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Wildlife Tourism Experiences at the Maasai Mara, Kenya: Using Kano Model to Assess Tourists' Satisfaction

Abstract

This study examines destination attributes through tourist reviews in the Maasai Mara ecosystem using the Kano model. Overall, positive reviews were dominant, and most tourists were satisfied with the Mara wildlife tourism experiences. However, some attributes led to dissatisfaction. The highest contribution to tourist satisfaction was due to excitement attributes such as witnessing the great migration of the wildebeest. Attributes such as safety and service-related aspects also negatively affected tourist satisfaction. The findings are useful in promoting sustainable wildlife tourism by government, private industry, and community-based tourism organizations.

Keywords: wildlife tourism, Kano model, tourist satisfaction, sustainable tourism management, Kenya

1. Introduction

Kenya is a leading wildlife tourism destination in sub-Saharan Africa (Odunga & Maingi, 2011). Tourism is a major contributor to the national economy, and wildlife tourism in protected areas (PAs) significantly contributes to tourism activities (Korir et al., 2013; Odunga & Maingi, 2011). Kenya's wildlife-based tourism has witnessed a significant increase in the number of tourists and revenue, ecosystem destruction, and conflicts among tourism stakeholders (Juma et al., 2020; Oduor, 2020). In Kenya, PAs were carved out of lands that were inhabited by pastoral communities. Thus, their wildlife tourism industry is seen by some as denying local communities access to herding and agricultural land, and this has created resentment among local communities for tourism (Korir et al., 2013). This narrative is changing with the growing concern over the long-term sustainability of valuable resources, which led to the establishment of conservancies to allow local communities the management of wildlife and tourism (Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association [MMWCA], 2019).

Sustainable PA tourism development leads to economic benefits that could result in the improvement of the quality of life of local communities while also leading to the protection of natural and cultural heritage; it is widely promoted in PAs in developing countries for its potential benefits (KC, 2021a). The concept of sustainable PA tourism development was also adopted in Kenya to encourage local communities' inclusion in the planning of tourism, conservation of resources, and benefit-sharing from wildlife-based tourism (Oduor, 2020). However, the quality of services provided in PAs for tourists influences the outcome (Odunga & Maingi, 2011). The literature often overlooks the benefits of community inclusion at different levels, including their involvement as tourism service providers. A lack of coordination and attention between the tourism

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businesses and the government causes service quality failure (Juma et al., 2020). This ineffectiveness could negatively affect the economic, social, or environmental components of the Maasai Mara ecosystem.

The Maasai Mara National Reserve, also popularly known as “the Mara”, received over 291,017 visitors in 2018 (Juma et al., 2020). Many avenues exist to provide authentic wildlife tourism experiences to tourists through conservancies. The park authorities and associated private companies also play a key role in ensuring the success of these conservancies. However, there are insufficient studies on wildlife tourism and tourist satisfaction in Kenya. The existing studies fail to identify why tourism in major ecosystems such as the Mara does not have a sustainable impact on wildlife conservation and local communities, despite the growing revenues from tourism. Meanwhile, tourist satisfaction with wildlife tourism services plays a crucial role in creating that sustainable impact. To that end, this study examines destination attributes in the Mara ecosystem using the Kano model.

2. Customer satisfaction and product functionality categorization in the Kano model

Customer satisfaction is essential for repeat visitation (Yuksel, 2001). Thus, various tourist destinations are increasing their investments in products and services based on the level of perceived value they will create for guests. This is aimed at ensuring customer satisfaction and gaining customers’ loyalty. To achieve this, destination managers must take into account the product attributes that are most likely to influence customer satisfaction (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Mohajerani & Miremadi, 2012). Customer satisfaction enhances via attributes like favorable price, appealing image, security, cleanliness, physical attractiveness, opportunities for relaxation, personal service, service standard, location, and reputation (Dominici & Palumbo, 2013). Mohajerani and Miremadi (2012) found that perceived value, perceived quality, and image have positive effects on customer satisfaction, while customer satisfaction has a positive impact on customer loyalty and a negative impact on emerging complaints.

Since the Kano model’s introduction in the 1980s (Kano et al., 1984), it has been considered a popular model among marketing/management practitioners and researchers (Mikulić & Prebežac, 2011). The model can group products into different categories of attributes to assess the tourism experience. These attributes include basic, performance, excitement attributes, indifference, and (reverse) dissatisfaction (Dominici & Palumbo, 2013; Shen et al., 2021). According to Dominici and Palumbo (2013), basic (must-be) attributes’ presence will not increase the satisfaction level necessarily, but their absence is likely to cause dissatisfaction. Whereas performance (one-dimensional) attributes cause satisfaction when their performance is high and dissatisfaction when their performance is low. Excitement (attractive) attributes contribute to tourist satisfaction if delivered, but they do not cause dissatisfaction if they are not delivered. For indifferent attributes customers do not care about this attribute. Lastly, for reverse (dissatisfaction) attributes, customers do not desire this attribute, and its presence causes a great level of dissatisfaction, and its absence determines satisfaction. Primarily, the Kano model is applied quantitatively to assess product attributes (Lin et al., 2017; Shen et al., 2021). Even though its application is rare in a qualitative context, Mikulić and Prebežac (2011) argue that this model is an effective qualitative methodological tool where attributes can be categorized by comparing how frequently customers mention an attribute in a positive context or a negative context.

