

Coping with seasonality: A case study of family owned micro tourism businesses in Obudu Mountain Resort in Nigeria



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ABSTRACT

Seasonality in tourism has attracted much attention from tourism management stakeholders due to the important role it plays in destinations sustainability. It is also recognised to have significant effects on tourism business survivability and sustainability. Despite this recognition, there has been a paucity of research on its effects on family owned micro tourism businesses and how they cope in tropical climate regions of developing countries. Using a qualitative research strategy, a total of 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted with family members in micro tourism businesses in the host communities of Obudu Mountain Resort in Nigeria. The finding reveals that Obudu Mountain Resort and the existing family owned micro tourism businesses experiences extreme seasonality. This has serious effects on business operations and family survival as a majority of the operators depend solely on the businesses. Unlike the practice in the majority of the destinations located in temperate climate regions, all the family owned micro tourism businesses in Obudu Mountain Resort environment stay open throughout the year, regardless of the fall in tourists' flow in off-peak; adopting similar and varying coping strategies. Despite the challenges of off-peak periods, the "familiness" of family tourism business has shown to have the potential of reducing the effects of seasonality in rural peripheral tourist destination.

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1. Introduction

Seasonality is a pervasive market phenomenon that is characterized by the underutilization of economic resources over a period of the year (Allcock, 1995; Butler, 2001). Hitherto, many tourist destinations are prone to systemic variations of tourists' flow (Kastenholz & de Almeida, 2008). As noted by Lee, Bergin-Seers, Galloway, O'Mahony, and McMurray (2008), while some lowland and highland destination receive a high influx of tourists that exceed their capacity at a given period of the year, they also experience very low influx at other seasons of the year. This scenario tends to dampen stakeholders propensity to invest in a destination tourism infrastructure and at the same time impede the employment, maintenance and expansion of the labour force (Krakover, 2000; Lundtorp, Rassing, & Wanhill, 2001). Thus, seasonality is often seen by stakeholders to have more of negative effects, but it's not all its implications that are negatives (Lee et al., 2008).

The seasonal nature of tourism in rural peripherals tourist destinations that are often characterized by the presence of micro, small and medium sized family owned business enterprises is a very critical

issue in the tourism industry affecting business performance (Getz & Carlsen, 2000). In addition to seasonality, the behaviour of tourism business owners and manager whether positive or negative also contribute in determining business performance (Haber & Reichel, 2005). Koenig-Lewis and Bischoff (2010) noted that as a result of the observable effects of seasonality on the performance of tourism enterprises, it has become a phenomenon that is a cardinal theme in tourism literature and also a pertinent worrisome issue for stakeholders in the tourism industry. Since the fluctuation in tourists demand and supply occasioned by the geographically-caused seasonal nature of tourism affects the survivability of micro and small tourism businesses, it is therefore a serious challenge that is capable of jeopardizing the sustainability of tourism businesses in tourists' destinations (Kastenholz & de Almeida, 2008).

An extensive range of literature exists on seasonality issues. A few of these studies are: examining seasonality in the hospitality industry (Lundtorp, 2001; Jeffrey, Barden, Buckley, & Hubbard, 2002), characteristics and segmentation of seasonal visitor (Spencer & Holecek, 2007; Garau-Vadell & de Borja-Sole, 2008), investigating the effects of seasonality in remote destinations (Commons & Page, 2001; Kastenholz & de Almeida, 2008). All of these studies were conducted in tourist destinations in a temperate climate zone and the majority are not on family business. To date, little empirical evidence is available on seasonality issues of family owned micro tourism businesses in mountain destinations in tropical climate regions in off-peak periods. Thus, the main

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objective of this study is to examine the effects of seasonality on family owned micro tourism entrepreneurs and business operations in the host communities of Obudu Mountain Resort in Nigeria with a view to understanding their coping strategies. To achieve this objective, this study was guided by the following research questions:

- (a) What is the perception of seasonality by family owned micro tourism business operators?
- (b) What are the effects of off-peak periods on family owned micro tourism entrepreneurs and business operations?
- (c) How do family owned micro tourism business operators cope with the effects of seasonality in off-peak periods?

