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Influence of Domestic Tourism Marketing Strategies on Post Covid-19 Hospitality Sector Recovery in Isiolo County

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Influence of Domestic Tourism Marketing Strategies on Post Covid-19 Hospitality Sector Recovery in Isiolo County

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Abstract

The impact of promotional strategies and product diversification on post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery in Isiolo County cannot be ignored, more so in a bid to reignite the sector recovery. Thus, the study examined the influence of domestic tourism marketing strategies on post covid-19 hospitality sector recovery in isiolo county. The study was guided by the dynamic capability theory and extended marketing mix theory. Descriptive survey was adopted and the study area was areas encompassing Isiolo County. The study targeted 370 employees from three game reserves in Isiolo County. Stratified random sampling was used to select 192 respondents forming the sample size. Primary data was gathered using questionnaires and underwent a pre-testing to ensure it was valid and reliable. The analysis of each objective was done through means and standard deviation and regression analysis and presented through tables and figures. The study established that 70.8% change in post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery in Isiolo County is explained by variation in promotional strategies and product diversification. Similarly, promotion strategies ($p < 0.05$) and product diversification ($p < 0.05$) had significant effect on post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery in Isiolo County. The study concluded that promotional strategies were significant predictors of post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery in Isiolo County. Isiolo County had invested in promotional efforts aimed at enhancing recovery of hospitality sector and concludes that product diversification had significant effect on post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery in Isiolo County. Product diversification strategies in Isiolo County helped to diversify broad range of services that were enjoyed by tourists. The study recommends that Isiolo County should intensify awareness campaigns and branding of the local tourism products to stimulate their uptake among tourists. Players in the hospitality sector in Isiolo County should leverage market research to enhance the level of awareness of the local tourism products. Players in the hospitality sector in Isiolo County should constantly develop new tourism attractions and diversify more on the portfolio available to tourists. Local culture of people living in Isiolo County should be blend with their tourism attractions as a way of supporting diversification.

Keywords: *Promotion strategies, product diversification, domestic tourism marketing strategies, post- COVID-19 hospitality recovery.*

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1.0 Introduction

Hospitality sector plays significant role in the socio-economic development of any Country or destination by providing employment opportunities and contribution to the gross domestic products. Pandemics, disasters and other natural calamities significantly affects the growth and development of the hospitality sector. In late 2019, Corona virus disease (commonly called COVID-19) emerged in China and within a limited period of time, COVID had spread to other parts of the world as a global pandemic resulting into significant implication on the hospitality sector. Countering the spread of this pandemic required the adoption of such measures as lockdowns that had negative effects on the inflow of tourists. The ripple effect of this was a reduction in hotel bookings and occupancy rates as well as significant loss in employment opportunities. While some hotels were forced to scale down most of their operations, others closed their premises permanently mostly in mid-2020 to early 2021. However, this situation has not remained permanent as the hospitality sector is currently striving to recover from the negative shocks that were occasioned by COVID-19. For instance, in the United States (US), the average hotel occupancy rates stood at 59 per cent in May 2021 while revenue per available room stood at \$69.81 within the same period (Eggleston & Lee, 2021). This was the highest figure since February in 2020 before the pandemic hit the country.

In Canada, the easing of COVID-19 restrictions in Mid-June 2021 saw hotel occupancy rate at 28.1 per cent which was relatively high as compared to the rates in 2020 within the same period (Eggleston & Lee, 2021). Conventional wisdom dictates that successful post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery is strongly dependent on efforts made by the government and sector players to stimulate local tourism. In most major economies around the world, domestic tourism is the key driving force of the tourism as well as travel sectors representing 73 per cent and 71.2 per cent for total travel and tourism spending in 2017 and 2018 respectively (WTTC, 2018). Globally, China is leading domestic tourism market with a domestic tourism spending of US\$ 840.9 in 2017 (WTTC, 2018). Because of the potential benefits associated with domestic tourism, countries around the world are working to come up with relevant means for stimulating the uptake of domestic tourism activities.

