

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Search Engine Optimization, Competitive Advantage and Market Performance of Registered Tours and Travel Agencies in Nairobi City County, Kenya

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Abstract: COVID-19 is a devastating pandemic with widespread negative health, social, and economic consequences. Due to drastic changes in the business environment of tour and travel agencies, firms and marketing managers can now use search engine optimization to effectively position themselves. The study's main goal is to evaluate the effect of search engine optimization on the market performance of registered tours and travel agencies in Nairobi County, Kenya. Kenya's tourism ministry and state government work hard to improve the business climate for tour and travel companies. Despite the overall positive image, international tourist market growth rates in Kenya have been 3.5 percent slower from 2017 to 2019 compared to previous years. This was further aggregated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the year 2020, when the growth rate of tours and travel agencies fell by 65%. The study's main goal is to evaluate the effect of search engine optimization on the market performance of registered tours and travel agencies in Nairobi County, Kenya. This study adopted a positivist philosophy. Both descriptive and explanatory research designs were used. A self-administered semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data from 324 registered tours and travels agencies picked from and a sample of 179 were used. Data analysis included the development and interpretation of both descriptive and inferential statistics, such as frequencies, mean, percentages, and standard deviation, and was presented using tables and numerical values. The results of regression analysis established that search engine optimization had a positive and significant effect on market performance of the registered tours and travel agencies picked from a sample of 179. The study recommends that agency management ensure that the firm's website is easily accessible in order to improve agency performance. Using the internet to gain a large market share can assist tours and travel agencies in improving the performance and income of their websites.

Keywords: Search engine optimization, Online marketing strategies, Market performance, Market share, Competitive advantage, Tours and travel agency

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1. Introduction

The world is emerging from the grip of COVID-19, a devastating pandemic that has had widespread negative health, social, and economic implications^[1]. Some of the outcomes are irreversible, while others will return to normal after the pandemic is over. Some changes, on the other hand, will become the 'new normal'. The pandemic has altered how various sectors of the economy operate. The drastic changes in the sector of tours and travel agencies business environment have enabled firms and marketing managers use internet marketing strategies to gain a large market share growth, profitability and position themselves effectively^[2]. In general, the pandemic impacted the market share growth and sales volume of most tours and travel agencies in Kenya; some were forced to close their doors, while others were able to recover due to their tenacity.

Changes due to global COVID-19 pandemic, have enabled tours and travel agencies an opportunity to access international markets through internet marketing. Since the number of internet users has increased tremendously globally, search engine optimization has turned into a crucial element of internet marketing. Search engine optimization (SEO) is a system that collects information about a site and enables the webpage appear in top^[3]. Travelers with the help of these online marketing strategies (search engine optimization, content marketing, e-mail marketing and online video marketing) can communicate directly with the tours and travel agencies within their opinion reach without the knowledge and control of marketers^[4]. Therefore, tour and travel agency marketers no longer have complete control over their particular location pictures thanks to online marketing strategies^[5].

There are over 400 tours and travel agencies in Kenya, of those, 324 have their head offices in Nairobi while the remaining number spread out to other towns in Kenya^[6]. Kenya's travel and tourism business provides roughly 8.8% of the country's total GDP, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council's (WTTC) report 2020. The sustainable growth of this tourism sector is replicated by the competitive supply of the tours and travel agencies^[7]. Kenya Association of Tours Operation (KATO) is responsible for controlling all the activities of these tours and travel agencies. Further, KATO with the help of the ministry of tourism strives to make better business climate for tours and travel companies in Kenya, as well as promote the services of its members to the general public and safe-

guard their rights.

Despite the overall positive image, the market share of tours and travel agencies in Kenya has consistently dwindled^[8]. According to an ETC report (2019), market growth rates of international tourists in Kenya, have been 3.5 percent slower from 2017 to 2019 compared to previous years. This was further aggregated by onset of COVID-19 pandemic in the year 2020, where the growth rate of tours and travel agencies declines by a 65% since travel restrictions were introduced globally^[9]. Equally the sales volume went down in 2020 compared to the year 2019 by a 0.7 percentage^[10].