2. Literature review

2.1. Family owned micro and small tourism businesses in peripheral rural areas and associated issues of seasonality

European Commission (2011) classified businesses with less than 10 employees as micro businesses and those employing 10 to 49 workers as small businesses. Thomas, Friel, Jameson, and Parsons (1997) also define small businesses as those that employ 1 to 50 staff. The definition and classification of micro and small enterprise of the European Commission is similar to that of Nigeria (Ogundele, 2007). Australian Bureau of Statistics definition of small businesses is quite different. It defines them as business ventures that employ less than 20 persons which, according to Bergin-Seers and Jago (2007) represent 91% of businesses in industries related to tourism. For the purpose of this paper, we employed the definition of the European commission (2011) and Ogundele (2007) for the micro tourism businesses investigated as all of these businesses in Obudu Mountain environment do not have more than 5 employees.

Many destinations and even the tourism entrepreneurs operating in them would have preferred to have an all year round tourists' flow if it's possible. For instance, the majority of the owners of micro and small tourism businesses in Central Otago in a remote area of New Zealand would have a desire to have a steady flow of tourists' all year-round instead of having one or two seasons in a year. But the reality of distinct peaks has led them into a situation where they have found it tough to continue their businesses in off-peak when tourists' flow is low (Duval, 2004). Thus, seasonality has become a thing to live with in many tourist destinations and it is noted to have a serious effect on the performance of micro and small tourism businesses (Butler, 2001; Koenig-Lewis & Bischoff, 2010; Lundtorp, Rassing, & Wanhill, 1999; Baum & Hagen, 1999). For this reason, Goulding, Baum, and Morrison (2005) opined that it should be seen as a sensitive phenomenon.

The effects of seasonality are higher in more remote or peripheral destinations as they often experience seasonality much more than centrally located destinations. This is so for several reasons, one of which is the inability of many tourists to visit peripheral locations as a result of long travel times needed, which is often not abundantly available (Baum & Lundtorp, 2001; WTO, 1999). Seasonality makes the problems of micro and small tourism businesses more and more complex as they strive to survive in a vibrant industry susceptible to variations in numerous external influences (Snepenger, Houser, & Snepenger, 1990). When seasonality is very extreme, operators are put under serious financial difficulty and because some family (for family owned tourism businesses) properties such as the homestay or bed and breakfast, campground are an integral part of the business, a closure of the business due to failure could result in the loss of family properties (Getz & Nilsson, 2004).

Koenig-Lewis and Bischoff (2010) noted that there are differences in the response to seasonality effects from one business to another. Nonetheless, the number of authors acknowledging this difference in tourism entrepreneurs' perception of seasonality and their responses to the

issues associated with it is small. Among the few studies that recognised such variations are: Jeffrey et al. (2002); Jolliffe and Farnsworth (2003); Goulding, Baum, and Morrison (2004); Getz and Nilsson (2004) and Duval (2004).

In temperate climate regions, many tourism business owners have adopted strategies for coping in the off-peak. In non-mountainous destination, such as the Danish Island of Bornholm for instance, owners of tourism businesses have adopted some coping strategies in off-peak which include: maintaining the business premises to prepare for a new peak period, moving to another place for vacation, closing the business and seeking for employment elsewhere and reduction of the number of staff and taken loans from the bank (Getz & Nilsson, 2004). According to Goulding and Gunn (2000), in the peripheral rural region of south-west of Scotland, micro and small tourism businesses have also resorted to closure when tourists' patronage is low. Also, the study of Koenig-Lewis and Bischoff (2010) in Wales in UK have shown that tourism business owners try to attract tourists by offering tourists' reduced hotel rates in the weekends and the use of winter brochures among other strategies.

In some mountain destinations, the coping strategies adopted is similar to that of non-mountainous destinations. As noted by Flognfeldt (2001), in the Jotunheimen mountain area in Norway, micro and small tourism entrepreneurs cope with seasonality in winter off-peak by taken holiday and getting another employment. Some of them engages in renovation work on business premises and also undertake exportation of knowledge and goods to other areas of needs. The scenario in the mountain region of New South Wales, Australia with accommodation owners presents similar and different coping strategies. While many micro and small tourism businesses in the region operate mainly in the winter peak season and close their businesses in the summer, a substantial number of them have commenced operating yearly with the initiation of cultural events, festivals, conferences and sports (Pegg, Patterson, & Gariddo, 2012; Connell, Page, & Meyer, 2015).