Promotion strategies of domestic tourism require a country to improve on the infrastructure and carry out aggressive marketing and promotion (WTTC, 2019). In Malaysia, Chan (2021) argued that domestic tourism can be promoted when attractive and discounted tour package prices are offered to local tourists in the country. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the attitudes and behavior of tourists have been greatly impacted resulting into a situation where most people have strong preference of domestic rather than oversea traveling (Chan, 2021). This has therefore increased the essence of domestic tourism in most countries around the world. In China, Wu, Cao, Liu and Chen (2022) observed that before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a drop-in contribution of domestic tourism to the overall economy from 2.53 per cent to 1.20% per cent across these the two periods respectively.

In Africa, Woyo (2021) argued that most of the countries like Zimbabwe are leveraging on domestic tourism as one the post COVID-19 recovery strategies. However, as a recovery strategy, Woyo (2021) shared that challenges being faced by Zimbabwe that are beyond COVID-19 have rendered local tourism unsustainable. Similarly, Kabote, (2020) observed that in absence of domestic tourism, as a tourist destination country, Zimbabwe would be struggling to achieve growth in expansion of tourism market share. As observed by Maturaa (2021), the main ways of that most of the African countries are leveraging to stimulate

domestic tourism in pre and post COVID-19 pandemic include enhancing affordability of and accessibility to tourism products, enhancing the level of income of citizens in a country, development of appealing tourism packages and aggressive marketing efforts.

Thus, from the above global and regional conceptual review of literature, it is evident that there exist several domestic tourism marketing strategies. However, the study focused on tourism product promotion, product diversification and competitive pricing with focus on Isiolo County that was created in 2013 following the promulgated of new constitution in 2010 that gave rise to devolution through County Government system in Kenya. The Isiolo county is among tourism attraction centers in Kenya due to wildlife as well as wide range of hotels. Basically, Isiolo County in terms of tourism attraction sites is well cognizant of three game National reserves namely, Shaba National Reserve, Buffalo Springs and Bisanadi. Despite the presence of these tourism attractions in Isiolo, the uptake of domestic tourism products in the county has remained low over the years. This has ignited debate and scholarly discourse on whether adequate mechanisms have been put in place to drive domestic tourism activities in Isiolo County. This is of great importance as it would allow the hospitality sector to recover after the shocks that were occasioned by the pandemic waves. Empirical investigation of this scenario of low uptake of tourism products in Isiolo County is limited to support mature conclusion.

Successful post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery is strongly hinged on strategies put in place to promote local tourism sector. Developed countries like China have realized the need to have in place relevant strategies to promote domestic tourism as compared to less developed and developing countries like Kenya. The low uptake of domestic tourism products in some regions in Kenya and particularly Isiolo County has remained a challenge for hospitality sector post COVID-19 recovery. Given the significant role played by hospitality sector towards the development of Isiolo County and Kenya at large, and the negative shocks that were witnessed from COVID-19 pandemic, this sector is currently working on a path to recovery. According to MoT, Kenyan international visitors reduced by 72.3% from 2.04m visitors in 2019 to less than 570,000 international visitors in 2020 while domestic bed nights shrunk from 4.8m beds in 2019 to 1.8m beds in 2020.

However, the sector is on the path to recovery and quick recovery of this sector would require the concern of all stakeholders in the tourism sector to stimulate domestic tourism through aggressive promotion, diversification and competitive pricing of the tourism products. While promotional strategies are likely to grow the market share, product diversification has potential of minimizing exposure to risks while competitive pricing of products has likely potential of attracting more customers. Failure to embrace the aforementioned strategies would mean that the hospitality sector would remain staggering with an imminent danger of job cuts and lose of livelihoods to millions of people working in this sector. Most of the available studies create gaps as some were conducted in different contexts at country level and available studies were done focusing on different dependent variables away from post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery and others failed to cover hospitality sector. Furthermore, Isiolo County's potential for tourism growth had not been discussed in the scholarly discourse. Thus, with these identified knowledge gaps and the existing scanty literature, the study sought to establish how domestic tourism marketing strategies impact positively towards post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery with reference to Isiolo County.

1.1 Research Objectives

The study was guided by the following objectives.

- i. To establish the impact of promotional strategies on post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery in Isiolo County
- ii. To determine the impact of product diversification on post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery in Isiolo County.

2.0 Literature Review

The literature review was discussed in sections.

