USE OF INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES BY ZIMBABWEAN TOUR OPERATORS IN BUSINESS OPERATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Information communication technologies (ICTs) are a tool that is used by a large number of stakeholders in the tourism industry for product distribution and transacting. This is a result of the development of technology and a response to changes in customer purchasing behaviour. The study aimed at determining the ICT adoption and use by Zimbabwean tour operators. The qualitative research method was used through face –to- face interviews with key informants from the tourism industry. The study revealed that the majority of tour operators had not adopted information communication technologies in their business operations. This was a result of a number of factors for example, lack of knowledge about ICTs, limited information communication technologies infrastructure in the country and lack of appropriate government policies on ICTs. The study concluded that if the tour operators continue to use the current outdated business models the enterprises will gradually decline and close down. It is recommended that the government implements training programmes that are aimed at improving the tour operators' knowledge about the role that ICTs play as part of a business strategy as well as improving their general knowledge about the tourism industry. The study further recommended that local tour operators seek partnership with international tour operators selling holiday packages to Zimbabwe. This will help the tour operators to lip-frog the "digital divide" at the same time giving them a chance for long term survival.

Keywords: *ICTs, Tour Operators, Adoption, Digital Divide, Tourism Industry.*
JEL Classification: L86, L83, Z32

I. INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry has witnessed unprecedented growth in the adoption of information communication technologies in various areas of the sector. These include among others, adoption of hotel Central Reservation System, (CRSs) airlines and hotel Global Distribution Systems, (GDSs) Customer Management Systems, (CMSs) destination management systems, (DMS) point of sale system, (POSS) electronic security system, (ESS) and global positioning systems, (GPS) (Buhalis and Soo, 2009, Sahadev and Islam, 2014). Information Communications Technologies have been defined by Buhalis and Soo (2009:5) as "the entire range of electronic tools which facilitates the operational and strategic management of organizations by enabling them to manage their information, functions and processes as well as to communicate interactively with their stakeholders for achieving their missions and objectives". These trends were observed by Poon (1993) who postulated that no section of the tourism industry was going to escape adoption of information communication technologies in its operations in the future.

Tour operators in developed countries have followed the current trend of information communication technologies adoption in their business operations (Karcher, 1996, Reino and Baggio, 2013). However, this has not been the case with tour operators in the majority of developing countries (Shanker, 2008; Wiig, 2005 and Salim et al, 2013). The major problem faced by tour operators in developing countries is what has been referred to by Shanker (2008) as the "digital divide" whereby the level of ICTs development in these countries has generally been low.

The aim of this study was to determine the level of information communication technologies adoption by Zimbabwean tour operators and to identify the challenges they have encountered in adopting ICTs in their business operations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The adoption of information communication technologies in business operations has changed the relationship between the partners within the tourism distribution value chain. It has led to channel conflict, competition, and the birth of e-mediaries which are virtual tour operators, (Buhalis and Kaldis, 2008, Shanker 2008). Cavlek

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(2013) argues that tour operators need to change their business models from being organisers of tour packages to designers and innovators of special holiday packages that the market is demanding. He posits that tour operators can only achieve this through the adoption of information communication technologies as part of their business strategies. The observation is supported by Buhalis et al (2011) who postulate that adoption and use of ICTs gives the enterprises competitive advantage as a result of overall reduction in operational costs.

The use of the internet and the World Wide Web has therefore led tour operators to develop new business models, for example, the dynamic packaging model (Romano, 2005) in order to remain competitive in the market. A number of researchers have shown that these developments have, to a large extent, taken place in most developing countries (Romano, 2005, PhoCusWright Inc. 2009; Fotis et al, 2013) However this has not been the case in most developing countries (Karanasios,2007; Sanker,2008;Maswera et al, 2009; Wanjau et al, 2012).

The adoption and use of the internet has further led to changes in customer behaviour in terms of how they access the tourist products. The majority of tourists have shifted from accessing holiday products through the tour operators and travel agents to accessing them through virtual platforms using a wide range of devices for example, laptops, tablets and smartphones (Cosh 2007,Safer 2012, Reino and Baggio, 2013, Thakran and Verma; 2013). Tour operators have leveraged the use of ICTs in their enterprises in a number of ways (IFITT, 2014) including the following:

- Improvement of yield management and effective inventory management ;
- Enhancement of productivity and reduction in transaction costs;
- Enhancement of innovation, product creativity and competiveness;
- Provision of dynamic packaging platforms to clients; and
- Ability to customize products and service to market niches.

