

## The Evolution of Promotional Marketing Strategies of Tourism Businesses in South Africa - Post Covid-19

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### Abstract

The impact of the lockdown restrictions and travel bans, locally and internationally, have had an immense impact on tourism businesses in South Africa. Several Tourism businesses closed during the lockdown, and those that survived are making a slow recovery. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the promotional strategies used by tourism businesses prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as promotional strategies used during the pandemic. The methodology employed is a secondary data analysis of desktop research. The researcher expands on a former study conducted with tourism businesses based in Durban, South Africa. Results reveal that the tourism industry mostly used traditional promotional strategies prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic had a direct impact on 100 percent of the sample. However, during the pandemic, the tourism sector shifted drastically from traditional promotional strategies to digital strategies. The implications of the study reveal that businesses need to understand how digital marketing tools can be utilised to reach their full potential post-Covid-19. The study stimulates the need for tourism businesses to constantly evaluate and re-evaluate their promotional strategies

**Keywords:** Covid-19; tourism South Africa; digital promotional strategies; promotional strategies; promotions post Covid-19

### Introduction

Tourism in South Africa (S.A), as is the case in the global economy, had been thrown into crisis by the Covid-19 pandemic, putting thousands of businesses and jobs at risk. The priority for the sector is to resume operations as early as it is safe to do so, but re-opening will be the start of a difficult recovery. The situation requires an urgent response and a recognition of the constraints that hamper S.A.'s tourism development (Republic of South Africa, DOT, 2020). Industry experts across the globe have largely admitted that the Covid-19 crisis will leave the global economy in a state not seen since the Great Depression of 1929. Undoubtedly, internationally and locally, the tourism sector has been the biggest casualty of the current crisis. We are still uncertain about the full impact of Covid-19 on the tourism sector, but also more concerning, how long the crisis will take to go away, if at all. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has listed S.A. as one of the top 15 countries being negatively impacted by the near-closure of the international travel industry during the pandemic (Tourism Sector Recovery Plan, 2020). The tourism survey results indicate that the Covid-19 crisis has already significantly devastated the supply side of the tourism sector as a result of the demand collapse in S.A (Republic of South Africa, DOT, 2020).





A business promotional marketing strategy is a key component in reaching the goals and objectives of that company. Indeed, the current pandemic had a major impact on the tourism industry, where traditional promotional marketing strategies (newspapers, print media, radio, flyers, and billboards) could not adapt to this new marketing environment. The Covid-19 pandemic has largely affected the tourism industry, restricting domestic and international travel that emerged during 2019 and rapidly expanding into 2021 (Bama & Nyikana, 2021). Consequently, in South Africa, with new Covid-19 variants that had been identified, such as Delta and Omicron, it had major implications on travel restrictions. The tourism industry was one of the hardest-hit sectors, with the industry being a source of local economic development, generation of employment, and increasing the standard of living. Therefore, this study seeks to evaluate the promotional strategies in the tourism industry in South Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, (1) to understand the promotional strategies used in the tourism industry prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and (2) to identify which promotional marketing strategies had been implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Literature review

### *Promotional marketing strategies*

Developing the right marketing strategies requires a combination of flexibility, adaptability, and discipline that businesses have to follow in order to keep up with the ever-expanding marketing world (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). A marketing strategy is formulated on the basis of the marketing mix, which involves marketing activities such as product, price, place, and promotion, also known as the four Ps that reflect the needs and wants of consumers (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Due to the study being grounded on promotional strategies, the focus will be placed on promotion as one of the four Ps. A product is only as good as its promotion (Biyela, 2018). Marketers promote a good or service to communicate, inform, influence, and persuade customers to purchase their product or service. Businesses can use different methods to promote their businesses, such as using advertising, personal selling, print media, radio, TV advertisements, flyers, and brochures which are referred to as traditional marketing (Kotler & Armstrong, 2019).

Each of these elements of the promotional mix work synergistically to carry an important message to the potential customer base or “target audience” (Du Toit et al., 2011). Venkatesh (2015) however, refers to promotion as being the organised attempt to advance prospects from a state of ignorance then to knowledge and then to preference and conviction, and finally to action (purchase) or a positive behavioural response. Businesses will not be able to move their stock without regular promotions in the current global market where competition is prevalent (Phillips et al., 2015).

