital age. The findings reveal that the majority of respondents still view VIECs as valuable resources for travellers, despite the availability of digital alternatives. Both international and domestic visitors expressed strong agreement on the significance of VIECs, with only minimal differences in perceptions. When asked whether the services received at VIECs have improved their overall experiences, most respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. Among international visitors, 61.9% demonstrated a slightly stronger positive perception compared to 57.2% of domestic visitors. However, a considerable proportion of visitors remained unsure about whether the services offered had any impact on their overall experiences, as 38.1% of international visitors and 42.9% of domestic visitors expressed this as uncertainty. This phenomenon suggests that while VIECs contribute positively to visitor experience, their impact may not always be immediately recognised or valued by all visitors, possibly due to varying levels of engagement with the services offered and personal subjectivity. Tourist satisfaction is a key measure of the effectiveness of tourism services, and the results indicate that VIECs play a substantial role in enhancing trip satisfaction for many travellers. Among international visitors, 73.1% agreed that VIECs services contributed to their satisfaction, with 44.4% expressing strong agreement. Domestic visitors reported even higher satisfaction levels, with 81.4% agreeing or strongly agreeing which indicates that local visitors may find services offered in VIECs particularly beneficial in meeting their travel needs. Nonetheless, 26.9% of international and 18.6% of domestic respondents were unsure about the significance of VIECs in their overall satisfaction. This uncertainty highlights the need for improved service visibility and better communication of the benefits VIECs provide to visitors.

Table 3: Visitors' opinions on the overall significance of VIECs

Statement	Visitors' origin	Frequency (Per cent)					Mean	SD
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree		
The services and products you received improved your overall experience.	International	0(0%)	0(0%)	61(38.1%)	85(53.1%)	14(8.8%)	3.71	0.62
	Domestic	0(0%)	0(0%)	30(42.9%)	31(44.3%)	9(12.9%)	3.7	0.69
The services you received in VIECs contributed to the overall satisfaction of your trip.	International	0(0%)	0(0%)	43(26.9%)	46(28.7%)	71(44.4%)	4.18	0.83
	Domestic	0(0%)	0(0%)	13(18.6%)	24(34.3%)	33(47.1%)	4.29	0.76
Overall, VIECs are still relevant sources of information in the digital age.	International	0(0%)	0(0%)	37(23.1%)	45(28.1%)	78(48.8%)	4.26	0.81
	Domestic	0(0%)	0(0%)	10(14.3%)	26(37.1%)	34(48.6%)	4.34	0.72

Despite the widespread use of digital information, the findings suggest that VIECs remain relevant for both international and domestic visitors. A significant majority of international visitors (76.9%) and domestic visitors (85.7%) agreed or strongly

agreed that VIECs are still a relevant source of information at travel destinations. This underscores the importance of improving in-person assistance, and the capacity of local expertise in delivering tailored services in VIECs, the factors that digital platforms may not fully replicate. Nevertheless, 23.1% of international visitors and 14.3% of domestic visitors were unsure of the relevance of VIECs to be the most applicable information sources in the digital era. This indicates that while many visitors appreciate the role of VIECs, their long-term significance may depend on how well they adapt their services to ensure all visitors recognise their unique contributions.

