The Effectiveness of Customer-Centric Approach in Understanding Tourist Behaviour: Selected Tour Companies in Arusha, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Experience shows that the best way to attract and keep customers is by responding positively to their preferences. The best solution is to understand customer needs and behaviour. Customer-centric approach is predicted on successful understanding and management of customer preferences. However, there is no credible information on the effectiveness of this approach, especially in the East African tourist market. This study examined effectiveness of the approach in understanding tourist behaviour. It specifically assessed influence of customer preferences management and customer-business alignment on tourist behaviour. Out of 446 tour companies licensed in 2018 in Arusha, Tanzania, 210 were randomly selected and studied. Key respondents were sales/marketing managers purposively selected from the samples. The study adopted a quantitative research approach where a semi-structured questionnaire was used for data collection. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis and multiple regression for hypothesis testing Findings show that the approach was significantly effective in understanding tourist behaviour ($p < 0.001$; $r = 0.984$) through customer preferences management ($r = 0.334$) as well as customer-business alignment both internally ($r = 0.464$) and externally ($r = 0.318$). This study recommends automation of tour operators' business practices focusing on understanding and addressing new tourist expectations.

Keywords: Customer-centric approach - Customer preferences - Customer-business alignment - Tourist behaviour – Tour operator.

INTRODUCTION

Every tour operator strives to ensure customer satisfaction. The increasing power of customers and rapid growth of the competitive environment influenced by technological advancements and customers' desire for alternatives bring more pressure for the companies to win and keep customers. Satisfying customers has been one of the most important matters for a company's success (Hudson 2008). Customer satisfaction depends on how the service or product matches the buyer's expectations. There are many ways to win customer satisfaction; the best way is to understand customer needs and behaviour, commonly known as Customer-centric approach (Hudson 2008).

The approach has two basic parts: First is the collection and arrangement of information and data on individual customers, known as *customer preferences management*; Second is effective utilization of information collected to customize service targeting existing customers and allowing them to adapt and to match their own needs and

preferences, known as *Customer-business alignment*. The customer-centric approach aims at responding to ever-changing tourists' needs and priorities while ensuring a mutual profitable relationship.

Several studies have been conducted on Customer-centric approach from various perspectives: Customer-centric approach practices (Wagner and Majchrzak 2007), contextual factors facilitating the implementation of Customer-centric approach (Sheth *et al*. 2000; Wind and Rangaswamy 2001), required levers to achieve Customer-centric approach in a firm (Galbraith 2002, 2011) and on the antecedents of customer-centricity in companies, or the features of companies that favor customer-centricity (Lamberti 2013). There are gaps on its influence in understanding tourist behaviour in tour operating companies. The study by Hashem (2020) highlights the impact of customer preferences management on customer's purchase decision process. Literature is missing information on the assessment of this famous approach in the East African setting, which is blessed with vibrant tourist business.

This study aimed at filling the gap by examining the effectiveness of customer-centric approach in understanding tourist behaviour in selected tour operating companies in Arusha, Tanzania. The study specifically intended to examine the influence of customer preferences management and customer-business alignment on tourist behaviour. The study systematically examined effectiveness of customer-centric approach in capture tourist behaviour as the viable solution to challenges of dynamics of attracting and keeping tourists by tour operations in Tanzania

The study findings can be used to establish and implement a successful customer-based culture in tour operating companies not just as a marketing tool, but also as an effective method for customer preferences management so as to win and keep customers.

The relationship between customer-centric approach and tourist behaviour is explained based on a conceptual framework (Figure 1). The independent variable (IV) for this study was the customer-centric approach while the dependent variable (DV) was tourist behavior. The influence of the independent variables over the dependent variable is affected by intervening variable, known also as mediator variable (MV), which encompasses tourists' needs and expectations.

The framework based on some of the researchers' ideas regarding the customer centricity (Niininen 2006, Lamberti. 2013) and buying behavior concepts (Karimi 2013, Solomon *et al*. 2014) as well as related literature. This was therefore an expansion of the already existing body of knowledge which puts an emphasis on the approach as the viable solution on the understanding of tourist behaviour.