The objectives of promotions in business are to increase sales and thereby increase the revenue (Volpe, 2013). The primary focus of the business is to increase turnover and the only way to do this is to sell more products. Hence, the primary goal of promotions is the increase of foot traffic into stores (Volpe, 2013). Although, promotions increases the demand for products and creates more awareness for the brand, it also creates opportunities to up-sell products and generate long-term repeat business (Tuten & Ashley, 2011). Concomitantly, a system to control and measure sales has to be in place to measure the success of a promotion (Cant & Machado, 2011).

Salem et al. (2011) comment that the main purpose of conducting promotions is to create awareness and share product information. The other purpose of promotion is “product positioning” and the control of sales volumes. Many businesses that retail items experience intermittent sales configurations. Therefore, by boosting promotional activities in quiet periods, the retail entity may be able to experience stable sales volumes throughout the year



(Salem et al., 2011). Lusch et al. (2011) believe that, presently, businesses are not in a position to enjoy continued profitability simply by opening up new branches and that growth in profit must occur by increasing same-store sales by means of more promotions. Small to medium businesses are likely to succeed if they make use of a combination of promotional tools, especially in the media, as this will help in increasing sales (Mokhtar & Wan-Ismail, 2012). Promotional strategies can be of the “push” or “pull” variation. A business with a “push” strategy will deliberately “push its product through wholesalers” and retailers, who in turn convince customers to purchase. A business with a “pull” strategy is preferred by customers who order the goods from retailers, who thereafter request the product from merchants (Du Toit et al., 2011). Traditional marketing includes offline marketing such as direct sales and word of mouth. Although traditional marketing has its benefits, there are some shortfalls, such as high promotional and maintenance costs that are higher than costs relating to online marketing, also known as digital marketing (Soriano & Cabanes, 2020).

### ***Digital marketing***

Digital marketing has been gaining momentum in South Africa, with 28.6 million, which amounts to 52%, using the World Wide Web and 15 million utilising social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and others (Mkwizu, 2019). Many businesses are using digital marketing to promote a product or service to attract consumers and create brand awareness through digital marketing as opposed to traditional promotional marketing strategies (Mkwizu, 2019). The advent and growth of the digital age built on the foundation of computing and the Internet has seen the development and adoption of new ways of accessing and assessing consumer trends (Al-Mana & Mirza, 2013). Social Media has quickly become the preferred medium to promote specials online. The tool was initially presented to the world as a form of peer-to-peer communication and yet Social Media is still regarded as the backbone of interactive Internet (Lorenzo-Romero et al., 2014).

This interactive communication has for the first time in the commercial history, put producers of products and services at the back seat of the control pit. Traditional mass communication channels like television, radio, press and even direct channels like mailing and telemarketing have tremendously lost ground in controlling both the medium and content of the commercial process (Al-Mana & Mirza, 2013). Generations Y and Z (“digital natives”) spend considerably more time on SMSs than any of the older generations (“digital immigrants”). The suggested conceptualization provides guidelines for companies to effectively use such communication strategies to motivate young people to engage with their brands on sites such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook (Florenthal, 2019). Social Media has empowered customers; drastically shifting the way people make purchasing decisions; and further severing the supremacy and implementation of the traditional marketer (Kotler et al., 2019). Marketers have become aware of the customer empowerment danger and the power shift to the direction of the consumer. Many potential online shoppers frequently wait for online comments by social media influencers, before taking up an offer to gain first hand experiences of how products or a brand can benefit or harm them (Magno & Cassia, 2018). This electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) has the ability to spread information obtainable by online customers on several review platforms (Al-Mana & Mirza, 2013). WOM has been extensively studied and is recognised as a key influencing factor in consumer decisions (Litterio et al., 2017). Macro Influencers are agents ranging from social media notables with tens of thousands of followers to celebrities with tens of millions of followers (Akram, 2018). They are the main drivers of influencer marketing to share with follower’s first-hand experiences of how a product benefits them (Glucksman, 2017).