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Dynamic Capability Theory

This theory was developed by Teece, Pisano and Shuen (1997). This theory regards a firm as one that operates in an increasingly turbulent environment and thus the need to ensure that their internal and external competences have been integrated, built and reconfigured in response to the changes in the operating environment. The theory is premised on an account that efforts should be made to ensure that basic competences of an enterprise are utilized in creation on competitive advantage on a short-term basis. It focuses on the fact that the industry must be able to reinvent itself and evolve due to unexpected eventualities. Therefore, dynamic capabilities allow businesses to adapt to quickly changing circumstances while maintaining a competitive advantage. The developed short-term competences are then required to transform into long term competitive edge (Teece et al., 1997). Product differentiation, promotional strategies and competitive pricing of local tourism products are some of the strategies that can be used to respond to changes in the operating environment for the sector. Thus, this theory will be used to underpin these variables.

2.1.2 The Extended Marketing Mix Theory

Initially, the marketing mix was developed by McCarthy (1960) and it covered 4-Ps: Price, product, promotion and place. Later on, three more additional Ps were incorporated by Booms and Bitner (1982) covering people, process and physical evidence. Product is the actual good and services that are produced or offered by an enterprise. In most cases, products are usually designed to achieve the needs of customers of the firm. Price is the only aspects of the 7Ps that generate revenues to the firm, all the remaining elements present potential costs to the enterprise (Rathod, 2016). Place is the location of the business where customers pay visits to purchase products. It may be through an online platform or physical in nature. Promotion is communicating of the unique features of the product to customers so that they are aware of the same. The people in the firm are critical in providing unique services to customers to improve revenues in the firm. The daily processes in the firm are key in improving efficiency and thus contributing towards customer satisfaction. Physical evidence provides tangible cues regarding the quality of experience being offered by the firm for instance, online reviews on Google (Mucui, Mbaeh & Noor, 2013). Competitive pricing strategies are one of the independent variables in the proposed study that will be guided by this theory.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Domestic Tourism Promotional Strategies

Promotional plays an instrumental role in ensuring that tourism products are well communicated to tourists. The study done by Maturaa (2021) focused on strategies of

promoting tourism before and after the rise of COVID-19 within the context of Zambia. Leveraging qualitative approaches, the study documented that the key strategies that were embraced in promoting and marketing of tourism before and after the pandemic included enhancing affordability of and accessibility to tourism products, developing packages that were appealing and marketing campaigns. In a study by Zwirn (2021), the implication of influencer marketing on recovery of the domestic tourism sector were examined. Leveraging the context of United Kingdom, the study observed that influencer marketing ensure that tourism brands are well connected with their target audience. This way, the advantages of domestic tourism are closely brought to consumers.

The analysis by Basera (2018) placed more emphasis on strategies for marketing tourism and their implication on demand of domestic tourism within the context of Zimbabwe. Building on evidence from qualitative approaches, it emerged that the strategies of marketing tourism products and the demand of domestic tourism are significantly linked with each other. It also emerged that tourism marketing strategies can only be successful when there is high level of corporation between stakeholders in marketing efforts. Samau (2017) assessed marketing efforts and activities and their implication on perceptions the consumers have towards domestic tourism. Leveraging convenience sampling, it emerged that limited funds and strong preference for international tourists hindered effective marketing of domestic tourism.

In Kenyan context, Thumbi (2014) did an analysis with emphasis on strategies for marketing tourism and their implication on flow of domestic tourists. Tourism marketing strategies were represented by use of the existing tourism products, branding, market segmentation and awareness campaigns. All these proxies of tourism marketing were found to have significant implication on the flow of local tourists. Kamau et al (2015) did an analysis whose focus was on channels of marketing communication and the role they have as far as urban domestic tourism in Kenya is concerned. The location of the study was Nakuru and Nairobi. It emerged from the survey that the key marketing communication channels for local tourism include sales promotion, exhibitions, televisions as well as magazines and brochures. There are no similar studies that were conducted in the northern Kenyan tourism corridor which Isiolo is a key player with its unique tourism product offers.

2.2.2 Product Diversification Strategies

Diversification focuses on expanding the portfolio of products and services that are offered to customers in order to remain sustainable. Within the context of local tourism, diversification implies increase the range of products offered to customers as a strategy to mitigate against unforeseen risks (Yap, et al, 2022). The study conducted by Weidenfeld (2018) was on diversification of tourism and its implication on specialization. The results from this analysis were that market, product and sectorial diversification play an important role when it comes to local tourism products. Brel, et al (2020) did an appraisal of tourism diversification and how it contributes towards a green economy. It was observed that diversification of tourism entailed expanding the portfolio and that it was instrumental in reduction of risks. The study failed to link diversification of local tourism products with hospitality sector recovery after COVID-19 pandemic.