The hypotheses for this study were:

$H_{01:}$ Customer preference management has no influence on tourist behaviour mediated by identifying tourists' needs and expectations

H_{02}: There is no a significant impact of internal and external customer-business alignment on tourist behaviour mediated by satisfying tourists' needs and expectations.
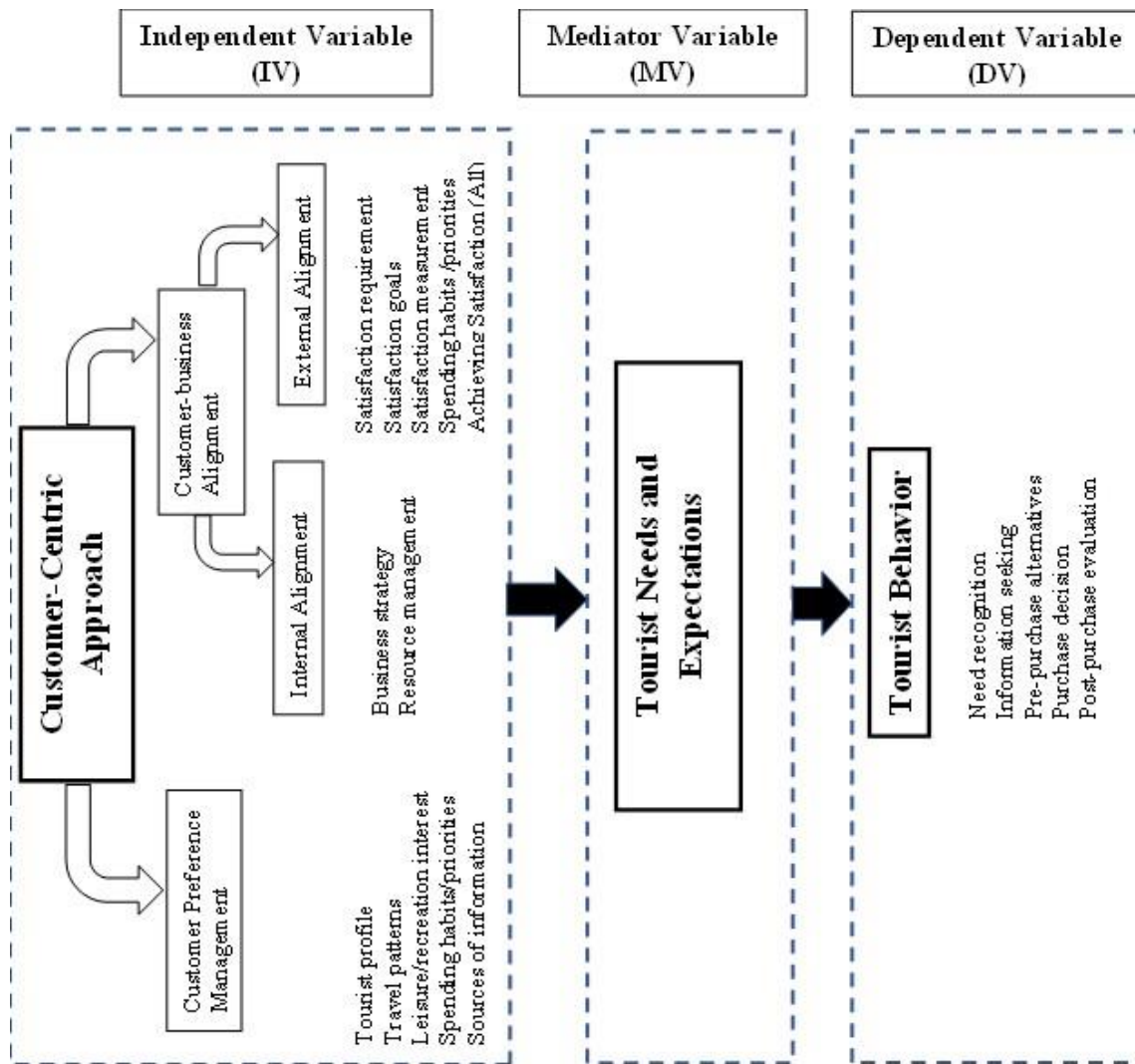
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework depicting influence of customer-centric approach on tourist behaviour.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area