## **Tourism**

Tourism includes aspects such as culture, societies, and economic phenomena that involves the travel of individuals to countries that are out of their usual environment due to work or personal purposes and involves the use of promotional marketing to inform, influence, and persuade travellers (Mkwizu, 2019). Nyawo (2020:1146) highlight that “The cultural and natural diversity found in South Africa distinguishes the country’s tourism as a compelling global sector. Adventure tourism, township tourism, beaches, wildlife and safari, city and cultural lifestyles offer high-quality and value for tourists’ money in the country. Due to the tourism sector’s direct and indirect link with other network sectors in the country, the tourism sector’s essential role in the South African economy is substantial”. With the global pandemic of Covid-19, the South Africa tourism industry had to face major challenges and closed most operations based on government restrictions to curb the spread of Covid-19. Due to the outbreak it resulted in restrictions on travel (inter-provincial and international). With the tourism industry having a significant role in the South African economy this had a detrimental impact on many businesses. Dube-Xaba (2021:856) mentions that “In the wake of Covid-19, unprecedented lockdown regulations relating to travel restrictions and social distancing have had a direct and indirect impact on the tourism industry and visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travel in particular”. The arrival of the global pandemic known as Covid-19 had various effects on the marketing discipline as well as the tourism sector (Alshaketheep et al., 2020). Moreover, in South Africa, the tourism industry was one of the hardest-hit sectors during Covid-19. Thus, the need to assess the evolution of promotional marketing strategies that were implemented during the pandemic. Promotional marketing strategies provide insight in respect of how to reach your preferred target market, understanding your competitor’s promotional strategies, as well as a blueprint towards achieving marketing objectives and goals within the business (Alshaketheep et al., 2020). Thus, it is vital to formulate a promotional campaign that is strategic in nature, flexible and adaptable to the marketing environment. Therefore, this study aims to provide insight into the evolution of promotional strategies of tourism businesses in South Africa post-Covid-19.

### ***Types of promotional strategies used in tourism businesses***

Businesses communicate with customers through advertising via print media or Email, sales promotions, creating a pleasant store atmosphere, creating publicity, direct selling, and referrals (Dunne et al., 2013). There are different ways of reaching an audience or market (Zingsheim, 2011). According to the author, the options to reach customers include print media, magazines, digital mediums, online platforms, social media, exhibitions, conferences, video, direct mail, Email, and text-message advertising. Email is as important as ever in an increasingly social world. Email users, in most cases, need an Email address to join a social network (Woker, 2019). The author also states that social networks are the biggest users of Emails as a way to maintain customer engagement and encourage visits, which constitutes approximately two billion users a day. Facebook is the largest Email sender in the world. Businesses currently use Email widely to inform potential customers pertaining to a product or promotional information. Some companies offer coupons that can be downloaded from their websites. The combination of traditional and digital marketing tools can help a business reach a wider target audience and allow more conversions (Pribanci, 2020).

Benefits of digital promotions include an uncomplicated online experience during a visit to a business’s website and has the potential to assist in shaping a confident attitude towards future engagement with tourism businesses (Akram, 2018). Online transacting and digital channels, for example, mobile channels and social media, have changed the business models of retailers (Diaz, 2020). Unlike traditional brick and mortar stores, an online store’s