Visitors' suggestions on VIECs improvement

The research findings, as presented in Table 4, highlight key suggestions which were captured directly from visitors to enhance the competitiveness of Visitor Information Exchange Centres (VIECs) in the digital era, with notable differences between international and domestic visitors. The most prominent recommendation is improving product and service novelty, with 53.9% of visitors emphasising its importance. This aspect is particularly significant for international visitors (77.5%) who seek unique and innovative experiences more than domestic visitors (48.6%). Similarly, expanding product and service offerings is another major concern, with 42.2% of visitors supporting it. Also, most of international visitors (60.6%) display a stronger preference for variety compared to domestic visitors (20%) which indicates that the former have higher expectations for novelty. Promoting locally manufactured products is another area of interest, particularly among international visitors (34.4%) compared to domestic visitors (8.6%). This suggests that international visitors value authentic, local souvenirs and products, which could enhance cultural appeal and economic benefits. Additionally, service accessibility within the centres is a key area for improvement suggested by respondents, with 17% of respondents highlighting it to be crucial. Many international visitors (24.4%) find accessibility a more critical aspect than domestic visitors (11.4%), indicating the need for improving navigation within the centres. A smaller but still notable concern is information diversity and updates, with 14.8% of visitors demanding for better and more up-to-date information. More international visitors (21.3%) prioritise this need compared to domestic visitors (7.1%), who suggests the demand for multilingual information, real-time updates, and an improved online services. Community engagement is also suggested, with slightly more international visitors (13.8%) supporting it compared to domestic visitors (11.4%). However, this remains a lower priority for many visitors compared to other areas. Surprisingly, 21.4% of domestic visitors had no specific suggestions compared to only 3.1% of international visitors, possibly because domestic visitors are more aware of many aspects of local community compared to international visitors.

Table 4: Visitors' suggestions for VIECs improvement

Visitor suggestions	Total	International	Domestic
Improve products and service novelty	158(53.9%)	124(77.5%)	34(48.6%)
Expand product and service offerings	111(42.2%)	97(60.6%)	14(20%)
Promote the locally manufactured products	61(23.9%)	55(34.4%)	6(8.6%)
Improve service accessibility	47(17%)	39(24.4%)	8(11.4%)
Improve information diversity and updates	39 (14.8)	34 (21.3)	5(7.1)
Increase local community engagement	30(9.6%)	22(13.8%)	8(11.4%)
No opinions	20(2.2%)	5(3.1)	15(21.4)

Discussion

Aligning the findings with previous studies

This study investigates from visitors' perspectives the factors that motivate tourists to visit Visitor Information Exchange Centres (VIECs) and how the competitiveness of these centres can be maintained in the digital age. Drawing insights from prior research, the study highlights that visitor expectations in the tourism industry have significantly evolved over the past few decades. Modern tourists increasingly seek experiences that exceed their expectations (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011; Pine & Gilmore, 2013). In the Tanzanian context, the findings suggest that visitors desire more than traditional offerings such as wildlife viewing, mountain climbing, and beach tourism. Based on visitors' opinions, VIECs have the potential to play a crucial role in delivering such enriched experiences. However, this potential remains underutilised, as the case study reveals visitors' expectations in Tanzanian VIECs are only partially met. Previous studies have also shown that while traditional functions of VIECs, such as distributing brochures and maps, are being replaced by digital tools, these centres remain relevant if they offer interactive, educational, and immersive experiences (Ispas et al., 2014; Tlabela & Douglas, 2022). This study corroborates those findings, indicating that VIECs are still viewed as vital facilities for cultural learning, destination marketing, and local trading, to list a few. However, challenges persist, where visitors' opinions revealed that there are several essential areas for improving visitor experience with VIECs. These include the strong demand for novel products through innovation and creativity, integration of digital tools with traditional facilities, collaboration with local communities, expanded opportunities for social and cultural interaction, and improved accessibility to a wide range of recreational activities within the centres. The findings strongly support the view that enhancing the competitiveness of VIECs depends on how well these experiential aspects are leveraged.

Starting with novelty through creativity and innovation, the paper emphasises the transformative role of creative thinking in tourism. In doing so, it introduces to the tourism industry the need for adopting alternative ways of producing and delivering tourism products in the centres. It also stimulates innovation research and its application in tourism and policy formulation. This observation aligns with previous research that emphasises the role of innovation in production processes,