This study was conducted in Arusha, Tanzania, located at 3° 23' 12.9300" S and 36° 40' 58.7820" E. This was considered due to the fact that Arusha city is a global tourist destination and serves as the hub for the northern Tanzania safari circuit. The National Parks of Serengeti, Manyara, Tarangire, Arusha and Kilimanjaro, the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, including the Oldupai Valley; Loliondo Game Controlled Area, Engaruka stone-age structures, Lake Natron, and associated spots are among the major destinations in the northern tourism circuit. Arusha is one of Tanzania's most developed areas, with a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.721 (Chacha *et al*. 2018) (Figure 2).
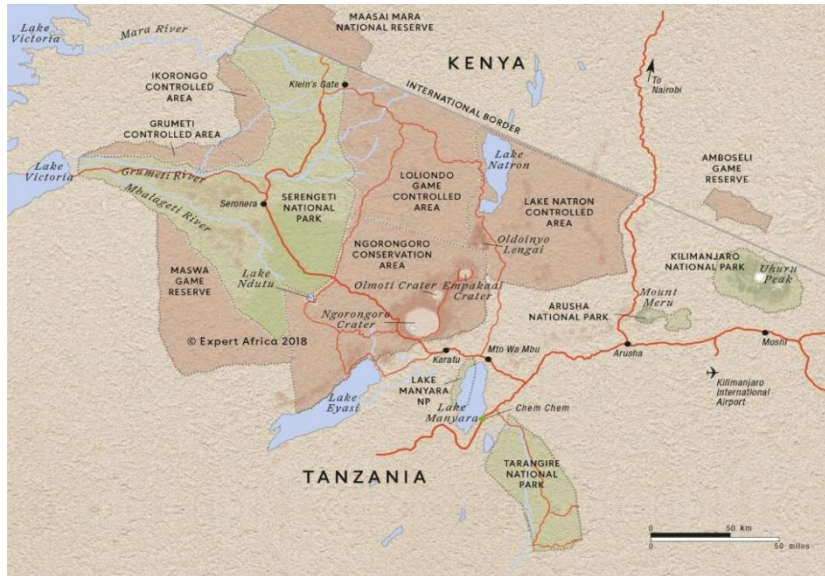
Figure 2: A map showing Arusha as a tourist hub of Tanzania's Northern circuit.

Research design

The study adopted quantitative research methodology. The research philosophy implemented has been that of pragmatism, a problem-centred study that sought to find a solution to the challenges of tourist behaviour dynamics in tour operating companies. Pragmatism is concerned with the application of "what works" and solutions to problems (Cresswell 2013). A cross-sectional design was also applied as the data were all collected at one point in time, the design allowed the researcher to analyze, compare and evaluate the samples

Sampling procedures and sample size determination

The target population for this study was the tour operating companies located in Arusha, Tanzania. This is based on the fact that tour operators work closely with tourists and visitors, they are well informed of tourist behaviour. The study employed a probability sampling technique whereby, simple random sampling was used to select 210 out of 446 Tour operating companies licensed in 2018. Respondents were the sales/Marketing managers, one from each tour company making a total of 210 respondents. Yamane (1967) provides a simplified formula to calculate sample sizes. A 95% confidence level and p=0.05 are assumed for Equation below.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2} \qquad (1)$$

Where n is the sample size, N is the population size, and *e* is the level of precision.

$$\frac{446}{1 + 446(0.05 * 0.05)^2} \qquad (2)$$

n = 210 *Tour companies*

Data collection

Both primary and secondary sources were used in data collection for the study. Primary data were collected through questionnaires while secondary data collection involved gathering data from journal articles that have already been documented by other researchers through the internet and library.

The survey questionnaire consisted of two sections: section 1 for demographic characteristics of a respondent, and section 2 for general questions. The general questions were stipulated into 2 specific objectives. The questionnaires contained seven basic question types: quantity or information, 5-Likert scale, and open-ended. Open question responses were an add-on to quantitative

responses. The survey was conducted with 210 tour companies in Arusha from April to June 2019 between 10:00 and 16:00. Participants were given 15 minutes to fill in the survey. The questionnaire method appeared to be the best as it allowed the researcher to ask multiple survey questions, collect data from a pool of tour operators and analyze the data to produce numerical results.

Data analysis

Out of 210 questionnaires, 185 were returned. This amounted to 88% success because in survey studies a response rate of 60% is acceptable (Sekaran and Bougie 2010). Based on this assertion this response rate was very good and qualifies the analyzed data as reliable and valid. A reliability test was carried out using Cronbachs' alpha (Bland and Altman 1997). The result showed a value of 0.873 as the reliability for all items. The range for all items was 0.8 – 0.83. This therefore indicates that the items in the questionnaire were reliable.