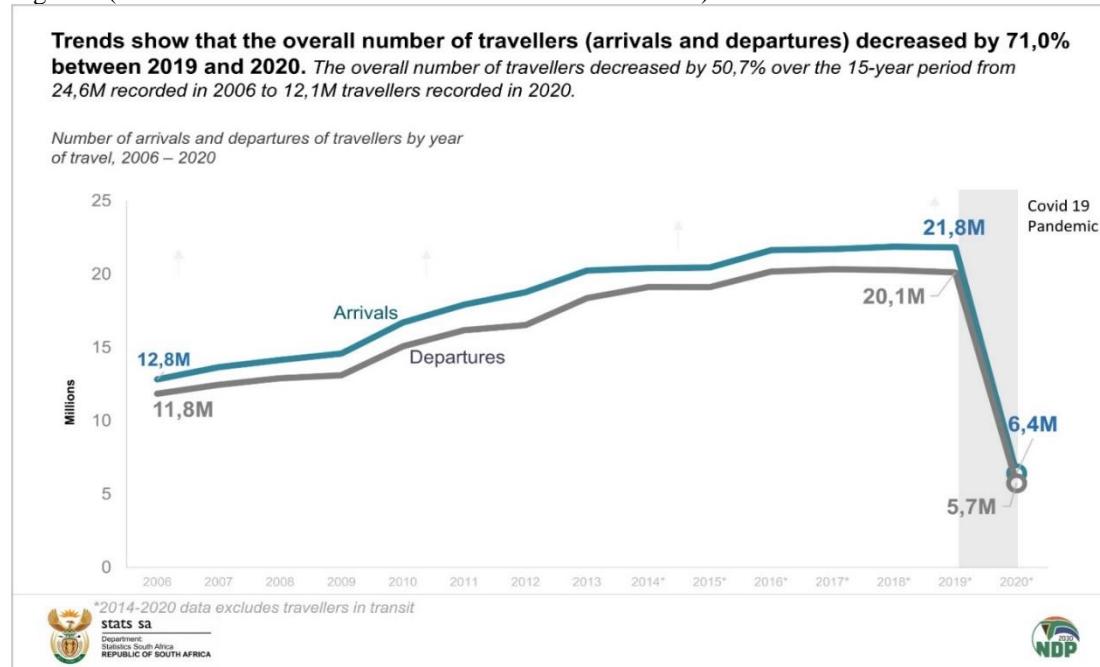


website plays a vital role in establishing a customer's pleasing purchasing experience. Thus, online shopping websites provide an alternate means for convenience in purchasing (Akram, 2018). Social Media Influencers (SMIs) have become important players within the social media domain impacting upon retailers and brand followers (Audrezet et al., 2018). Influencer marketing, a relatively new phenomenon, is demonstrating to be a worthwhile solution for marketers, to establish solid connections and promote products to prospective customers (Kadekova & Holienčinova, 2018). Numerous opinion leaders have turned into influential members of virtual groups and have become a principal source of advice for first time buyers (Casaló et al., 2018).

### **Covid-19 impact on South African tourism businesses**

The tourism industry was negatively impacted amidst the global pandemic that resulted in a drop of 71 percent, which amounts to 15,8 million in 2019 to an estimate of 5 million in 2020 (Statistics South Africa, 2022). The impact is due to the lockdown and travel restrictions that were implemented by the South African government. Figure 1 below shows that the overall number of travellers decreased by 71 percent between 2019 and 2020.

Figure 1 (Number of In-bound and Out-bound Travellers in S.A.)



Source: Statistics South Africa (2022).

The decrease had a major impact on local tourism businesses and their operations. It is vital to understand that the tourism sector is a major contributor to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in South Africa. The sector contributed 3% in 2018, which amounts to 130,1 billion Rand, that led to an increase in employment. In 2020, the decrease resulted in 10,2 million Rand in 2019 and to 2,8 million Rand in 2020. In March 2020, South Africans were informed regarding the measures required to combat the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Measures included travel restrictions both locally and internationally, as well as travel bans on foreign countries deemed high-risk. Level five restrictions had detrimental effects on the travel industry in respect of in-bound and out-bound traveling (Statistics South Africa, 2022). According to Visser & Marais (2021: 1690) "Since the subsector is mostly reliant on international tourists, international travel bans and global lockdowns caused exceptional declines in overall occupancy rates for



accommodation businesses and in turn, steep declines in revenue generation". With the various level restrictions, many tourism businesses in South Africa faced many hardships and would have been forced to make changes pertaining to marketing to consumers as well as their approaches to increase revenue (Mkwizu, 2019). Therefore, it is vital when businesses are making changes to their promotional strategies to consider implementing proper planning methods to ensure the businesses are able to achieve their marketing objectives and goals even in a changing and volatile marketing environment.