2.2. Causes of seasonality in tourism

The variables that cause seasonality are viewed by stakeholders in the industry differently. However, it is generally accepted to fall into two broad categories which include: natural (physical) and institutional (social and cultural) (Bar-On, 1975; Commons & Page, 2001; Goulding et al., 2004). According to Witt and Moutinho (1995), seasonality is encapsulated as seasonal patterns that are constant and well known which connotes that they are not infrequent abnormalities in tourist destinations. Therefore, operational issues in destinations such as the short term rise and falls in tourist influx occasioned by tourism tremor, inefficient management issues, dilemmas such as natural disaster, increase in the price of fuel and occurrence of terrorism are not considered as causes of seasonality (Lee et al., 2008).

Natural phenomenon which contributes to seasonality in tourism activities such as the climatic variability has a lot to do with some differences in hours of daylight and temperature in destinations (Commons & Page, 2001; Goulding et al., 2004). Geographic location of destinations such as the alpine region, coastal areas, urban and peripheral region could also result in seasonality (Commons & Page, 2001). Variations in natural phenomena include the weather causing access problems due to snow blocking roads, and levels of rainfall affecting beach activities (Commons & Page, 2001; Baum & Hagen, 1997). These variations imply that tourist destinations do experience dissimilar seasonal patterns, and thus their unique seasonal qualities are viewed differently (Hartmann, 1986).

Institutional seasonality on the other hand is principally associated with the following three factors such as holidays related to primary and secondary schools, universities and other schools of higher education; religious organizations and specific holidays (Goulding et al., 2004). Other factors are travel habits and motivations usually influenced by changing tastes, the hosting and timing of events in a specific

period of the year, which may be leisure or business inclined (Jang, 2004) and the availability of leisure time (Commons & Page, 2001).

2.3. Merits of tourism seasonality

The mountain tourists' region is sensitive to disruptions associated with seasonal patterns and in response, requires a period of repossession in enabling the surmounting of peak periods over-use of facilities (Pegg et al., 2012). This is portraying seasonality as a phenomenon that is somewhat significantly advantageous to stakeholders in the tourism industry (Murphy, 1985). For a tourist destination in remote regions, off-peak periods are time and again useful for restoring their alluring face (structure and landscape) and provides a window for the destination environment to recuperate from the emotional state of being overawed by the enormous volume of tourist inflow in peak periods (Pegg et al., 2012). Furthermore, operators of tourism business in temperate climate regions in more developed countries who are known for lifestyle motives for running a tourism business tend to pursue a period of recovery outside the main tourist season (off-peak) (Commons & Page, 2001). The end of the season provides an opportunity for individuals and communities to dissipate their energy and resources obtained during peak periods into some form of renovation prior to the beginning of the coming peak periods (Murphy, 1985; Baum & Hagen, 1999). Additional, off-season is seen as the only period destinations environment residents somehow return to their normal way of life as it is then they enjoy the utilization of local facilities and amenities without any inconveniences and at the same time participate in other non-tourism social activities (Butler, 2001).

Mourdoukoutas (1988) found that tourism seasonal workers favoured current arrangements with employment only in the peak periods because such jobs often generate higher income than other alternative jobs. Ainsworth and Purss (2009) also found that seasonal employments permitted individuals to pursue desired life styles at other times - one example being ski or sailing instructors.

2.4. Demerits of tourism seasonality

Tourism seasonality has long time been regarded as a worldwide issue confronting and slowing down the activities of a destination with the most significant effects being a reduction in proceeds derived from micro, small and medium tourism businesses (Scott & McBoyle, 2007). Commons and Page (2001) argued that it is very well associated with tourism, especially in peripheral areas and its occurrence comes with some negativities one of which is the underutilization of facilities if it is in off-peak periods and over-utilization of facilities in peak periods.

The incidence of seasonality in tourist destination has led to a situation where micro and small tourism entrepreneurs face incessant inefficiency as they try to contend with the variation in demands. It can result in an inefficient use of capacity because excessive capacity is needed to accommodate peak periods when demand is at its greatest and is left relatively empty outside of that period. Attracting investment for additional capacity can be difficult because of the short time available to generate a return on investment (Halpern, 2007). Moreover, during peak periods, tourists' destination can be overcrowded and face with the problems of congestion and all of these places tourism entrepreneurs on their toes (Hudson & Cross, 2005).