Whilst tour operators in the developed countries are reaping the benefits of the use of ICTs in their operations (Buhalis et al, 2011) there is still a need for them to improve their use of ICTs in several areas of their operations for example, the use of multi-channels for product distribution, improving the level of interactivity with customers and improvement in creativity and product innovation (IFITT, 2014).

Shanker (2008) postulates that inadequate information communication technologies in developing countries have slowed tour operators' ability to adopt information communication technologies in their operations. The challenges faced by tour operators in developing countries in adopting ICTs include; high costs of hardware and software, poor information communication technologies infrastructure, inability to attract ICTs skilled personnel, fear of technology, poor power supply and lack of government support (Karanasios, 2007; Wanjau et al, 2012). The problem of information communication technologies adoption by developing countries is further compounded by the fact that the majority of the tour operators in these countries are small and medium sized enterprises. They therefore have a limited financial base and a general lack of understanding of the strategic role that information communication technologies play in business operations (Mbatha, 2010; Shemi, 2012). The overall result of these negative macroeconomic and structural problems that developing countries have faced, has been limited adoption and use of information communication technologies in business operations (Maswera et al, 2009; Tsoka et al, 2014).

Potential customers from the developed countries have limited confidence in the information offered on the websites of the majority of tour operators in developing countries due to the general poor quality of these websites. The customers end up using the websites of source market tour operators who they are familiar with hence leading to loss of potential business by the local tour operators (Wiig, 2005).

III. METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research approach was used to gather data from the target population which was comprised of seven key informants from the tourism industry in Zimbabwe. The research strategy used was in-depth interviews. This strategy provided the opportunity to directly interface with the respondents (Jennings, 2001; Patton, 2002).The seven respondents were composed of the president of the Zimbabwe Council for Tourism; the Managing Director of Africa Sun; the ZTA Director for Standards and Product development; the General Manager of South African Airways in Zimbabwe; a lecturer in tourism at the University of Zimbabwe and the General Manager of Elephant Hills hotel in Victoria Falls.

The strategy used offered the opportunity to the respondent to proffer in-depth insights on the challenges that the tour operators faced in adopting information communication technologies in their enterprises. The knowledge

and experience of the respondents about operation in the tourism industry gave them the ability to give useful recommendations on what the Zimbabwean tour operators needed to do in order to remain in business in the future. The outcomes of the interviews were content analyzed using the Nvivo software package.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS
Demographic Composition of the Respondents
The main characteristics of the respondents covered; employment position, gender, education attained and experience in the industry. All the respondents were in management positions. The sample was dominated by males who constituted 78% of the respondents with remainder, 42% being made up of women. All the respondents had completed their O level education; with the lowest qualification attained being a post secondary diploma in tourism and the highest level attained being a PhD in tourism.

Figure 1 shows the number of years spent in the industry by the respondents.

FIGURE 1
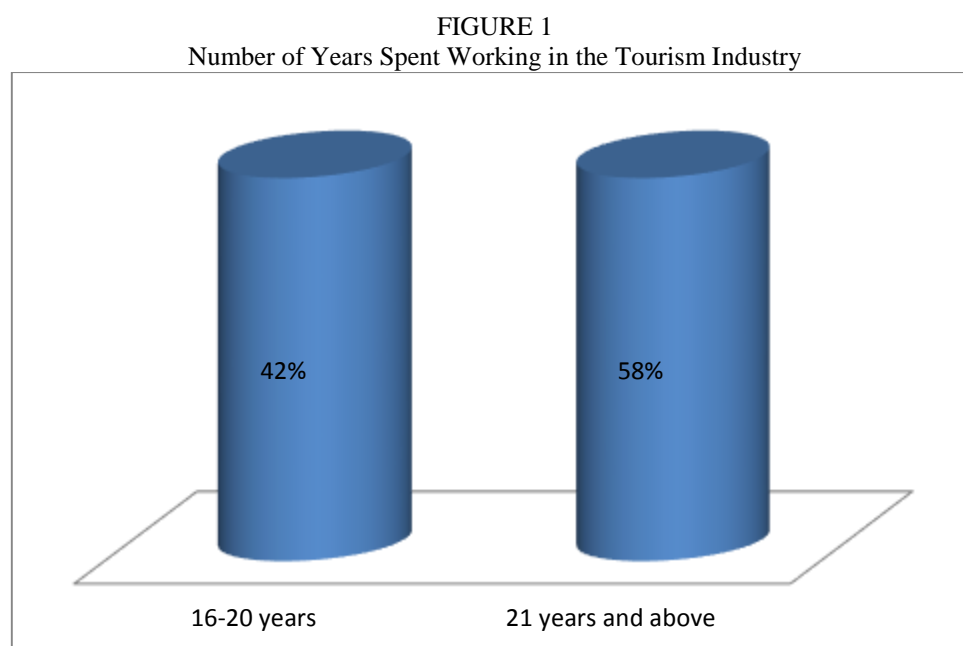Number of Years Spent Working in the Tourism Industry