Market share is conceptualized as the customer spending and product sold in the market while sales volume as the aggregate sum of all sales sold in a particular period of time^[11]. Due to recent development of marketing, innovation and technology are the key factors that have led to success stories on the increment of performance of a firm in terms of sales volume, market share, and cash flow^[12]. The drastic changes in the sector of tours and travel agencies business environment have enabled firms and marketing managers use competitive advantage aspect to gain a large market share growth, profitability and position themselves effectively. Never has the need for creating suitable competitive advantage within the tours and travel agencies in Kenya been more relevant than today.

Organizations achieve competitive advantage aspect by developing attributes to outperform and outdo their competitors on profit margins, market share, technological advancements, product quality or through its significant resources^[13]. This has also been argued by proponents of the Resource-Based View (RBV) theory, who viewed resources as a scarce commodity in an organization but specialized as a source of competitive advantage due to their immobility and heterogeneity^[14]. As a result, corporate, reputation, quality and unique products, and brand positioning are the main concepts of competitive advantage^[15-17]. Basically, the objective of this study is to assess the effect of search engine optimization on market performance of registered tours and travel agencies in Nairobi city county, Kenya.

Summary of the Research hypothesis, Objectives and Methods

Table 1 below presents the outline of the research hypothesis with their corresponding objectives and proposed method as captured in the sub-sections above.

Table 1. A Summary of the Research objectives, hypothesis and Proposed Methods

Research Objectives	Research hypothesis H_{01}	Methods
To assess the effect of search engine optimization on market performance of registered tours and travel agencies in Nairobi city county, Kenya.	Search engine optimization has no significant effect on market performance of registered tours and travel agencies in Nairobi city county, Kenya.	Review, through a desk study, the existing conceptual frameworks to develop a framework that will be ideal for tours and travel agencies in Kenya. Validate through survey instrument for critique to help the team arrive at a robust framework.

Source: Authors (2022)

The hypotheses of the study were:

H_{01} : Search engine optimization has no significant effect on market performance of registered tours and travel agencies in Nairobi city county, Kenya.

H_{02} : Competitive advantage has no significant mediating effect on the relationship between Search engine optimization and market performance of registered tours and travel agencies in Nairobi city county, Kenya.

2. Desk Research Data Collection

The contextual and theoretical underpinning of the study was developed using a systematic literature review of relevant articles used to identify the search engine optimization measures, and develop an appropriate theory of change. To accomplish this, the following criteria proposed by Nabi et al., (2017) ^[18] served as the foundation for the final selection of articles reviewed using the team’s literature review matrix. The criteria included:

- Peer-reviewed published articles and book chapters rather than working/conference papers or unpublished work.
- Papers primarily focused on Search engine optimization, online marketing strategies, tours and travel agencies
- Sampled recipients of search engine optimization from tours and travel agencies.

The initial desk study was conducted in the year 2019. This involved a Google Scholar search to identify and review relevant articles using the key term ‘search engine optimization’ for the period 1990-to-2021. A further search was conducted on Google Scholar with the term ‘online marketing strategies or internet marketing strategies’ and ‘tours and travel agencies’ to spotlight studies that had used the term in their title or abstract. Another

author was the need to identify articles that focused on the tours and travel agencies in Kenya as this was relevant to the study. The team was also keen to ensure that papers that delved into the Kenyan context were captured, hence the study was conducted by scrutinizing bibliographies and relevant references from key search engine optimization reviews and reports.

3. Empirical Review

Due to increase used of internet search engine optimization has become one of the most important areas researched only not only in marketing but of computer science, information system and mathematics ^[19]. To learn more, a study was conducted on the conversion potential and search engine optimization performance from a major retailer in Ireland ^[20]. A longitudinal data analysis was conducted for a period of 33 months. Qualitative and quantitative statistics were used to analyze the data. According to the findings, there was a considerable impact on conversion potential and performance on this retailer shop. The study was conducted in a country that has already developed and on one sector, retail.

Barry & Charleton, 2009 ^[21] conducted a study on effects of search engine optimization and performance among small and medium-sized enterprises in Ireland. The research uses a qualitative research design, purposive sampling technique to get 95 respondents of 625 target population, data was analyzed through descriptive statistics. According to the research results, there is a link between search engine optimization and performance. The study also included that search engine optimization increased visibility on the website among firms. Purposive sampling technique is not suitable for testing hypothesis and generalizing of results.