### Theoretical framework

The PR Smith's SOSTAC model (Figure 2, below) is adopted in this study as a guide as it involves the planning of marketing strategies. The SOSTAC model was rated as the third most popular model by the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) due to its nature of ease when planning for various marketing activities (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2020). The SOSTAC model is a planning model developed in the 1990s by PR Smith. SOSTAC stands for:

Situation – where are we now?

Objectives – where do we want to be?

Strategy – how do we get there?

Tactics – how exactly do we get there?

Action – what is our plan?

Control – did we get there?

This SOSTAC model, depicted below in Figure 2, is relevant, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, as we will assess the tourism businesses and the promotional strategies that were implemented during the pandemic.

### SOSTAC Model



Figure 2 (PR Smiths SOSTAC Model)

Source: Chaffey (2022).

The model allows businesses to assess the situation by conducting a situational analysis, followed by an analysis of the objectives of the business (where do we want to be?). This leads to the formulation of the strategy, and in this regard, focusing on promotional strategies adopted during the pandemic, as well as the tactics on how we formulate our promotional strategies to reach our objectives. Moreover, what is the action plan? How do we use these promotional strategies in our businesses? And lastly, how did we get there (control); and what measures should be in place for the business to meet the objectives? Thus, this model will be discussed further in the discussion.



## Methodology

### *Research methodology*

The research methodology adopted in this study is desktop research that includes reviews, critiques and analyses of literature based on the topic. Desktop research involves research on existing literature to create new knowledge and insight on the relevant study (Torraco, 2016). Desktop research is the review of previous research findings to gain a broad understanding and gain more in-depth insight (Travis, 2022). The ability to reuse research data is gaining more momentum as it provides a key advantage to wider research (Travis, 2022). A secondary data analysis that the study will be utilising will be re-used from a previous study. The methodology of choice enhances the credibility and validity of the research finding. The data collection methodology for the previous study was qualitative, obtained via structured interviews, using purposive sampling methods. The total sample of the study was five tourism business in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The demographics of participants in terms of occupation includes, marketing managers, key account managers, managers, CEOs and marketing executives that were pivotal in the formulation of promotional strategies in their respective companies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The current study will conduct a secondary data analysis using qualitative data collected via structured interviews obtained from the former study. The study will be deductive in nature; also known as a top-down strategy. This further indicates that with a secondary data analysis a deductive reasoning is a promising approach; as it will provide more insight into the real phenomena of the evolution of promotional marketing strategies post Covid-19 in the tourism sector in South Africa (Van de Sandt et al., 2019). Therefore, the study will adopt a desktop research methodology to examine the evolution of promotional marketing strategies of tourism businesses in South Africa post Covid-19 pandemic.

## Discussion

### *Services offered by the tourism businesses*

Upon analysis, the researcher was able to extract the nature of the tourism businesses and the various services that the organisation offers to consumers. Below are the responses as per transcripts:

“We are a travel agency. We customize travel packages for individuals and businesses”, “Travel packages including accommodation, flights and tour packages”, “Outbound travel holidays to the leisure market and corporate travel”, “Various-Flights; hotel accommodation; car hire, etc”, “Travel packages to various destinations”.

Given the nature of the businesses it is evident that during the pandemic tourism businesses were unable to undertake promotions in the manner that they were used to. Trade promotions and other horizontal joint promotions came to a halt. It became increasingly difficult to stay connected with customers as they stopped going into physical stores, and data usage became challenging and expensive.

### *The promotional marketing strategies used by tourism businesses prior to the Covid-19 pandemic*

The findings indicate that there was a use of traditional promotional marketing strategies such as advertising, radio, newspaper and digital marketing promotional strategies for example social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and websites. The following responses were received with regards to the types of promotional strategies used by the tourism businesses: “Social media marketing: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp for Business”; “Website and Facebook advertising only”; “Social Media, Radio Sponsoring and Product Giveaways and Causes / Charity”; “Online and newsletters”; “Social media platforms”.