Seasonal fluctuations in demand have always been a hurdle that has become very difficult to handle by tourism entrepreneurs as it places them in tight situations of deciding what to do in terms of full time staff recruitment and retention (Butler, 1994, 2001). For some managers in mountain destinations in temperate climate regions, recruitment of new staff has proved difficult at the commencement of each fresh ski season and it's usually time consuming (Ainsworth & Purss, 2009). Most of the available seasonal staff often lacks sufficient skills and experience for efficient service delivery. Situations like this can lead to

decrease in the quality of services rendered by staff to tourists (Dickson & Huyton, 2008).

According to Hudson and Cross (2005), seasonal unemployment is always a negative result of seasonality and places seasonal workers as victims of circumstance especially in off-peak periods. Because of the limited prospects of career progression and the associated job insecurity, seasonal tourism jobs are classified as inferior (Commons & Page, 2001).

3. Research methodology

3.1. Case study area

Obudu Mountain Resort is located in Cross River State in Nigeria. It was described by a foreigner as "Obudu is Nigeria best kept secret" (Esu & Arrey, 2011) (see some features of Obudu Mountain Resort in Figs. 1 and 2) and seated at 1575 m altitude above sea level. It experiences two main climate seasons which includes: the dry and rainy season because of its location within sub-Sahara Africa tropical climate zone. For temperature levels, the months of November to January records the highest temperature experienced which ranges between 26 °C and 32 °C. The lowest temperature level is usually experienced from June to September and its ranges between 4 °C and 10 °C (Esu & Arrey, 2011). According to Amalu, Ajake, Oba, and Ewa (2012), Obudu Mountain Resort lies within Latitude 64°N and Longitude 91°E, to the north of it is Benue State, Ogoja local government council area is bordering it on the south while it is being bounded by the Republic of Cameroon to the east.

Obudu Mountain Resort is located in Obanliku local government area and co-exists with the Becheve ethnic community who live nearby in seven village communities. Six communities are located at the top of the mountain where the resort is situated and they are called: Anampe, Okpazawge, Kigol, Keji-Ukwu, Okwamu and Apah-Ajilli. The seventh community called Ikwette is located at the bottom of the mountain close to the entrance (by road and cable car) to the mountain top. Figs. 3 and 4 shows all the 36 states in Nigeria including Cross River State and a map of all the local government in Cross River State indicating the location of Obudu Mountain Resort respectively. Also, Fig. 5 is a sketch map of the Obudu Mountain Resort and the surrounding communities.

3.2. Data collection

3.2.1. Research strategy

In order to collect in-depth information on issues concerning seasonality in the study area, a qualitative case study research paradigm



Fig. 1. Longest cable car (4 km) in the world for moving tourists' downward from the mountain and up to the mountain top.

Source: www.experiencecrossriver/Hotels-details/Obudu-Mountain-Resort.



Fig. 2. Sit out at Obudu Mountain Resort.
Source: www.experiencecrossriver/Hotels-details/Obudu-Mountain-Resort.

was used. The reason for its choice is based on the established notion that research designs that are qualitative base are more applicable than quantitative ones in examining tourism phenomenon intricacies (Jennings, 2010). Moreover, phenomena within their context are better examined and understood using qualitative data (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2002; Yin, 2009).

The idiosyncratic necessity for the use of case studies becomes pertinent as a result of the aspirations to comprehend multifaceted social phenomena (Yin, 2003). In this instance, the complex phenomenon is seasonality and its impact on family owned micro tourism businesses in local communities in a peripherally located destination in Nigeria. One of the distinctive characters of a case study research strategy that distinguishes it from other research strategies is that the boundaries between phenomenon and the context within which it occurs are not clearly evident (Yin, 2003, 2009). In this case, the family owned tourism businesses are subsets of a tourists destination that cannot be separated from the destination (Banki & Ismail, 2015), as the emergence of the family owned micro tourism businesses are the result of a pioneer resort (after Miossec, 1976, 1977) that has been the genesis for the growth and the development of a tourists' destination.

3.2.2. Selection of samples

In this study, respondents used in obtaining information on seasonality were selected using snowball sampling technique. This technique was used because there was very little information about the location of family owned tourism businesses in Obudu Mountain Resort environment, as there was not much familiarity with its terrain and host communities. The only information available is that the tourism businesses are managed by very few (less than 10) family members, implying that they are micro businesses.