Salminen, (2018) ^[22] conducted a study on rationale effects of search engine optimization and performance for branded bidding strategy in Qatar. The study was for the purpose of identifying advantages and disadvantages of brand bidding in search engine optimization. Data was collected through semi structured questionnaire on ten industry experts with extensive experience. The results showed that significantly search engine optimization had significant influence on performance of these industries in Qatar hence impacts choice of branding bidding strategy. This study used the Exploratory research design and went further to test hypothesis. The exploratory research design is not conclusive but supposed to give more insight, therefore hypothesis cannot be tested and results cannot be generalized.

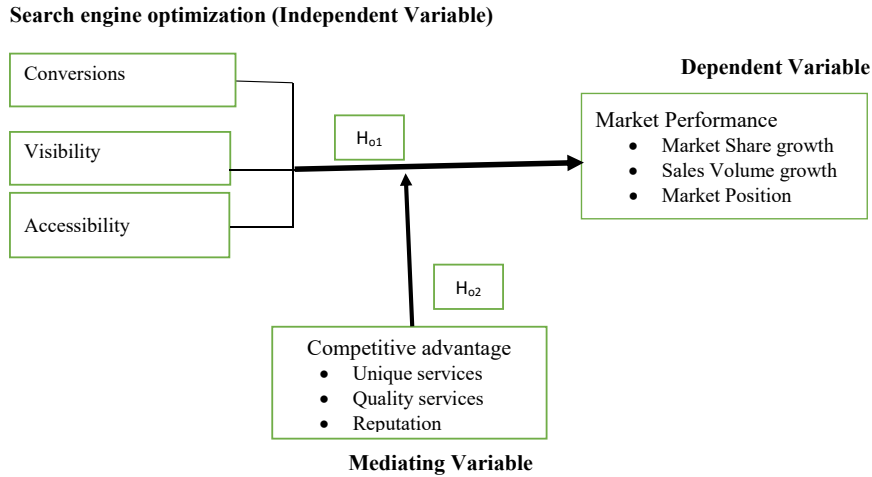


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Source: Author (2021)

4. Methodology

The study adopts a sequential mixed-methods research (MMR) design, employing qualitative and quantitative descriptive and explanatory approaches. Positivism philosophy as the most suitable philosophy since it promotes a quantitative mindset that assumes there is an objective reality that can be mathematically stated and predicted^[23]. The target population included all 324 registered tours and travel agencies in Nairobi city county, Kenya. Using^[24] formula for determining sample size of 179 agencies was gotten. The data were collected in (1) through desk study research (2) primary cross-sectional data collection i.e. the use of questionnaires.

Due to the pandemic, questionnaires were dropped and picked, as well as the use of the survey monkey online tool, to marketing managers and owners of selected tours and travel agencies in Nairobi County, Kenya. Respondents were selected using a stratified sampling technique. The Cronbach alpha value obtained for the pilot study variable on search engine optimization was 0.855, which was greater than 0.7. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2008)^[25], a coefficient of 0.7 is a suitable threshold indicating acceptable reliability.

5. Descriptive Statistics

5.1 Response Rate

The researcher administered 179 questionnaires to marketing managers or CEOs of registered tours and travel agencies in Nairobi, Kenya shown in Table 2.

The demographics characteristics analysed by this

study include gender of the respondents, number of employees in the selected tours and travel agencies, and how long the agencies have been in operations shown in Table 3 below.

Table 2. Response rate

Response Rate	Frequent	Percent (%)
Dully filled questionnaires	120	67%
Unreturned Questionnaires	59	33%
Total	179	100

Source: Survey data, (2022)

Table 3. Respondents Background Information

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Female	36	30
	Male	84	70
	Total	120	100
How many employees does your agency have	Below 15	2	1.7
	15-30	14	11.7
	31-45	28	23.3
	46-60	32	26.7
	Over 60	44	36.7
Total	120	100	
How long has your firm been on operation	Below 2 years	26	21.7
	Above 2 years to 6 years	28	23.3
	Above 6 years to 10 years	30	25
	Above 10 years to 14 years	16	13.3
	14 and above	20	16.7
Total	120	100	

Source: Survey data, (2022)

5.2 Search Engine Optimization

Search engine optimization was determined by assessing, conversions, visibility and accessibility. The descriptive results for search engine optimization are shown in Table 4 below. The questionnaire used a 5 point

Monadic scale of 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= moderately agree, 4= Agree and 5= Strongly Agree.