The study examined the effectiveness of the customer-centric approach in understanding tourist behaviour in selected tour operating companies in Arusha as a viable solution to the challenges of growing tourist behaviour dynamics. The study specifically intended to examine the approach's constituents which are customer preferences and internal and external customer-business alignment on their influence on tourist behaviour. The study sought to analyze the effectiveness of the customer-centric approach in understanding tourist behaviour mediated by identifying and satisfying tourists' needs and expectations. Before analysis, the gathered data were prepared. The dataset using a scatter plot was checked for missing data and outliers. All values outside the calculated range were considered outliers. The data was then analyzed using Statistical software SPSS Version 25.

Descriptive statistical analyses were performed on the samples to obtain a clear understanding of the population. Measures of central tendency and dispersion were computed. Inferential statistics analyses were performed through a multiple linear regression model to assess the strength of direction of the relationship between variables; the independent variable (customer-centric approach) and dependent variable (tourist behaviour) with a mediator (tourists' needs and expectations).

RESULTS

The following are the results based on descriptive and inferential analyses.

Influence of customer preferences management in tourist behaviour

Outcome of descriptive analysis to assess the influence of customer preferences management on understanding tourist behaviour, starting with the assessment of effectiveness of customer preferences management in identification of tourists' needs and interests. Results from the Likert scale-based analysis showed that customer preferences management on leisure/recreation interests scored the highest mean being effective on identification of tourists' needs and expectations, followed by the customer preferences management on spending habits and priorities, then on travel patterns, on how they obtain their information, and lastly on tourist profile insights. The results and value of the mean scores is shown in Table 1.

Influence of identification of tourists' needs and expectations in understanding tourist behaviour were assessed. Results shown in Table 2 indicate that identification of tourists' needs and expectations through customer preferences management on tourist insight items highly influence understanding of tourist needs recognition stage, followed by understanding of tourist's information search stage, then tourist's pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives stage, tourist's purchase decision stage and lastly tourist's

post purchase evaluation stage. Inferential analysis was done to assess the significance of influence of customer preferences management in understanding tourist behaviour. The p-value was 0.001 (Table 3). This shows a significant positive correlation. This is a least strong relationship as stated by Fan and Cohen (1988) but does not change the interpretation of the significant relationships in a regression model. This indicates that the more effective customer preference management on tourist insight items, the better the understanding of tourist behaviour.

Table 1: Effectiveness of customer preferences management in identification of tourists' needs and expectations

Likert Items/Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
Tourist insights on leisure/recreation interests	4.11	0.702
Tourist insights on spending habits and priorities	3.86	0.743
Tourist insights on travel patterns	3.70	0.506
Tourists' insights on how they obtain their	3.70	0.493
Tourist profile insights	3.54	0.667

Table 2: Influence of customer preferences management in understanding tourist behaviour

Likert Items/Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
Tourist's need recognition stage	4.17	.753
Tourist's Information search stage	3.92	.650
Tourist's Pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives stage	3.55	.650
Tourist's Purchase decision stage	3.34	.569
Tourist's Post purchase evaluation stage	2.86	.721

Table 3 Model summary on the influence of customer preference management on tourist behaviour

Model Summary[b]									
					Change Statistics				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.334[a]	.111	.087	.49203	.111	4.487	5	179	.001

a. **Predictors:** (Constant), tourists' insights on how they obtain their information, tourist profile insights, tourist insights on travel patterns, tourist insights on spending habits and priorities, tourist insights on leisure/recreation interests

b. **Dependent Variable:** Tourist behaviour

Influence of Internal customer-business alignment on tourist behaviour

Descriptive analysis was done to assess the Influence of internal customer-business alignment in understanding tourist behaviour, starting with the assessment of effectiveness of internal business alignment with the satisfaction of tourist needs and expectations. Results from the Likert scale-based analysis are: Tour company's business strategy (M=4.51; SD=0.716) and internal resource management decision (M=4.43; SD=0.704) are effectively being structured around tourist satisfaction as Table 4 shows.

Influence of internal business alignment with tourist satisfaction in understanding tourist

behaviour was assessed. Results from the Likert scale-based analysis showed that the mean ranged from 3.11 to 4.18: Table 5 summarizes the results by showing that Internal business alignment with tourist satisfaction leads in influencing understanding of tourist's need recognition stage, followed by their pre-purchase evaluation of alternative stage, then tourist's information search stage, tourist's purchase decision stage and the last was tourist's post purchase evaluation stage.

Inferential analysis was done to assess the significant influence of internal customer-business alignment in understanding tourist behaviour. The p-value was 0.000 (Table 6).