According to Yin (2003, 2009) and Cresswell (2012), snowball sampling techniques is a form of purposeful sampling that is used when a researcher has little knowledge of the location of respondents to be sampled and the phenomenon of interest. It begins by identifying somebody with that knowledge who helps in locating other respondents (Kumar, 2006; Smith, 2010). This was done by identifying an informant who is in the business and has the capacity to provide insight into issues surrounding family owned tourism businesses, who helped in locating other family owned tourism businesses. Its main weakness is that it can be non-representative; but in this instance, with less than 20 family owned micro tourism businesses on the site, it allowed the researchers to quickly identify them.

As noted by Yin (2009), a key informant contributes to the success of a case study by assisting a researcher to gain access to vital documents that strengthen evidences in the case study. The assistance of the key informant led to identifying the locations of all the existing family owned

micro tourism businesses. In all, fourteen (14) family owned micro tourism businesses were located. Two (2) hotels were located, one each in Apah-Ajilli community and Keji-Ukwu community, one (1) restaurant was located at Ikvette community also known as Bottom Hill and six (6) provision shops, three (3) alcohol shops and two (2) other restaurants were located in a place called the market square very close to Obudu Mountain Resort. The hotel located in Apah-Ajilli community has 12 rooms and the one in Keji-Ukwu community has 10 rooms according to the proprietors.

3.2.3. Qualitative interviews

For the data collection proper, face to face in-depth interviews were conducted with all the family members participating in the tourism businesses. The reason all family members in the tourism businesses were interviewed was to get different viewpoints on the effects of seasonality and the coping strategies adopted, as members could share different and similar opinion on their experiences. For instance, seasonality effects on the proprietors of the businesses may likely be different from that of other members. All of these perspectives are necessary for wider understanding of the issues. The interviews were conducted using semi structured questions as it provides a way of obtaining a wide variety of data on an issue and afford respondents the liberty to express themselves without any hindrance (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2002; Patton, 2002; Zikmund, 2003).

The interviews were all conducted in English with the respondents in varying fluency. The interviews lasted for two weeks starting from 15th June to 31st June 2013. In total, the fourteen (14) family owned micro tourism businesses have 38 members running the businesses, but, only 27 of them granted interviews, which was considered sufficient for data analysis. All the interviews were conducted on the premises of the existing family owned micro tourism businesses. The duration of the interviews was between 35 and 40 min for the proprietors and 20 and 35 min for other members. In capturing the full interview, audio recording is acceptable to many people, but, their permission to record must be given and there may be those who do not wish to be recorded (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Therefore, in this study, the consent of the participants was sought to record their interviews with a digital recorder and they all agreed to its usage. So all of the interviews were recorded and verbatim transcription, which took another three weeks, was done at the conclusion of the interviews.

In order to clarify some issues and to obtain further information from the micro tourism business operators, the key informant was contacted on phone for additional interviews. He also helped in informing other micro tourism business operators of the need for their attention for interviews. This time around, the interviews were with the proprietors of the businesses only. All the interviews were conducted from 23rd to 27th March 2014 through the telephone. The interviews lasted for 20–30 min. The recorded interviews were transcribed in 3 days with the aid of Dragon Naturally Speaking 12.5 (voice recognition software). The success of all the interviews is attributed to the support of the key informant. Additionally, data on visitor arrivals to Obudu Mountain Resort from year 2009 to 2014, to the two hotels in Apah-Ajilli and Keji-Ukwu from year 2011 to 2014 based on monthly quarter, to a provision shop and an alcohol shop from 2011 to 2014 were also obtained. All of this information strengthened data on seasonality in the Obudu Mountain site and improved the validity of this research.