Figure 1 shows that all the respondents had spent above 15 years working in the tourism, industry with 58% of them having spent twenty one years and above working in the tourism industry in Zimbabwe.

TABLE 1
Distribution of the Respondents by their Employment Positions

Employment Designation of Respondent	% of Respondents
Chief Executive	29
Director	14
Manager	43
Other	14
Total	100

The respondents were allocated codes related to their employment designation so as to maintain confidentiality of the views each one of them expressed during the interviews. The following codes were allocated to the respondents: RI-R3, managers, R4 director, R5-R6 Chief Executives and R7, Other.

The content analysis brought out a number of themes on each of the three questions discussed. With regard to the first question which addressed what needs to be done in order to ensure the sustainability of the tour operators in the country the respondents raised a number of issues. Figure 2 below shows the range of issues pointed out by the respondents.

FIGURE 2
Themes on What Needs to be done to Ensure Tour Operator Sustainability

Figure 2 shows a range of issues that tour operators needed to address in order for them to remain as sustainable business enterprises. These include the following:

- Adoption of a clear vision on the use ICTs;
- Developing adequate knowledge about the tourism industry;
- Engaging in cooperative marketing with other stakeholders in the tourism industry;
- Ensuring adoption of ICTs in business operations;
- Changing the current business model and use appropriate pricing of products;
- Developing innovative products;
- Offering service consistency; and
- Undertaking tour packaging consolidation.

Discussions with the respondents brought out the relative importance of each theme with regard to the long term sustainability of the tour operating enterprises in the country. Figure 3 shows the relative importance of the above themes.

FIGURE 3
Relative Importance of the Different Themes in Tour Operator Sustainability
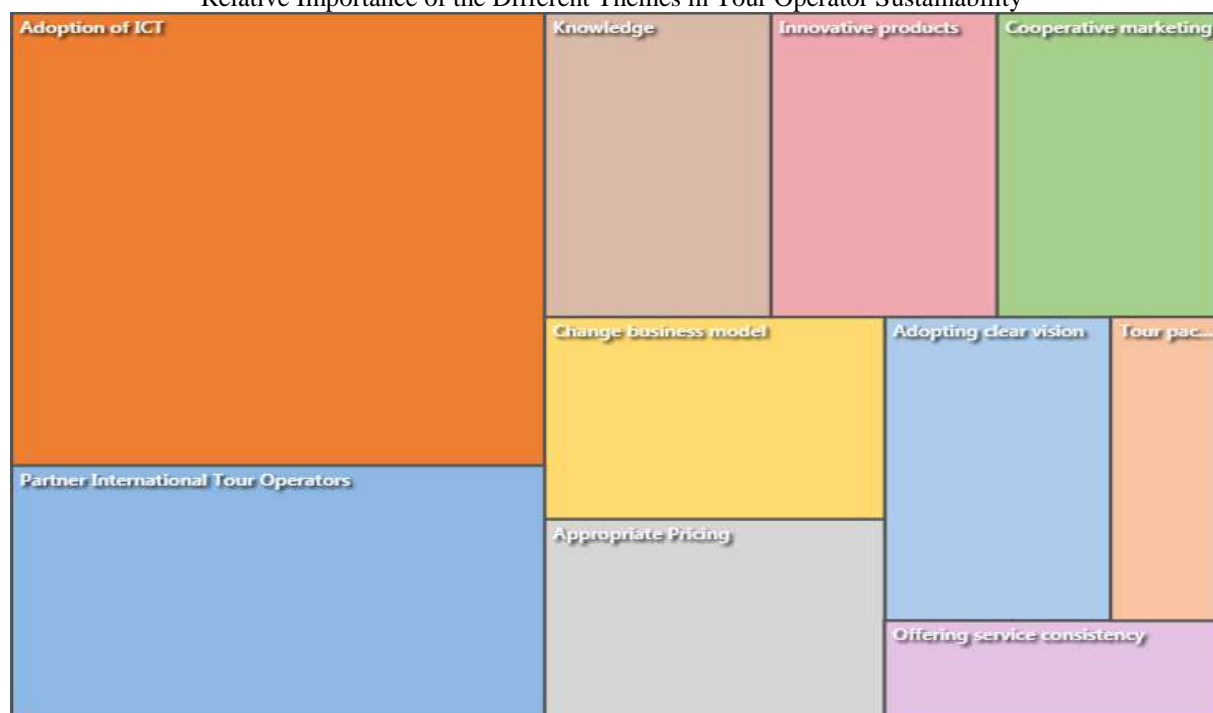
The most important issue to be addressed by the tour operators was perceived by the respondents as the need to adopt information communication technologies in business operations. The issue was highlighted by R2 who said:
"If Zimbabwe's tour operators do not adopt information communication technologies in their operations they will not be part of the country's future tourism industry"