Zigern-Korn and Kol (2018) focused on how diversification of tourism products can act as strategies for developing local tourism in Russia. The study noted that local tourism can be diversified by incorporation of recreation facilities which in turn would increase the period that tourists would spent during the adventures. Benur and Bramwell (2015) did an analysis of the development and diversification of tourism products within destinations. It emerged

that tourism diversification include establishment of mass as well as niche tourism products to customers. Tourism products can be diversified through development of new attractions that can help in enticing the tourists. It also entails promotion of cultural tourism that focuses on sports, festive and food. These complement the tourism activities thus attracting more tourists. Events like sports and cultural tourism are important diversifications that when embraced can increase the period of stay by tourists. There is no research conducted that highlights how the product diversification strategies could lead to the development and growth of the domestic tourism sector in the northern part of Kenya thus contribute to the recovery of hospitality sector after the pandemics and other disasters.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 is the conceptual framework that was used to guide the study.

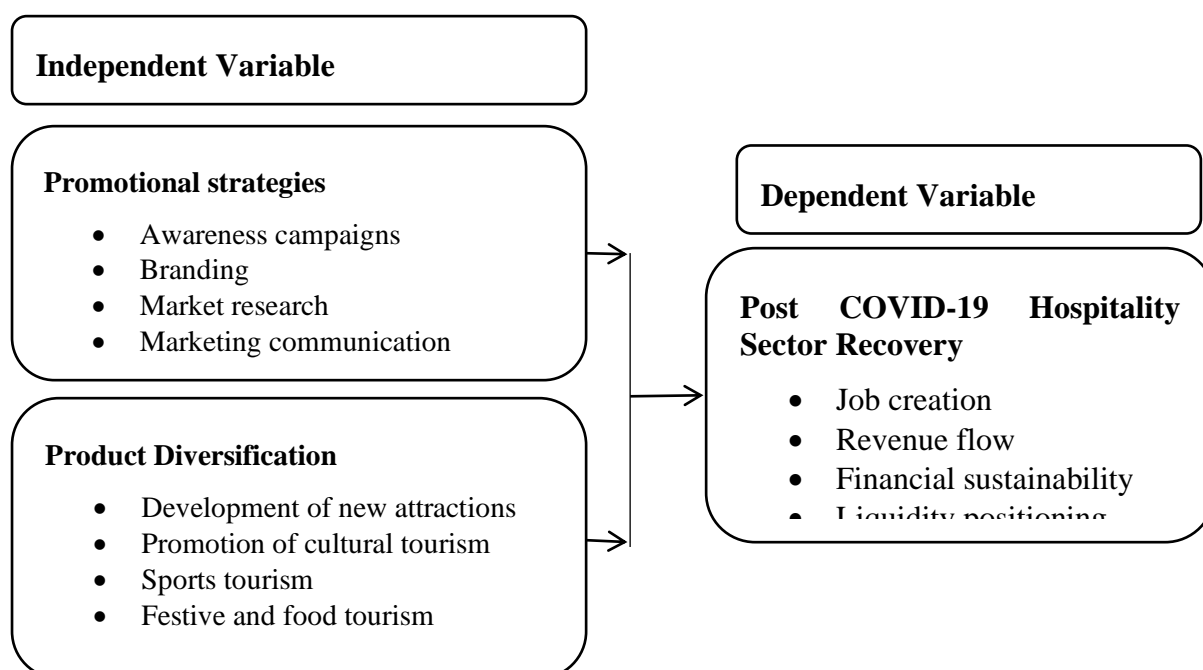


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

3.0 Research Methodology

The study utilized a descriptive survey research design to collect and analyze quantitative data. The target population comprised 370 employees working in hospitality establishments located in three game reserves in Isiolo County: Buffalo Springs National Reserve, Bisanadi National Reserve, and Shaba National Reserve. The stratified random sampling technique was adopted to select a representative sample from each stratum. The sample size was determined using Yamane's formula, resulting in a total of 192 respondents. The sampling process involved stratifying respondents into their respective game reserves and selecting a proportional sample from each stratum. Data was gathered through primary means, using questionnaires as employed in a related study. The questionnaire underwent a pre-test involving 4 respondents (1% of the target population) from Meru National Park, chosen due to its proximity to Isiolo County to reduce bias. Two experts in tourism from Maseno University reviewed the questionnaire to ensure adequate coverage of the construct being measured. Comments raised during the review process were incorporated into the final instrument before data collection. The reliability of the instrument was assessed using