Based on the findings these tourism businesses are using a combination of traditional and digital marketing promotional strategies. Four out of five (80 percent) of the sample indicated that it is cost effective to use social media promotional strategies. At the same time, one out of five (20 percent) explains that the traditional strategies are preferred by customers. Thus, the findings indicated that prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, tourism businesses adopted both traditional and digital promotional strategies. The findings also indicate that social media marketing platforms were not fully understood as well as the additional features each platform has for a business to maximise its full potential in terms of business visibility and generation of traffic to social media accounts.

### ***The promotional marketing strategies used by tourism businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic***

“It is no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic has created social and economic crises both in developed and developing countries, and the tourism sector has been mostly affected by the pandemic. The majority of the countries in which the tourism sector contributes significantly to job creation, export generation revenues, economic income, and investments were mainly exposed to the effect of the Covid-19 crisis” (Nyawo, 2020: 1145). The study reveals that the Covid-19 pandemic had a direct impact on 100 percent of the sample. The participants provided the following elaborations in terms of the impact: “The pandemic has had a direct impact. We have lost business. Our business was shut for six months”; “We have retrenched staff. Although we have re-opened the business with a skeleton staff, we are hardly trading. There are minimal queries. There are no walk-in clients. People are still afraid to travel”; “We have not traded since the start of the lockdown through to October. Our regular customers have not been traveling at all. Minimal flights are being booked currently. We are operating on a skeleton staff”; “Reduced demand for travel services”; “People are not traveling. Corporates do not want staff to be at risk. Business is at its lowest”; “Travel has been seriously affected. We have been locked down since March 2020 and remain in a delicate situation due to travel still being limited. With airlines currently locked down and South Africa’s impact with the vaccinations, has caused serious delays in travel movement. At this point in time, we are awaiting new and further developments for travel to reopen”.

From the above responses, clearly, there were huge ramifications. These findings are congruent with the findings of the Tourism Industry Survey (2021). Tourism businesses have put in place a variety of measures to help mitigate against the impact on their business. The most commonly applied measures are ‘adjusted marketing strategies’ at 72%, ‘supporting deferment of bookings instead of cancellations’ at 70%, and ‘lowering prices’ at 69% (Tourism Industry Survey of South Africa, 2021).

Participants were asked if their businesses pivoted to online platforms during the pandemic, and three out of five indicated “yes” (that represented 60 percent of the sample). Furthermore, participants were further asked if there was an adoption of technology during the pandemic in their businesses and four out of five indicated “yes” (that represents 80 percent of the sample). The following responses were received with respect to the adoption of more technology in their marketing approach since the pandemic: “We are using Social Media to promote our specials currently.”; “Absolutely no billboard and newspaper marketing has been done for almost a year as customers are afraid to travel. We used to conduct regular promotions of our tour packages at all the major malls, however, due to Covid-19 we were unable to conduct any of our regular promotions.”; “We use Facebook-for-business advertising.”; “We tried advertising in the newspaper at the start of the lockdown. Word of mouth is also a method we had tried. We called on clients and regular customers. Social media seems to work best for us currently.”



From the research findings, it is clear that businesses in the tourism industry are pivoting towards online transacting and promotions. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a major, unavoidable thrust in this direction. This corresponds with the findings of the Tourism Recovery Plan (2020). It is clear that the tourism sector shifted towards digital platforms as preferred marketing promotional strategies as it was cost-effective, user friendly, as well as had a higher target reach. Based on the above findings, as marketers, we can see prior to Covid-19 that the adoption of both traditional and digital promotional strategies were being used to communicate, inform, influence, and persuade customers to purchase the product or service. However, during the pandemic, there was a drastic decline in traditional promotional strategies and a surge in digital marketing promotional strategies as it proved to be able to reach a larger target audience as social media was a platform that kept consumers connected to brands during the pandemic. The following section focuses on the recommendations for this study.

## Recommendations

It is evident that a business needs to be prepared for any unexpected event or situation that will allow for adaptability and flexibility. The model that is recommended for tourism businesses to be adopted is the SOSTAC model, which will be beneficial in terms of planning future promotional strategies. Highlighted below is an overview of the adoption of the model in the tourism industry.