The results in Table 4 above show that agencies' Facebook comments, shares, reads, and likes were judged on future lead conversions to a large extent, that inconsistency in shares and comments improved market performance of the agencies, that easy accessibility of agencies' websites increased the number of clients, and that search engine marketing increased profit margin growth in the agency by a mean score of 3.42, 3.23, 3.23, and 3.23, respectively, supported by a standard deviation of 1.287, 1.482, 1.482 and 1.482. Moreover, the agency's website appears on the first page of search results to a moderate extent, and easy accessibility of the website has increased the number of clients in the agency by mean scores of 3.07 and 3.03, respectively, supported by a variation in respondents' opinions indicated by a standard deviation of 1.555 and 1.471. The aggregate mean score of 3.2 indicated that respondents agreed on the use of search en-

gine optimization to improve the marketing performance of tours and travel agencies. However, there was a wide variation in the extent of search engine optimization used, as indicated by a standard deviation of 1.471. According to Barry and Charleton (2009) ^[21,22] and Salminen (2018) conclusions, search engine optimization has a positive impact on performance.

5.3 Competitive Advantage

The descriptive results on competitive advantage among tours and travel agencies are shown in Table 5 below. Measured using unique services, quality services and reputation.

Respondents generally agree that agency employees follow an ethical code of conduct in order to uphold corporate culture, and that agency services are easily identifiable in markets by customers, as evidenced by mean scores of 3.63 and 3.40, respectively, supported by standard deviations of 1.384 and 1.35. Furthermore, to a large extent, new entrants spend heavily on building cooperative reputation to overcome competition; the agency has unique services that competitors do not have; the agency maintains a good relationship with their clients to maintain organization reputation to the outside world; the

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics Results for Search Engine Optimization

Descriptions	Mean	Std. Deviation
Our agencies, Facebook comments, shares, reads and likes will be judged on future lead conversions	3.42	1.287
The inconsistency in shares and comments have enhanced market performance of your firm	3.23	1.482
Easy accessibility of our website has raised the number of clientele in the agency	3.23	1.482
Search engine marketing has increased profit margin growth in your agency	3.23	1.482
The agency's website appears on the first page while searching	3.07	1.543
Easy accessibility of our website has raised the number of clientele in the agency	3.03	1.555
Aggregate mean score and standard deviation	3.2	1.471

Source: Survey data, (2022)

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics Results for Competitive Advantage

Descriptions	Mean	Std. Deviation
Employees of this agency adhere to the ethical code of conduct to uphold the corporate culture	3.63	1.384
The agency services are easily identifiable in the markets by customers	3.40	1.35
New entrants spend heavily on building cooperative reputation to overcome competition	3.28	1.513
The agency has unique services that our competitors do not have	3.23	1.516
We maintain a good relationship with our clients to maintain organization reputation to the outside world	3.22	1.49
We have maintained a reliable service to ensure we maintain our brand position at the market level	3.18	1.277
Our agency have their corporate culture that enables better their market performance	3.18	1.472
The firm always seeks to maximize the value to our customers in our services	3.15	1.418
Aggregate mean score and standard deviation	3.28	1.427

Source: Survey data, (2022)

agency has maintained a reliable service to ensure they maintain their brand position at the market level; and the agency has a corporate culture that allows them to better their market performance and the agency always seeks to maximize the values the customer as demonstrated by a mean score of 3.28, 3.23, 3.22, 3.18, 3.18 and 3.15 respectively. There was high opinion variation of the respondents as indicated by a standard deviation of 1.513, 1.516, 1.49, 1.277, 1.472 and 1.418 respectively. Tours and travel agencies in Nairobi city county Kenya used competitive advantage to a large extent, as evidenced by an aggregate means score of 3.28 and a standard deviation of 1.427. The study findings support those of Mutuku et al., 2019, [26] who emphasize the importance of non-financial performance as a source of competitive advantage.