Due to the omnipresence of social media platforms, customers are constantly writing their tourism experiences. Social media platforms establish a valuable database for tourism destination communities or tourism service providers to evaluate those customer experiences to improve their tourism product and service quality (Li et al., 2013). Different attributes discussed in customer reviews have great value in influencing customer demand and satisfaction (Xu, 2020). Often, for tourism product purchases, online reviews play a critical role in customers’ decision-making process and simultaneously affect the supply side (Schuckert et al., 2015). Online

customer reviews can be conveniently used to categorize the destination attributes following the Kano model in understanding customer demand and satisfaction while informing providers to allow improvement in the destination attributes to cater quality of tourism experiences. This study is the first to explore the Kano model based on online customer reviews, which has much potential for its replication to advance both theoretical and practical implications in various tourism ecosystems.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study context

The Maasai Mara is in the southwestern region of Kenya, extending to the border of Tanzania, where it adjoins the Serengeti National Park. This PA is the location of the great annual wildebeest migration, a phenomenon that happens between the Mara and the Serengeti (MMWCA, 2019). The Maasai Mara constitutes the Maasai Mara National Reserve and the Mara conservancies, which are private conservancies that were established to form the great Mara ecosystem. The 15 conservancies belong to 14,528 landowners, who are the Maasai people living adjacent to the reserve. They lease their land for conservation efforts in return for revenue streams while maintaining ownership of the land. These conservancies cover a total area of 1,405 km², almost the size of the reserve (MMWCA, 2019).

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Tourist reviews about the Mara posted between January 2015, and January 2020 were collected from TripAdvisor. The review analysis is an accepted methodological approach (Abrahams et al., 2021). These reviews reflected wildlife tourism experiences offered at 15 conservancies. A total of 753 usable reviews were collected using the scraping technique via RapidMiner Studio data mining software (Bonthu & Bindu, 2018). The 5-year sample period was intended to enable trends in the experiences at the Mara. The reviews were analyzed thematically to categorize attributes according to the Kano model. Azure Generator was used, i.e., a Microsoft Excel extension software that has the mechanism to compute and assign count values to sentiments. Initially, reviews were grouped as either positive, neutral, or negative; the reviews were then further re-grouped as either basic, performance, excitement, indifferent, or (reverse) dissatisfaction attributes (Dominici & Palumbo, 2013).

With consensus, authors developed a threshold to re-group the reviews into different attributes. Neutral attributes were grouped as basic attributes (animals – crocodiles, hippos, wildebeest, and big five, and safari – game drives and game viewing). Likewise, positive attributes were grouped with satisfaction scores below 80% as performance attributes (people – Maasai people and tour guide, activities – wildebeest crossing and balloon rides, and accommodation – food and lodges) and above 80% as excitement attributes (locations – physical scenario, and experiences – great migration and drowning wildebeest). Since basic attributes such as animals and safari are foundational aspects of customer satisfaction in the Maasai Mara ecosystem, a threshold to distinguish performance and excitement attributes is kept as high as 80%. Further, the study grouped negative reviews with a score below 30% as indifferent attributes (missed opportunities – migration season and animals crossing, and intangibles – idle hours and weather) and those above 30% as dissatisfaction attributes (security – theft and overcrowding, and service – guards charging). The Maasai Mara is considered one of the natural wonders of the world, and a threshold to distinguish indifferent and dissatisfaction attributes are kept as high as 30%. This is because to be indifferent or dissatisfied in such a revered destination, tourists' negative experiences should be unlikely; therefore, a threshold is kept only as high as 30%.

To evaluate the examples of the attributes in each category of the Kano model, a text frequency analysis of responses in the various categories was conducted, and the responses were tabulated using both one-word and two-word phrases. Specifically, a two-word phrase was used to ensure interpretation in instances where one-word phrases could result in missed interpretations.

4. Findings

The findings showed that 21.51% of the tourists had a negative experience, 8.63% had a neutral experience, and 69.85% had a positive experience at the Mara (Table 1). Despite the high number of positive experiences at the Mara, the results still showed that the number of negative experiences was relatively high, even though this is revered as one of the natural wonders of the world.

Table 1.
Review analysis

Reviews	Count of score	Percentage
Negative	162	21.51
Neutral	65	8.63
Positive	526	69.85
Total	753	100.00

The findings revealed that 8.63% of the tourists associated their Mara experience because of the basic attributes, 31.61% associated with the performance attributes, and 38.25% associated with the excitement attributes. The indifferent and dissatisfaction attributes were associated with 13.28% and 8.23% of the respondents, respectively (Table 2). The excitement and performance attributes contributed greatly to the customer delight experience, but there was also a considerable number of indifferent and dissatisfaction attributes affecting the levels of tourist satisfaction.