The same issue was also pointed out by R5 who said:
"They have to develop a passion for ICTs otherwise their approach to its adoption will be half hearted. They need training in the role of ICTs in business management".

The second issue was perceived as the need to partner with international tour operators. The next important issues to be addressed were cooperative marketing, need to have adequate knowledge about the tourism industry, creation of innovative holiday tour packages and the need to have a clear vision on the use of ICTs in business operations. These issues were followed by the need to adopt a more appropriate business model. The final issue raised was   the need to have competitive prices. The respondents felt that the tour operators had failed to change their pricing to reflect the current economic situation in the country which was based on the United States dollar rather than the local currency. The point was aptly captured by R2 who said:
"Most tour operators are running their businesses as if the country is still in the hyperinflation period. Mark ups on products and services are still pegged at above 200%. No tourist is willing to spent their hard earned income on those types of prices"

The last issues highlightened by the respondents were the importance of offering consistent quality service and products and the need to be able to consolidate tour packaging in the country.

The key themes brought out by the respondents with regard to the question on what needed to be done to encourage tour operators to use the internet to sell their products were the following:
- ICTs security;
- Education of tour operators;
- Need to engage in cooperative marketing; and
- Need to establish partnership with other stakeholders in the industry.

FIGURE 4
Relative Importance of the Different Themes with Regard to Encouraging Tour Operators to Sell their Products Using the Internet.
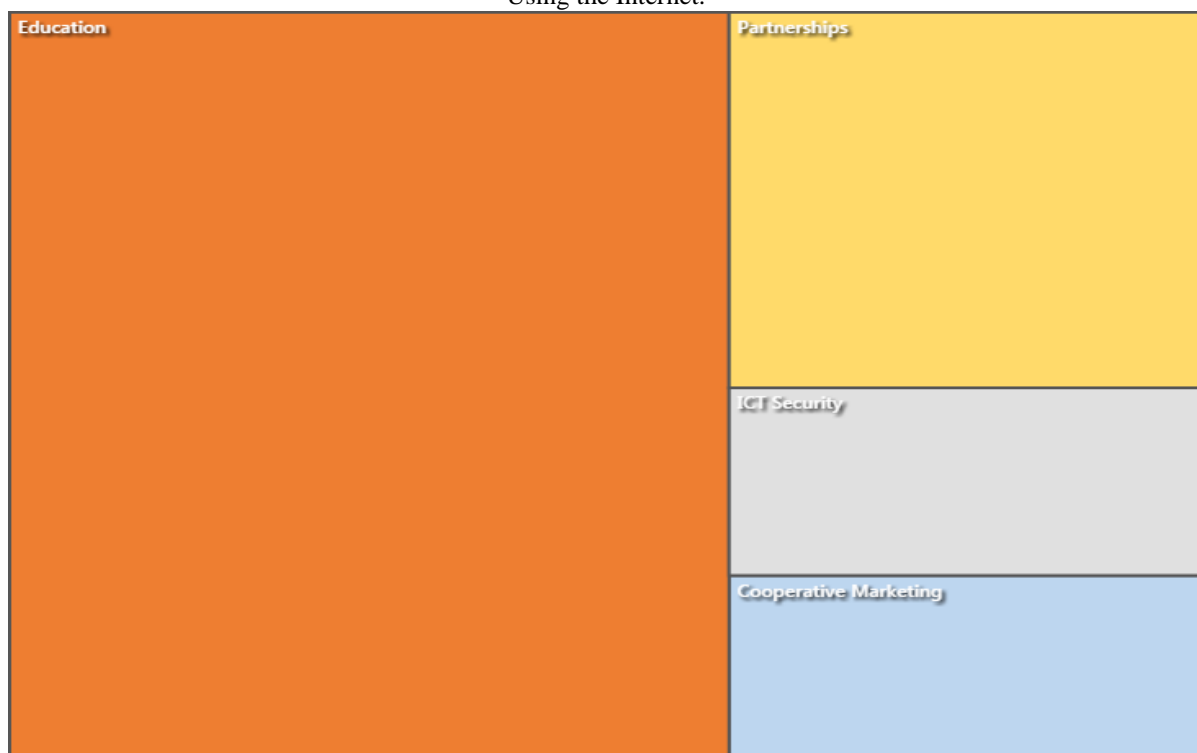