This is also a least strong relationship (Fan and Cohen 1988) but that does not change the interpretation of the significant relationships in a regression model. This indicates that: the more effective the utilization of the information generated to target existing customers, the better understanding of tourist behaviour; and hence quite right for the tour operators to adapt and customize services to match the tourists' needs and preferences internally.

Table 4: Influence of internal customer-business alignment on customer preferences management

Likert Items/Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
The company's business strategy is structured around tourist satisfaction	4.51	0.716
The company's internal resource management are designed around Tourist satisfaction	4.43	0.704

Table 5: Influence of Internal customer-business alignment on tourist behaviour

Likert Items/Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
Internal customer-business alignment influences understanding of:		
Tourist's need recognition	4.1838	0.75811
Tourist's Pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives	4.0324	0.75831
Tourist's Information search	3.9514	0.67792
Tourist's Purchase decision	3.4432	0.67427
Tourist's Post purchase evaluation	3.1081	0.75842

Table 6. Model summary on influence of internal customer-business alignment on tourist behaviour

Model Summary[b]									
					Change Statistics				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	f1	f2	Sig. F Change
1	464[a]	.215	.206	.45867	.215	24.901		182	.000
a. Predictors: (Constant), company's internal resource management decisions designed around Tourist satisfaction, company's business strategy structured around tourist satisfaction									
b. Dependent Variable: Tourist behaviour									

Influence of external customer-business alignment on tourist behaviour

Descriptive analysis was done to assess the influence of external customer-business alignment in understanding tourist behaviour, starting with the assessment of effectiveness of external business alignment with the satisfaction of tourist needs and expectations. Results form Likert scale-based analysis indicated that in order to achieve high level of tourist satisfaction tour operating companies also need to fulfill important attributes. Table 7. Collaboration with external key actors to achieve tourist satisfaction collectively ranked the highest attribute, followed by integrating with external key players to measure tourist satisfaction, then the attribute of sharing of information about tourist satisfaction requirements and the last was sharing information about tourist satisfaction goals.

Influence of external business alignment with tourist satisfaction in understanding tourist behaviour was assessed Results from the Likert scale-based analysis show that external business alignment with tourist satisfaction highly influence understanding of tourist's need recognition stage, followed by understanding of tourist's information search, whereas tourist's post purchase evaluation stage was the least. Table 8 highlights these results.

Inferential analysis was done to assess the significant influence of external customer-business alignment in understanding tourist behaviour. p-value was 0.001 (Table 9). This is also a least strong relationship (Fan and Cohen. 1988), but does not change the interpretation of the significant relationships in a regression model. This indicates that: the more effective the utilization of the information generated to target existing customers, the better the understanding of tourist behaviour; and hence and allowing tour operators to adapt and customize service to match the tourist needs and preferences externally.

Table 7: Influence of external customer-business alignment on tourist behaviour through customer preferences management

Likert Items/Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
The company collaborates with external key players to achieve tourist satisfaction collectively	4.04	0.769
The company integrates with the external key players to measure tourist satisfaction	3.83	0.717
The company shares information about tourist satisfaction requirements with external key players	3.73	0.746
The company shares information about tourist satisfaction goals with external key players	2.55	0.633

Table 8: Influence of external customer-business alignment on understanding tourist behaviour

Likert Items/Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
External customer-business alignment influences understanding of Tourist's:		
Needs recognition	4.1676	0.75111
Information search	3.9135	0.64528
Pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives	3.5514	0.65009
Purchase decision	3.3405	0.56888
Post purchase evaluation	2.8649	0.72089

Table 9: Model summary on the influence of external customer-business alignment on tourist behaviour

Model Summary[b]									
				Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square		R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.318[a]	.101	.081	.49340	.101	5.079	4	180	.001
a. **Predictors:** (Constant), company collaborates with external key players to achieve tourist satisfaction collectively, company shares information about tourist satisfaction goals with external key players, company shares information about tourist satisfaction requirements with external key players, company integrates with the external key players to measure tourist satisfaction									
b. **Dependent Variable:** Tourist behaviour									

DISCUSSION

Influence of customer preference management on tourist behaviour

Understanding of tourist behaviour begins with the company's capacity to identify tourists' requirements and interests (Decker and Hoppner 2006, Sarlak and Fard 2009). Customer preference management on tourist profile insights, tourist insights on travel patterns, leisure/recreation preferences, spending habits and goals, as well as how they acquire knowledge, all have a major impact on understanding tourist behaviour.