3.3. Data analysis

An inductive analysis strategy was considered appropriate for this study. This is based on the premise that the emerged themes were derived from the collected data and not determine before data collection (Patton, 2002). In this regard, thematic analysis was used to bring out patterns and categories in the data. Grbich (2007) noted that thematic analysis is the process of segmenting and categorizing qualitative data before final interpretation. Moreover, analysing qualitative data is

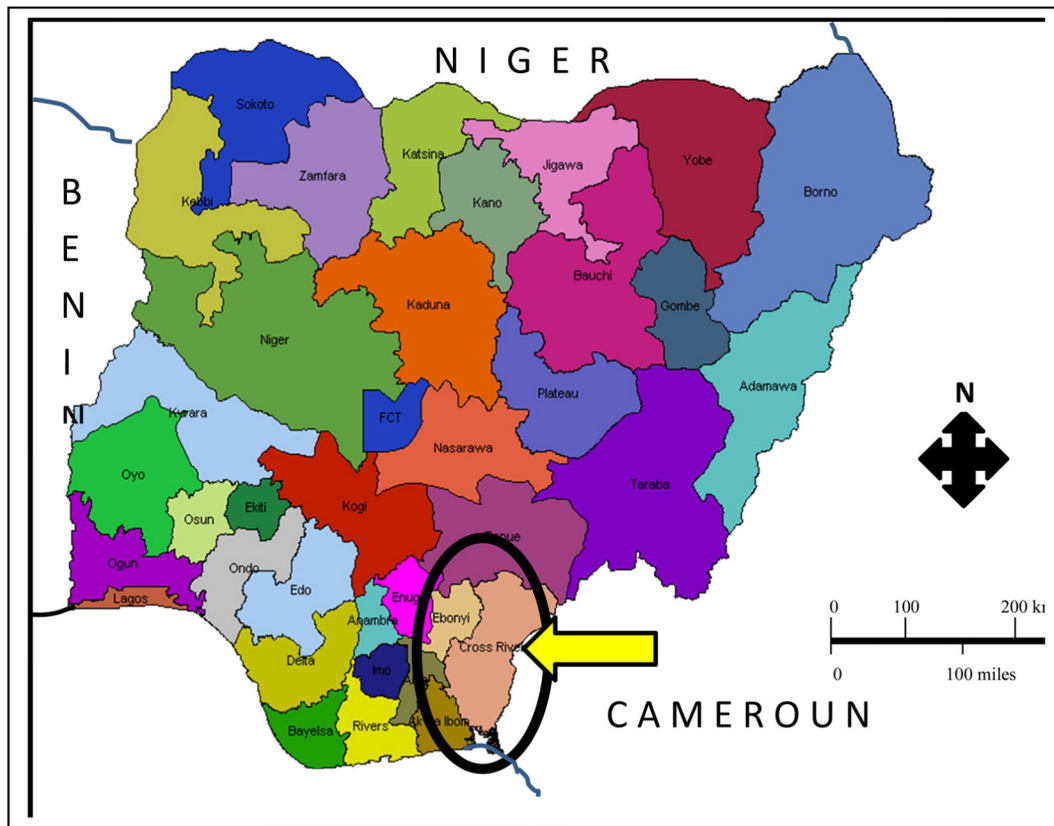


Fig. 3. Map of Nigeria showing 36 states in Nigeria including Cross River State. Source: National Population Commission (2006) and authors' modification.

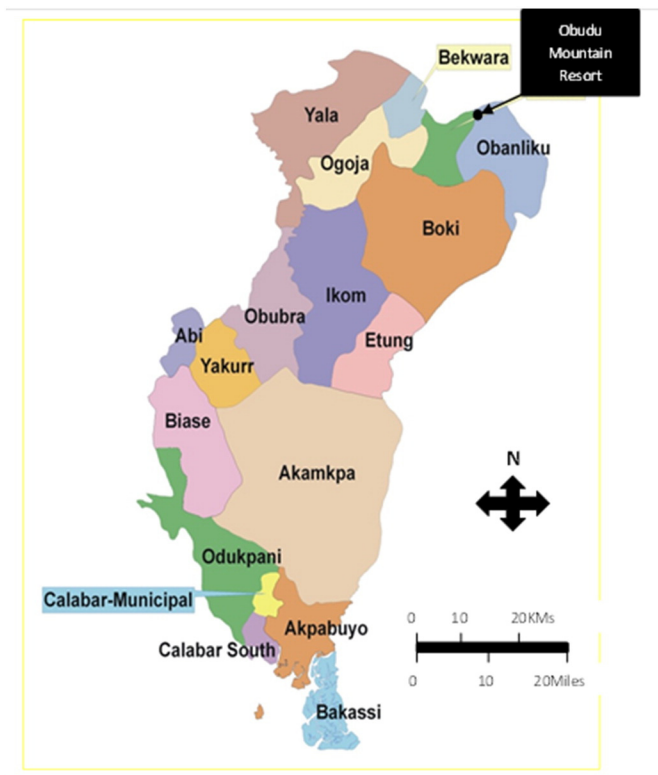


Fig. 4. Map of local government councils in Cross River State showing the location of Obudu Mountain Resort. Source: National Population Commission (2006) and authors' modification.

primarily about understanding and interpreting the statements expressed by respondents (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Thus, thematic analysis commenced with understanding each respondent's words and putting them alongside the words of the other respondents to enable a description of the data and its exploration for meanings. All the interview transcripts were manually coded and categorized into emerging themes and sub-themes using the concept of the auto coding function in NVivo 10.