Cronbach's alpha, with values above 0.7 indicating a reliable scale. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was utilized for data analysis, employing measures such as means, standard deviations, and regression analysis to examine the influence of domestic tourism marketing strategies (independent variables) on post-Covid-19 hospitality sector recovery (dependent variable).

4.0 Results and Discussions

The study conducted a survey to gather data from respondents. From the 192 questionnaires that got administered to respondents, 163 got duly filled up and collected for analysis. This translated to a response rate of 85%. Reliability analysis was conducted from the pilot tested questionnaire through determination and interpretation of the values of Cronbach Alpha Coefficients and summarized as in Table 1.

Table 1: Reliability Results

	No. of items	Cronbach Alpha Coefficient
Promotion strategies	4	.765
Product diversification	4	.847
Competitive pricing	4	.773
post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery	4	.892
Average score		.819

The findings in Table 1 indicate the overall value of the Cronbach Alpha Coefficient as 0.819, and the respective values for all the objective variables are above 0.7. As observed by Rose, McKinley, and Baffoe-Djan (2019), such values above 0.7 provide an indication that a reliable scale has been utilized in the design of the questionnaire. Thus, a reliable scale was used in designing the contents of the questionnaire for this study. Means and standard deviations were computed on the objective variables as part of descriptive statistics and the findings as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Promotional Strategies

Statements on promotional strategies	Mean	Std. Dev
Promotional strategies	3.78	.756
product diversification strategies	3.77	.808
Competitive Pricing Strategies	3.61	.703

Table 2 shows that promotional strategies (M=3.78), product diversification (M=3.77) and competitive pricing strategies (M=3.61) had all been embraced in Isiolo County to help in promoting domestic tourism (M=3.61). Competitive strategies at Isiolo County entailed offering of differentiated prices. Regression analysis was conducted to establish the effect of domestic tourism marketing strategies on post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery. The

study results imply that the hospitality sector in Isiolo County had adopted various marketing strategies to promote domestic tourism and aid in the recovery of the sector after the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of promotional strategies, product diversification, and competitive pricing strategies, as indicated by their high mean scores, suggests that these strategies were widely employed by the industry in the region. The embracement of competitive pricing strategies, particularly offering differentiated prices, highlights the efforts made by the hospitality sector to remain competitive and attract domestic tourists. Table 3 is a breakdown of the model summary.

Table 3: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	
1	.845 ^a	.714	.708	.70047	
	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	4.030	1.776		2.269	.000
Promotion strategies	.416	.024	.745	17.333	.000
Product diversification	.474	.111	.595	4.270	.000

It can be noted from Table 3 shows that 70.8% change in post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery in Isiolo County is explained by variation in domestic tourism marketing strategies. It then follows that there exist other variables other than the domestic tourism marketing strategies covered in this study that have an influence on post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery which future studies should seek to establish. The study results imply that domestic tourism marketing strategies play a significant role in the post-COVID-19 recovery of the hospitality sector in Isiolo County. The following equation is predicted from Table 3 above:

$$Y = 4.030 + 0.416X_1 + 0.474X_2 + e$$

Where Y= post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery

X₁= Promotion strategies

X₂= Product diversification

e= stochastic term

The study established the impact of promotional strategies on post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery in Isiolo County. Table 3 shows p-value under promotional strategies as p=0.000 i.e p<0.05 and thus, the study inferred that promotional strategies were significant predictors of post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery in Isiolo County. The findings agree with a study by Zwirn (2021) who established that influencer marketing ensure that tourism brands are well connected with their target audience. This way, the advantages of domestic tourism are closely brought to consumers. The analysis by Basera (2018) established strategies of marketing tourism products and the demand of domestic tourism are significantly linked with each other. It also emerged that tourism marketing strategies can

only be successful when there is high level of corporation between stakeholders in marketing efforts. Thumbi (2014) established that the use of the existing tourism products, branding, market segmentation and awareness campaigns have significant implication on the flow of local tourists. Kamau, Waweru, Lewa and Misiko (2015) noted that the key marketing communication channels for local tourism include sales promotion, exhibitions, televisions as well as magazines and brochures.