service delivery, knowledge and technology use, and environmentally friendly practices (Aldebert et al., 2011; Divisekera & Nguyen, 2018; Musoga et al., 2021; Pikkemaat et al., 2019). Concerning digital tools, in this study, visitors expressed a strong preference for integrating VIECs with digital tools, including multimedia content, TV documentaries, and augmented reality (AR) tours. This preference is echoed by previous researchers (such as Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Neuhofer, 2013; Neuhofer et al., 2014; Vilcina & Bormane, 2022), who identified these tools as innovative means of improving visitor experiences. The role of multimedia content, particularly digital storytelling through documentaries and AR, is consistent with research by Gretzel et al. (2015), who highlighted its influence on visitor travel decisions and engagement. This study supports that assertion, with many respondents indicating that multimedia content plays an important role in their choice of areas to visit and in increasing their satisfaction levels, echoing the typology proposed by Neuhofer et al. (2014) on role of technology-enhanced tourism experiences. Furthermore, visitor preference for experiential learning and multimedia-driven content is reflected in the concept of the "experience economy" proposed by Pine & Gilmore (2013), which suggests that modern travelers seek experiences beyond traditional goods and services; the experiences that are memorable and sensory-rich. This is further supported by Sundbo & Sørensen (2013), who examined the evolution of experience-driven economies.

The analysis also identified strong interest among visitors in increasing collaborations with local communities to improve the VIECs experience. This aligns with the findings of Dias et al. (2024), and Graci (2020) who emphasised empowering small businesses and local creatives through cultural immersion and co-creation of tourism products. The findings are also consistent with Richards & Wilson (2006), who argued that partnerships with local communities enhance the authenticity of cultural tourism and improve overall visitor satisfaction. On the other hand, Della Lucia & Trunfio (2018), underscored the importance of adopting approaches that involve local communities in service delivery at cultural heritage sites. Although cultural tourism in the Northern Circuit is currently offered, mainly in Maasai Bomas, Meru Cuisine, and Chagga home gardens and festivals, as an add-on activity for visitors primarily interested in wildlife or mountain climbing, the strong interest in engaging local communities through VIECs suggests that the current cultural practices partially suffice visitors' expectations. It is therefore reasonable to argue that visitors want local experiences crafted from diverse local perspectives. Perhaps the visitors wish to learn more aspects of local aspects from a broader range of communities than they are currently offered, thereby expanding opportunities for social and cultural engagements. Additionally, this study identified challenges related to service diversity and spatial design within VIECs that impede comfortability and service access. These challenges are linked to poor infrastructure and limited technological advancement, which restrict free movement and access within the centres. Limited physical space also reduces comfort and the ability to gain memorable experiences from the activities. This is especially true during periods of high visitor influx. These findings align with Gupta et al. (2024), who emphasised the importance of adopting improved technologies in tourism service delivery to stimulate visitor satisfaction and tourism development in general. Similarly, Anunobi & Okpoko (2024), observed that weak infrastructure continues to impede the performance of tourism support services in regions such as the Niger Delta. In line with this study, expanding the physical space of VIECs would more consistently address these challenges. Regarding service quality, visitors noted the friendliness of frontline staff as critical to their satisfaction. This is a positive recommendation for Tanzania's VIECs which is particularly relevant for destination marketing and branding, as also in Araña et al. (2016), and Hudson & Ritchie (2009). However, low ratings in service accessibility, variety, and novelty reflect longstanding issues in Tanzanian tourism development, often attributed to underinvestment in innovation, creativity, and infrastructure. This concern is also echoed by Musoga et al. (2021), who emphasised the importance of innovation in improving service delivery in the tourism and hospitality industries.