4. Results

4.1. Visitor arrivals in Obudu Mountain Resort

Obudu Mountain Resort is distinguished as one of the relatively well managed and active tourist destination in Nigeria (Ushie, 2009). This is seen from the influx of tourists' to the resort. According to Ushie (2009), Obudu Mountain recorded 65,341 Nigeria tourists in 2008, 18,161 of whom are foreign tourists, and no tourist site has beaten this record in the history of tourism in Nigeria. The record fell to 13,668 in 2011, 13,105 in 2012 and 14,615 in 2013. This drastic fall could be as a result of reduced destination marketing as compared to the year 2005 to 2008 when the resort was fully established and the Cross River State Governor at that time gave much emphasis to tourism development and so promoted the resort through private sector partnership. It could also be as a consequence of the current insecurity situation in the country.

Seasonal variation in tourism demand is one of the major challenges currently facing the Nigerian tourism industry and specifically in Obudu Mountain. Obudu Mountain Resort operates at a reasonable capacity during the late rainy season to the peak dry season and the early rainy season (Oct–April), with facilities and services not fully utilized at other times of the year, especially in the heavy rainy season when the natural conditions such as weather affects tourism activities leading to

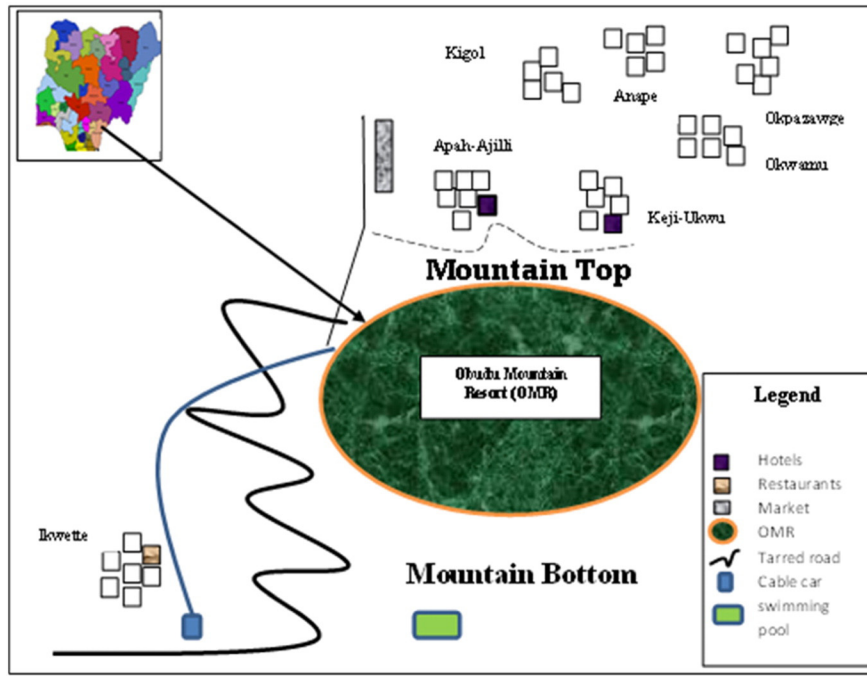


Fig. 5. Sketch map of Obudu Mountain Resort and the family owned tourism businesses in its host communities (not to scale). Source: Authors' field work, 2013.

low tourists' patronage (Cross Rivers State Tourism Bureau, 2008). The available records shows that tourists visit the Resort in all the months of the year, but higher visitation is usually experienced in the dry season when the weather is much more friendly than the wet rainy season when visibility is hampered by heavy rainfall and foggy weather. The quarterly variation in visitor arrivals to the Resort from 2009 to 2014 is shown in Fig. 6.