On the impact of product diversification on post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery in Isiolo County. Table 3 indicate the p-value under product diversification as $p=0.000$ that is $p<0.05$. Thus, the study deduced that product diversification had significant effect on post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery in Isiolo County. The finding agrees with Weidenfeld (2018) who noted that market, product and sectorial diversification play an important role when it comes to local tourism products. The study's findings underscore the importance of implementing strategic promotional strategies and embracing product diversification as key drivers for the revival and sustained growth of the hospitality sector in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. These implications provide valuable insights for industry stakeholders, policymakers, and researchers, enabling them to develop and implement targeted initiatives to support the sector's recovery and long-term resilience.

The study results are consistent with the findings of Brel, Zaytseva and Kaizer (2020), who observed that diversification of tourism entailed expanding the portfolio and that it was instrumental in reducing risks. Additionally, Ziger-Korn and Kol (2018) noted that local tourism can be diversified by incorporating recreational facilities, which, in turn, would increase the period that tourists would spend during their adventures. Furthermore, Benur and Bramwell (2015) revealed that tourism diversification includes the establishment of mass as well as niche tourism products to cater to different customer segments. The alignment of the study's findings with these previous research works reinforces the importance of product diversification as a strategic approach for the hospitality sector's recovery and resilience in the post-COVID-19 era. By expanding their offerings through portfolio diversification, incorporating recreational facilities, and catering to both mass and niche markets, hospitality businesses in Isiolo County can effectively mitigate risks, enhance their competitiveness, and provide a more enriching and extended experience for domestic tourists. Consequently, these diversification efforts contribute to the overall recovery and revitalization of the local hospitality industry in the aftermath of the pandemic's disruptions.

5.0 Conclusion

The study concluded that promotional strategies were significant predictors of post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery in Isiolo County. Isiolo County had invested in promotional efforts aimed at enhancing recovery of hospitality sector and concludes that product diversification had significant effect on post COVID-19 hospitality sector recovery in Isiolo County. Product diversification strategies in Isiolo County helped to diversify broad range of services that were enjoyed by tourists. Through product diversification, Isiolo County's hospitality sector could offer a more comprehensive and enriching experience to visitors, catering to diverse interests and preferences. This diversification not only enhanced the overall tourism experience but also contributed to risk mitigation by reducing reliance on a limited range of products or services. By embracing a broader portfolio of offerings, the county's hospitality businesses were better equipped to weather economic uncertainties and adapt to changing market dynamics.

6.0 Recommendations

The study recommends that Isiolo County should intensify awareness campaigns and branding of the local tourism products in order to stimulate their uptake among tourists. Effective promotion and branding strategies are crucial for increasing visibility and attracting potential visitors to the region's diverse offerings. By leveraging various marketing channels and collaborating with industry partners, Isiolo County can enhance the awareness and appeal of its local tourism products. Furthermore, the study recommends that players in the hospitality sector in Isiolo County should leverage market research to enhance the level of awareness of the local tourism products. Conducting comprehensive market research can provide valuable insights into consumer preferences, emerging trends, and potential areas for growth or improvement. By utilizing data-driven strategies, the county's hospitality businesses can tailor their offerings, refine their marketing efforts, and effectively communicate the unique value propositions of their local tourism products. Additionally, the study recommends that players in the hospitality sector in Isiolo County should constantly develop new tourism attractions and diversify more on the portfolio available to tourists. Continuous innovation and diversification are essential for maintaining a competitive edge and catering to the evolving needs of travelers. By introducing new attractions, experiences, and services, the county's hospitality industry can broaden its appeal, attract a wider range of visitors, and foster sustainable growth. The study also recommends that the local culture of people living in Isiolo County should be blended with their tourism attractions as a way of supporting diversification. Integrating cultural elements and showcasing the region's rich heritage can create unique and authentic experiences for tourists, enhancing the overall appeal of Isiolo County as a destination. By embracing and celebrating its cultural diversity, the county can differentiate itself from other destinations and offer visitors a deeper appreciation for the local way of life.

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