The respondents considered education of tour operators in different aspects of the tourism industry and information communication technologies as the most important issues to be addresses. The point was summarized by R1 as follows:

"The tour operating sector is dominated by people who have no experience in the tourism industry. They need to have an in-depth knowledge of the industry in order for them to appreciate why it is necessary to adopt ICTs in their enterprises".

The education theme was followed by the need to establish partnerships with stakeholders in the tourism industry. Issues of ICTs security and the need to engage in cooperative marketing were given equal weighting. Respondents (R2, R4 and 6) emphasized the need for the tour operators to participate in cooperative marketing as well as seek partnerships with international tour operators. The views were summed up by R4 who said:

"Our tour operators need to see themselves as key partners in promoting the destination as a whole and not just their tour packages. The majority of them are too small to be effective in the international market place. They have to partner with international tour operators if they want to survive in this business"

With regard to what the government needs to do to encourage tour operators to increase the use information communication technologies in their enterprises discussions with the respondents brought out four key themes. These are shown in figure 5.

FIGURE 5
Themes on how Governments Can Encourage Tour Operators to Adopt ICTs
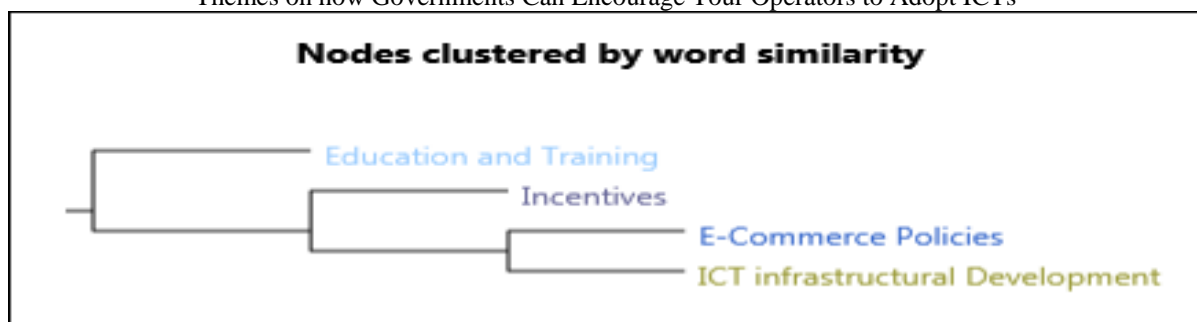

Figure 5 shows that in order for tour operators to adopt ICTs in their operations the government needs to address issues of education and training of the tour operators. The respondents offered a number of options as to what the government needs to do for example R2 made the following suggestion:

"Government must role out education programmes which help operators to be aware of the importance of using ICTs in their business".