Implications for marketing and policymaking

This study underscores the importance of integrating diverse tourist activities into centralised hubs through VIECs. In doing so, it introduces an alternative tourism product that supports the country's ongoing efforts to diversify tourism offerings in line with the national goal of increasing visitor numbers from 2 million to 5 million. Such integration will not only enhance experiences beyond traditional wildlife and adventure tourism but also has the potential to increase visitors' length of stay, spending, and local economic impact. Given this, the study's findings have practical implications for destination marketing and policymaking. From a marketing perspective, these findings carry significant weight for the country's tourism product development. For instance, Tanzania's 'Tanzania Unforgettable' brand has historically focused on natural and cultural attractions, which may appear to limit visitors from experiencing other aspects of the destination. This suggests that visitors are interested in using the same package tours to explore experiences beyond natural and cultural tourism, with VIECs serving as an appropriate avenue to meet this need. Destination marketers should therefore position VIECs not merely as information providers but as hubs of innovation and immersive experiences. Today's travellers seek more than scenic beauty and due to this phenomenon, they expect authentic, interactive, and personalised experiences. Revamping VIECs to include digital storytelling platforms, augmented and virtual reality features, showcasing locally crafted products, and multilingual services would better align with global tourism trends and evolving consumer preferences. This approach would also help marketers to meet the growing demand for experiences that go beyond traditional wildlife viewing and mountain climbing. In this regard, Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) must strive to deliver tailored-made or personalised experiences that align with the desires of modern travellers. Involving local communities more actively in the process would add value. As Neuhofer, Buhalis, and Ladkin (2014) suggest, the future of tourism lies in co-created products and technology-enhanced service delivery to deliver meaningful experiences. For Tanzania, this implies that VIECs should be rebranded as dynamic, interactive hubs capable of offering both emotional engagement and informational value to better connect with tourists in an increasingly digital tourism landscape. Policymakers should prioritise investments in infrastructure and technological innovation at VIECs,

especially at key entry points and underserved protected areas. The strategic development of flagship VIECs in locations such as Arusha can act as central tourism nodes that support local economies, stimulate cultural tourism, and foster sustainable development. Policies should also promote public-private partnerships and community-based initiatives that enhance the visibility, inclusivity, and local ownership of VIECs. Overall, aligning VIECs with digital and experiential tourism trends will significantly boost Tanzania's tourism competitiveness and ensure that visitor support systems remain relevant in an evolving global tourism landscape.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the evolving role of Tanzania's Visitor Information Exchange Centres (VIECs) in the digital era. While visitors continue to trust VIECs as valuable sources of information, they also show a strong preference for novel and engaging experiences. They believe that introducing innovative services, products, or ideas can further enhance their experience. Given the high percentage of visitors influenced by documentaries and the strong demand for multimedia content, this study considers these media crucial in shaping visitor interests and experiences. By refining service offerings and addressing the expectations of both international and domestic visitors, VIECs can strengthen their role as essential tourism support centres in an increasingly digitalised world. However, significant challenges remain, including inadequate service variety, outdated and limited offerings, and difficulty navigating services due to space constraints within the centres. To enhance the visitors' experience and the competitiveness of VIECs, several key recommendations are proposed. First, VIECs should foster innovation and creativity by introducing unique and modern services that align with evolving visitor expectations. These may include immersive cultural experiences, augmented reality (AR) tours, and interactive digital maps. Second, service accessibility and ease of navigation within the centres should be improved through clear signage, digital kiosks, and mobile app integration. Third, constructing new VIECs in PAs, such as Tarangire and Lake Manyara National Parks, where modern facilities are currently lacking, or establishing a centralised large hub in Arusha or another strategic location in the northern circuit, with integrated goods and services, could facilitate the value, visibility, and competitiveness of VIECs. Along with this, expanding the on-site VIECs located in the entry points of protected areas (PAs) such as Ngorongoro Conservation Area, and Kilimanjaro National Park is necessary to ensure that more spaces, services, and engaging activities are introduced to enhance visitor experience. Fourth, VIECs should diversify their offerings by expanding the range of locally manufactured products and cultural artifacts available for purchase. Finally, promoting collaborations between VIECs, local communities, and digital platforms could enhance their visibility and relevance by bridging in-person and online visitor support.

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher identifies the need for more in-depth studies to address the complex challenges facing VIECs in the context of digital technologies. Further research should focus on digital innovations such as AR and mobile apps, visitor engagement with multimedia, the benefits of integrating local goods and experiences, and comparative analyses with other countries to enhance service delivery. Additionally, the study recommends examining visitor engagement with multimedia content across different demographics to determine the most impactful formats and experience.

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