The findings, which are corroborated by studies by Naidu and Mashanda (2017) and Fader (2020), showed that customer centric approach through customer preference management has a beneficial impact in understanding tourist behaviour, with the need recognition stage being the most affected. During customer preference management process, the company simply tries to collect as much information as possible about the consumer builds its own customer database based on interests and knowledge about its customers. This allows the employee to understand about changes and elements that influence market tourist behaviour, such as technology improvements, growing living standards, shifting attitudes and conventions, and geographic diversity. The company can then comprehend the internal as well as social elements that influence tourist expectations, such as personality, attitude, willingness, cultural climate, basic requirements and demands, and values.

However, there are few research studies that had been conducted on customer-preferences management strategies in tour operations; hence these findings are helpful to most tour operators who are finding it challenging to apply.

Influence of internal customer-business alignment on tourist behaviour

Understanding of tourist behaviour does not end on the preferences generation part but the effective utilization of the information generated to target existing customers and allow them to adapt and customize service to match their own needs and preferences. Internal customer-business alignment guarantees that customer preferences generated is effectively used to target current customers. The findings show that customer-centric approach through internal integration has a significant influence on the understanding of tourist behaviour. This improves visitor convenience, expands potential value, and strengthens client loyalty.

According to Griffin (1995), when customers encounter a high-quality customer interface, it improves their loyalty to the company and the consumers' repurchase and recurrent purchase ratio. Hence, internal interdepartmental convergence would have an effect on tourist behaviour as a result of customer loyalty and service inventiveness.

The customer-centric notion is not new; most tour operators are familiar with it, and it is perhaps the most hotly discussed marketing notion (Naidu and Mashanda 2017, Fader 2020). The issue is with the implementation. The study noted some of the problems, including the presence of data silos, a business culture that is not aligned with customer expectations, a lack of proper client data management systems, and insufficient competence in data analytics; data specialists on hand who can translate consumer data into knowledge that can be used for customer-centric incentives; and data experts on hand who can turn consumer data into knowledge that can be utilized for customer-centric rewards. When the company is able to overcome these obstacles, it will earn a competitive edge (Alt *et al*. 2019).

Influence of external customer-business alignment on tourist behaviour

External customer-business alignment is all about collaboration, engagement and communication between external groups and the new product development team (Yeung *et al*. 2009, Flynn *et al.* 2010). External integration ensures that customer preferences generated is effectively used to target current customers more effectively and allows customers to customize and customize the service to suit their own needs and preferences by sharing information on tourist satisfaction requirements, tourist satisfaction goals, and tourist satisfaction measurement (Lau *et al*. 2010).

From the study findings, external customer-business alignment appears to have a significant impact on understanding of tourist behaviour, however, the transparency and access to information relating to customer preferences management ensured by external integration is insufficient which creates a substantial barrier to integration. Most tour businesses fail to provide transparency and access to external important actors on customer preferences management because the tour operating

business is extremely competitive; its success is built on the secrecy of internal business processes relating to tourist satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

The study findings evidently revealed that customer-centric approach is an effective tool in understanding tourist behaviour through Customer preference management as well as internal and external customer-business alignment aiming at responding to ever-changing of tourists' needs and priorities while ensuring a mutually profitable relationship. Generally, the customer-centric concept is known but it is not fully practiced. The study strongly supported to show how crucial the concept is in the midst of technological advancement. Importantly, it is time to address the challenges hindering the implementation of customer-centric approach practices in the tourism industry towards the effective implementation of a customer-centric approach to win and keep the customers in the midst of industrial competition.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the implementation of a customer-centric system in tourism businesses as the best way to win customer satisfaction, with the first step being to learn tourist preferences and special and important dates using customer information from their previous visits/stays. This entails obtaining tourist cooperation as well as orienting the organizational culture toward customization. Every customer must be treated individually, with care taken to select the relevant information to be provided and gathered for each of them, as well as paying close attention to the communication methods used. Even though financial incentives may appear to be the most common method of customer retention, it is critical that retention

strategies be based on customer emotional and satisfaction commitment.

The study further recommends that tour operators should collaborate with key external players on ensuring tourist satisfaction., For a company to be customer-centric oriented, integration of both internal and external key customer-related attributes is crucial as part of the approach. This also includes the IT and data specialists, particularly on customer preference management procedures and client data analytics. The operating companies should collaborate with them to turn consumer data into knowledge that can be used to provide people-centric rewards. Human behaviour specialists, too, who can comprehend and predict tourist behaviour.

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