5.4 Market Performance

The overall market performance of tours and travel agencies is shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics Results for Market Performance

Descriptions	Mean	Std. Deviation
Market share growth	3.48	1.378
Sales volume growth	3.48	1.303
Market position	3.23	1.581
Aggregate mean score and standard deviation	3.21	1.466

Source: Survey data, (2022)

The table above shows the aggregate mean market performance score in terms of market share growth, sales volume growth, and market position. The aggregate mean score of 3.21 indicated that respondents agreed to a moderate extent, but the aggregate standard deviation of 1.466 indicated a high valuation on respondent observation.

6. Inferential Statistics

6.1 Diagnostic Tests

Diagnostics tests are key to ensuring that the results obtained are robust and can be relied upon in predicting the relationship between variables. Data that do not comply to the assumption yields spurious results, in terms of exaggerated coefficient and standard errors hence leading to misleading inferences about the study population. In this study, test of normality, test of multicollinearity, test of heteroskedasticity and test of linearity were diagnostic tests conducted.

6.2 Hypothesis Testing

H₀₁: Search engine optimization has no significant effect on market performance of the registered tours and travel agencies in Nairobi city county, Kenya.

The coefficient for search engine optimization was $\beta=0.357$ with p-value =0.000 which was statistically significant at 5 percent. These results implied that search engine optimization had a positive and significant effect on market performance of the registered tours and travel agencies in Nairobi city county, Kenya. The finding further implied use of search engine optimization amongst tours and travel agencies would result in an increase of 0.357 units in their market performance. These findings led to rejection of the null hypothesis H₀₁; There is no significant effect of search engine optimization on market performance of the registered tours and travel agencies in Nairobi city county, Kenya. Hence, the study finding implied that search engine optimization significantly predicted market performance of the registered tours and travel agencies in Nairobi city county, Kenya.

The study findings concur with the findings of Barry and Charleton, (2009) [21] on effects of search engine optimization and performance among small and medium-sized enterprises in Ireland found that there is a link between search engine optimization and performance. The study also concluded that search engine optimization increased visibility on the website among firms. Salminen, (2018) [22] also conducted a study on rationale effects of search engine optimization and performance for branded bidding strategy in Qatar and the results showed that significantly search engine optimization had significance influence on performance of these industries in Qatar hence impacts choice of branding bidding strategy.

H₀₂: Competitive advantage has no significant mediating effect on the relationship between online marketing strategies and market performance of the registered tours and travel agencies in Nairobi city county, Kenya.

The study second objective was to test the mediating effect of competitive advantage on the relationship between online marketing strategies and market performance of the registered tours and travel agencies in Nairobi city county, Kenya. To test the mediating effect, the study used the four-step method proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986). Step one predicts the dependent variable, step two predicts the mediating variable by a regression with the

independent variable, step three predicts the dependent variable by a regression with the mediating variable, and step four predicts the dependent variable by a regression with the independent variable and the mediating variable.

7. Conclusions

This study focuses on search engine optimization and market performance on registered tours and travel agencies in Nairobi city county, Kenya. Search engine optimization is important because there is a lot of content online, and it is only through search engine optimization that the right target audience is directed to the firm's online presence. Search engine optimization increases the number of user visits to tour and travel agency websites, the average duration of user visits, and the company's overall sales volume, according to data. This, in turn, leads to an improvement in the performance of Kenyan tour and travel agencies, confirming the hypothesis.

The study recommends that the management of the agencies should ensure that firm's website appears among the top searches and also ensure accessibility of firm's website is easy to enhance proper performance of agencies. The research shows that using the Internet to gain a large market share can help tours and travel agencies improve website performance and income. They might require administrative assistance as well as SEO marketing metrics. Future studies should focus on establishing how SEO affect market performance of firms in other sectors such manufacturing, processing, retailing among many other. This is ensuring the existing contextual gaps are bridged. Similarly, future researchers should delve even deeper into the website's Google statistics and investigate the possibilities of lengthy keyword variations in order to attract even more organic visitors.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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