The growth of information and communication technology has been progressive in marketing, but the Covid-19 Pandemic has opened the floodgates for all businesses to embrace social media marketing more extensively in their businesses. This is primarily because of its convenience during the lockdown period, its cost-effectiveness, its preference by the customers, and the fact that it can easily snowball amongst people with similar needs. The sudden transition into digital marketing means that many organisations need to improve their technical skills in this regard. From the research findings, it is clear that businesses in the tourism industry are pivoting towards online transacting and promotions. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a major, unavoidable thrust in this direction. This corresponds with the findings of the Tourism Recovery Plan (2020).

According to the conceptual framework, as highlighted in Figure 2 the first step for tourism businesses is to conduct a situational analysis. According to Khan & Khan (2006), “Situational analysis is a process of examining a company and its competitors on the basis of size and share of the market, sales history including costs and profits, the use of advertising, the nature and types of customers and more”. Once the business has conducted a situational analysis, the next step is to provide the objectives of where the business wants to be in the future. This step is followed by the strategy. This is where the business will implement a digital marketing strategy. “Digital marketing strategy may be defined as a plan that the business has to achieve their business’ marketing goals and other business objectives through the use of different forms of media or technologies; paid, owned and earned media” (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2020:178). Thus, the forms of media would have been identified in the strategy. It is evident from the findings of the study that the tourism businesses are using social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Websites, E-newsletter, and Emails.

Social media (for example Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, WeChat and LinkedIn), Email and SMS are now the preferred methods for promotions since the marketing message can be delivered almost instantaneously via the internet (Magno & Cassia, 2018). The authors add that in the past, marketing was a process thought nearly unmeasurable. Businesses are moving away from print media because of the cost implications and are using digital billboards instead, as well as digital in-store display screens which are cheaper forms of advertising (Gangur & Plevný, 2014). The existence of mobile telephones and Email via these mobile



devices has meant that people are expected to be in constant communication (Blythe, 2014). Customers are now able to receive Emails even when they are on holiday or on weekends. Venkatesh (2015) states that mobile marketing is very effective as a marketing strategy. With the emergence of Web 2.0, the Internet became more collaborative. Gangur & Plevný (2014) express the view that, presently, “social networks”, (for example MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube) stimulate Internet use and state that these “social-network systems” use “online technologies and practices”, permitting shoppers to connect amongst themselves by distributing information, views and observations.

Bernariusz (2013) states that a third of S.A.’s population makes use of the internet. A wide range of gauges show that the internet delivers reach and is efficient for marketers who need to reach a large audience quickly. Email and SMS have proven to be the most cost-effective promotional tool (May, 2016:1). Email and SMS are irreplaceable in terms of after-sales service, together with the post, telephone communication or interacting via the internet (Tan et al., 2013). New evidence suggests a “large-scale pivot by youth toward mobile tools like WhatsApp and Viber” to do their “chit-chatting” (May, 2016:5). Groupon is an efficient way for businesses to market their products. This promotional method has increased in popularity over the last few years particularly in the tourism industry. The fact that these websites broadcast their specials on a daily basis to their database via Email (which can be accessed via mobile phones and computers) shows the economic viability of Emailing (Blythe et al., 2014).

“Transformation is an urgent process to change tourism firms from the usual system to a new model that can help them to survive during this pandemic” (Tung, 2021:737). Therefore, due to the restricted travel during the pandemic, which led the tourism industry to face major hardship, one recommended action that tourism businesses can adopt is virtual tours in the form of live-streams that can be implemented via Facebook Live, or Instagram live. In addition, links can be provided via WhatsApp, Emails, and E-newsletters. Virtual reality, also known as VR, is the use of a three-dimensional (3D) world with advanced technology that includes visual, audio, and kinetic elements (Kim et al., 2020).

According to Lekgau et al. (2021), virtual reality allows companies to provide tourists with an immersive experience to explore areas of their choice, such as famous attractions, hotels, malls, and the physical environment. This reduces the tourist’s perceived risk by becoming familiar with destinations sites. This form of virtual reality, if adopted, can reshape the tourism industry by building consumer confidence. Vasilina (2016) claims that the evolution of virtual reality can potentially change the tourism industry. Tourism partners can engage further with their potential customers using this technology by including snippets of land tours, a glimpse of various types of hotel suites, types of cuisine on the menu as well as live interviews with satisfied customers. Additionally, it provides a new competitive edge as this promotional strategy has not been fully implemented. “When used as a marketing tool, virtual reality allows for the development of products that are personalised and campaigns that enable tourists to experience a destination before they visit it, thereby stimulating the sales process with minimal marketing” (Lekgau et al., 2021:1519).