Figure 5 further shows that the government also needs to offer the tour operators incentives to adopt ICTs and put in place E-Commerce policies. Finally figure 5 indicates the need for the government to focus on the development of ICTs infrastructure.

The respondents were able to give detailed explanations on each of the issues which were impacting on adoption of ICTs by tour operators in Zimbabwe, for example figure 6 shows a range of views with regard to education and training of tour operators.

FIGURE 6
Respondents Views with Regard to Education of Tour Operators
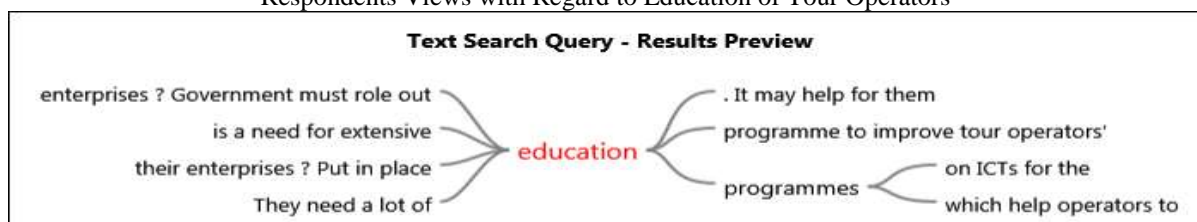
The explanations from the respondents emphasized the approach that the government needed to take in addressing the problem of training of tour operators on the role of ICTs in business operations.

V. DISCUSSIONS

The respondents gave informed insights into the issues affecting the long term sustainability of Zimbabwean tour operators. They highlightened what needs to be done to encourage tour operators to sell their holiday packages through the internet. They further indicated the actions that the government needs to undertake in order to encourage tour operators to use information communication technologies in their enterprises.

Future Survival of Tour Operators

The evidence from the respondents points to the crucial need for the tour operators to have a clear vision on adoption of information communication technologies in their operations. The enterprises are operating in a global environment in which the majority of the customers are using information communication technologies and hence if they continue to use the old ways of distributing their products they will not be able to access the "new" tourists. The adoption of information communication technologies needs to be part of the tour operators' business strategy (Porter, 2000). The challenges faced by Zimbabwean tour operators were also observed by Kilangi (2012) for tour operators in Tanzania and Demeke (2014) for tour operators in Ethiopia.

As was pointed out by the respondents the country's tour operators cannot hope to survive in the future if they continue to offer mundane tour packages to the market. Today's tourists are searching for experiential, innovative products that give them the opportunity to participate in cultural activities of the areas visited. They are also searching for products that give them the opportunity to increase their own skills through skills enhancing activities, for example participating in stone sculpture, pottery making or learning local languages. Therefore the tour operators need to undertake substantial market research in the country in order to establish the type of activities that will help to enhance the appeal of their products to both the domestic and international markets. It is also important for the tour operators to improve their knowledge of the tourism industry through participating in part-time training programmes that are offered by a number of colleges and universities in the country. Changes in customer demands, their buying behaviour, their incomes and holiday patterns are occurring at a very high speed. Tour operators cannot therefore rely on their experience to survive in the highly competitive global environment which is being constantly bombarded by new products. The tour operators need to have up-to-date information on global development in tourism for them to be able to sustain their business in the future.

5.1 Facilitators of internet adoption for selling tour operator' products

The respondents indicated that there were a number of factors that helped to change the mindset of the tour operators towards the use of the internet to sell their products. These factors included improvement of ICTs security, opportunities of cooperative marketing with other stakeholders in the industry and entry into partnership with international tour operators.

Given that senior tour operators' managers were individuals who had been in the tourism industry for a long time the lack of trust of information communication technologies was a challenge that prevented most of them to consider introducing them in their business. The managers feared losing control of the operations of the enterprise due limited knowledge of ICTs. They further feared incurring losses due to information communication technologies fraud. The apprehension on information communication technologies can only be allayed through training and education of the managers.

The respondents highlighted the fact that a large number of stakeholders in the tourism industry in Zimbabwe, for example hotels and airlines, were using the internet to sell their products. Tour operators are depended on packaging different components of the tourism products to create their own products. Possibilities were therefore high that with time the principles in the industry would persuade the tour operators to participate in cooperative marketing of the destination in different source markets. This would hence "force" the tour operators to use the internet to sell their products in association with other the stakeholders.