Table 2
The destination attributes categorization based on the Kano model

Attributes	Count of score	Percentage
Basic (animals and safari)	65	8.63
Performance (people, activities, and accommodation)	238	31.61
Excitement (locations and experiences)	288	38.25
Indifferent (missed opportunities and intangibles)	100	13.28
Dissatisfaction (security and service)	62	8.23
Total	753	100.00

5. Discussion and conclusion

Destination attractiveness and tourists' satisfaction are essential components of the tourism industry in a competitive world (Mikulić et al., 2016). Our findings suggest that tourists in the Mara ecosystem experience a relatively high level of satisfaction. However, negative experiences also led to dissatisfaction. Basic attributes contributing to neutral experiences include animal viewing and safaris—both attributes for which tourists hold strong expectations. Performance attributes, including accommodation services and activities, contribute to customer satisfaction, but much of the tourist satisfaction is a result of witnessing the wildebeest migration. The Mara ecosystem is grappling with challenges beyond the control of Mara's management; such challenges make up some of the indifferent factors identified in the Kano model. For example, there is unpredictability involved with the wildebeest migration due to climate change, while the number of migrating wildebeest has declined by over 80% on certain migratory routes (Sykora, 2020). The change in historically known dates of the wildebeest migration leads to missed opportunities for tourists.

Many dissatisfaction attributes resulted from poor park management. Overcrowding has been witnessed in recent years with an excessive number of vehicles and tourists at key crossing points (to have a better view of the animals), causing the destruction of wildlife habitats and environmental pollution that compromises the

well-being of the reserve (Maingi, 2019). There is a possibility that animals might change crossing points if this continues. Some camps are set up at these crossing points, and as a result, some routes have been blocked for the animals. This creates confusion among the animals during the crossing period and negatively affects the vegetation of the surrounding area and their migratory behavior/pattern (Maingi, 2019; Stuber, 2020).

The Mara ecosystem depends on tourism, but there is a dearth of studies on tourist satisfaction. This study fills that research gap. Conservancies are integrated to provide wildlife tourism experiences along with those provided by the park authorities and other private companies. These initiatives have the power to generate economic, sociocultural, and environmental benefits toward the long-term sustainability of the Mara ecosystem. The Kano model is used in the wildlife tourism context, and we argue that this model can be applied to improving the wildlife tourism experiences for tourists and to inform the government, the private sectors, and community-based tourism organizations to provide better and quality experiences for tourists.

PAs can generate both positive and negative impacts. In recent years, there has been a growing concern for overtourism at PAs, including some well-known natural world heritage sites (Honey & Frenkiel, 2021). Due to COVID-19, PAs are argued to have both short- and long-term impacts (Mandić, 2021). Even though COVID-19 has reduced some pressure on PAs, tourism-dependent PAs are still facing some serious conservation threats. KC (2021b) argues that sustainably managed PAs, undertourism, or overtourism PAs will face a different set of challenges due to COVID-19 and beyond the pandemic. Fredman and Margaryan (2021) suggest that COVID-19 will allow PAs to position themselves well for post-pandemic travel. Indeed, the impact of COVID-19 is likely to be uneven.

Based on the findings, we recommend that the Narok county government in charge of park management should develop a strategic plan to regulate the number of tourists visiting the Mara by having a centralized booking system, which will ensure that only a limited number of tourists visit the Mara at any given time. This will reduce the stress on the vegetation and the animals, especially during the migration. In the interim, the Narok county government should regulate the location and operation of camps and lodges. All camps and lodges near the crossing points must be eliminated or relocated to avoid the use of migratory paths. Often camps and lodges begin as temporary camps and are slowly converted to permanent lodges. The investors in charge of the management of the lodges should be encouraged to invest in conservation efforts and long-term tourism sustainability.

This study looked at demand-side perspectives by analyzing tourists' reviews. However, supply-side perspectives are equally important to promote sustainable wildlife tourism; hence, future studies can seek to fill this gap. Studies that acknowledge and build an understanding of the pillars of sustainable tourism—economic, sociocultural, and environmental—both from the demand-side (tourist) and supply-side (stakeholders including government/park authorities, communities from conservancies, as well as private hospitality and tourism businesses) perspectives, would enhance the long-term sustainability of the Mara ecosystem. In the African context, wildlife and natural resource conservation mechanisms are negatively affected by COVID-19 because their PAs are heavily dependent on tourism to fund their conservation programs (KC, 2021b). Thus, tourist satisfaction from wildlife tourism influences the successful conservation and management of the Mara. Accordingly, a strategic approach is required to create a sustainable impact of wildlife tourism on wildlife conservation and the well-being of all other relevant stakeholders.

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