There are innovative strategies that companies can use to boost their marketing presence, such as hosting online events via the social media platforms like Facebook, as it allows a user to livestream directly to their viewers. Moreover, the Livestream allows engagement and interaction, such as viewers can comment, share, like, react and save the livestream to watch later (Ramos & Cabanes, 2020). Another effective platform is Instagram, which provides a livestream that allows users to share content, views, and areas to their followers. It provides engagement as followers can comment, tag, like, send emojis, and request to go live with the user, allowing a conversation and interaction with the company or



brand (Zulli & Towner, 2021). Thus, from a South African perspective, if tourism businesses implement virtual tours, it can allow consumers to view locations and engage with the locals. This will influence their purchase intentions and stimulate them to purchase a travel package. Virtual tours can enhance consumer-buying behaviour, as they can see their value for money by reviewing the locations and sites in their travel packages. Travel agencies can use existing tour guides to speak to potential tourists and provide them with the virtual experience that tourists experience as they do in physical interactions. According to Lekgau et al. (2021:1521), South Africa introduced virtual tours such as visits to townships and deep-sea diving, leading to more room for opportunity and expansion with virtual tours. Yung et al. (2020) conducted a study on virtual reality and tourism marketing results indicate that the use of VR for tourism in marketing has intensified; however, the concept remains in infancy.

As marketing is transforming into the digital age, many companies do not fully understand the full potential digital marketing can provide, especially in this unique marketing environment with the presence of Covid-19. The digital promotional tools will certainly generate income and influence buying behaviour. Lastly, with regards to “Control”, tourism businesses can use the analytics provided by the social media platforms on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Websites to provide an overview in terms of whether the promotional strategies are meeting the desired target audience. The use of Google analytics can provide insight into keywords and search engines that can boost brand awareness and generate more traffic into websites and social media platforms. If the company finds that the promotional tools are not effective, an evaluation of “Strategy” should be conducted to ascertain whether the social media platforms are suitable for the target audience. Businesses can also engage with their tourism partners, locally and abroad to collaborate more effectively in tactical trade promotions. This form of promotion has been predominantly used in the past to push old stagnant stock. Travel agencies can go a step further by creating a consortium whereby members of the consortium benefit significantly from group discounts and deals. Members of the consortium can utilize one graphics designer and social media expert, creating augmented reality and immersive experiences using footage created by drones. Video postcards can be customized for each member of the consortium. Ongoing digital training for consortium members is critical.

## Conclusion

The growth of information and communication technology has been progressive in marketing, but the Covid-19 pandemic has opened the floodgates for all businesses to embrace social media marketing. In addition, this study proves that the tourism industry is shifting to a digital age as businesses have seen the potential during the Covid-19 pandemic. Digital marketing proves to be more convenient, cost-effective and preferred by the customers and furthermore, it can easily snowball amongst people with similar needs. Tourism businesses need to constantly evaluate and re-evaluate their promotional strategies to ensure that once a thorough diagnostic has been conducted, their new digital strategies are aligned to the overall corporate mission and vision. There are amazing benefits of tactical trade promotions, being members of consortiums, and having a strong brand as a holding company. Small tourism agencies should revisit their stance and embrace synergies and collaborations with larger brands that provide economies of scale. The significance of the study shows that businesses that did not use digital marketing tools, such as social media marketing, faced many challenges compared to businesses that adopted digital marketing and social media marketing tools. Therefore, it is important for upcoming businesses within the tourism sector to ensure that they adopt and implement digital marketing in their operations. The sudden transition into digital marketing



means that many tourism entities need to improve their technical skills and stay updated in terms of regular training in this regard to safeguard their business in the event of another crisis.

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