During the discussions the respondents noted that the majority of the tourists who were coming into Zimbabwe were purchasing their holidays packages through international tour operators. They further indicated that local tour operators were surviving as ground handlers of the business that is brought into the country by the international tour operators. They argued that Zimbabwean tour operators had no option but to introduce the use of information communication technologies in their operations if they were to maintain their relationships with the international tour operators. Failure to effectively adopt the use of ICTs in their operations could encourage the international tour operators to establish their own branches in the country which will handle their clients locally. The development would lead to the demise of a large number of tour operators in the country.

5.2 Role of government in encouraging ICTs adoption by tour operators

The respondents emphasized the fact that the government had a key role to play in creating an enabling environment that encourages tour operators to adopt information communication technologies in their business operations. There was a consensus that the government needed to focus on the following issues, education and training, provision of incentives, developing appropriate e-commerce policies and development of infrastructure in order to encourage tour operators to adopt ICTs in their enterprises.

Lack of knowledge was identified as the most important factor inhibiting tour operators in adopting information communication technologies in their enterprises. In view of the fact that the majority of the tour operators were small and medium sized companies they did not have the financial capability to accesses private sector driven training programmes. Hence it is through government driven training programmes that the managers in these companies can obtain the knowledge about the role of ICTs in business management. The training programmes would also facilitate their acquisition of basic ICT skills which would help them to appreciate the need to employ some ICTs skilled personnel in their operations.

It was argued that the government should investigate on the type of incentives that it can put in place which would act as a carrot for tour operators to adopt information communication technologies in their operations. One of the major challenges that small to medium sized (SMEs) companies have encountered in the country has been lack of affordable capital, as interest rates have been pegged between 10-20%. The government through the Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality Industry (MOTHI) therefore needs to consider creating a fund for the tourism industry which tour operators can access for the purchase of the necessary ICTs for their operations.

The respondents noted that tour operators in the country hardly practiced e-commerce which internationally had become the norm. Part of the challenge was lack of clear policies on ICT and e-commerce in the country. The government needs to put in place ICTs policies that will help business enterprises including tour operators to adopt e-commerce as a standard practice for transacting their business.

It was pointed out during the discussions with the respondents that the information communication infrastructure in the country was basic and far behind that available in neighbouring countries like South Africa and Botswana. Whilst the private sector has made commendable strides in development ICTs infrastructure there is still a major gap that needs to be fulfilled by the government, for example provision of adequate electricity in the whole country.

VI. CONCLUSION

Tour operators in Zimbabwe are operating their business using outdated business models. They hardly include information communication as part of their business strategy. There are a wide range of factors that created the current state of the tour operating business practices. These include among others lack of knowledge about ICTs and poor information communication infrastructure. The tour operator have to overcome these challenges if they are to survive as business enterprises in future because the majority of tourists around the world are accessing holiday products and services through information communication technologies platforms like websites using the internet. The tour operators who are not present on these global platforms will not be visible to the majority tourists and will therefore in the long term go out of business.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality Industry (MOTHI) rolls out a training programme on ICTs utilization for senior and middle managers in the tour operations sector of the tourism industry. The training will assist the managers to understand the strategic importance of information communication technologies in their business operations.

It is further recommended that the MOTHI arranges educational tours for tour operator managers to neighbouring countries like South Africa and Mauritius where they can be exposed to how far their counterparts had adopted ICTs in their business operations. The exposure will help the managers to grasp fully the central role that ICTs are now playing in modern business management.

The study further recommended that officials at the Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality Industry be exposed to tailor made ICTs training programmes so as to equip them with adequate understanding of information communication technologies. The training will help them to take a leadership role in guiding the whole tourism industry in the in the use of ICTs in business management.

It is also recommended that the government mainstreams the tourism sector in the national ICTs policy. The current components of the tourism industry that are enshrined in the national ICT policy are shallow and sketchy. The appropriate mainstreaming of the tourism sector in the national ICT policy will help to facilitate the establishment of statutory instruments that will incentivise tour operators to adopt information communication technologies in their business operations.

It is finally, the study further recommended that local tour operators seek partnership with international tour operators selling holiday packages to Zimbabwe. This will help the tour operators to lip-frog the "digital divide" at the same time giving them a chance for long term survival.

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