4.2. Perception of seasonality by family owned micro tourism business operators

When respondents were asked to give an account of their perception of the seasonal nature of tourism in Obudu Mountain Resort, the majority of them acknowledged that tourism activities in it are truly seasonal. The first question was on the months of the year when tourism activities are high and low in the mountain resort. They all recognised the existence of peak and off-peak periods. The majority (24) of respondents identified three peak periods which are all in the dry season in Nigeria. These periods are Christmas, the annual Obudu international

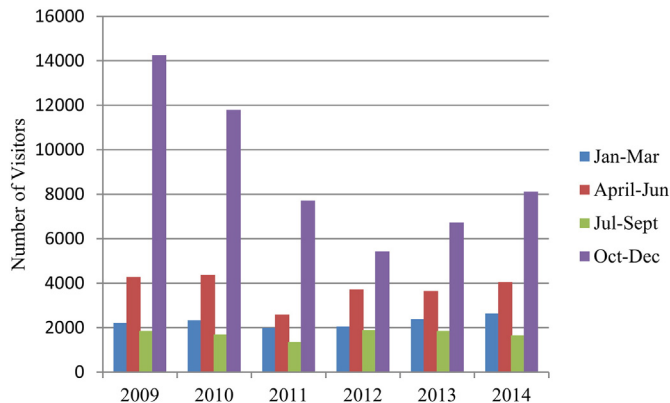


Fig. 6. Visitor arrivals in Obudu Mountain Resort by quarter, 2009–2014. Source: Raw data from Obudu Mountain Resort and chart produced by authors.

mountain race and the Easter festive period. According to the younger brother of the proprietor of a hotel in Keji-Ukwu community:

Tourism is truly seasonal here. We have three peaks; the Obudu Mountain race, which is November, the Easter and the Christmas. People normally come during Christmas, but, during New Year, nobody wants to leave his compound.

All the members of the two hotels in Apah-Ajilli community and Keji-Ukwu community and alcohol shops are inclined to three peaks. The members of the restaurants and the provision shops are divided with respects to the number of peak periods. While the majority of them also recognise three peak periods, very few of them are of the opinion that the resort experience four peak periods by including New Year period. One of them remarked:

The tourism here is actually seasonal. We have four peak periods, namely: Christmas, Easter period, New Year and Obudu mountain race. Among these periods, the Obudu international mountain race draws more tourists' to this place than other periods. The mountain race usually takes place on 25th November every year and so in the 24th to 26th we do receive many tourists' here and we sell a lot.

[Proprietor of a provision shop, an indigene of Anape Community]

All the peak periods are spread across October–December and January to April every year. The off-peak months are also accurately recognised by the respondents and to them the periods appear too long for them to bear. The months after April–June and July–September are the off-peak to the micro tourism business operators. As noted by a respondent:

After October to April, other months of the year are the periods that tourism activities are low in this resort and I don't know why. I expect the rainy season to also boom, but it is not so. Well, may be because our environment is cold and foggy also.

[Cousin of the proprietor of a hotel in Keji-Ukwu community]

The severity of the seasonality experienced at the mountain site by the micro tourism business operators, was strongly expressed as “a huge difference” between the peak and off- peak periods in terms of

tourists' patronage. Finding suggests that over 55% of tourists' patronage of the family owned tourism businesses is experienced in peak periods as indicated by the comment of the proprietor of a hotel in Apah-Ajilli community and Figs. 7, 8 and 9:

I don't even like thinking about the off-peak because it's a bad time for many of us in tourism business here. In fact, I will tell you that what I make as income from my lodge in the three peak periods are more than 60% of my income in the remaining months. You can see how bad it is.

4.3. Effects of seasonality on family owned micro tourism businesses

The research finding suggests that all the effects of seasonality on micro tourism entrepreneurs and business operations in off-peak are negative. The emerged themes explaining these effects are presented as follows:

4.3.1. Low sales

The majority of the respondents reported that they experience lower sales in the off- peak (rainy season). For example, the proprietor of a hotel in Keji-Ukwu community stated that:

During the off-peak, we start vomiting all the money we have gathered and saved during the peak periods to sustain the business and family because visitor's patronage becomes very low.

The situation in the hotels is so serious that in some months, no tourist visits any of the hotels for lodging. This was clarified by the proprietor of a hotel in Apah-Ajilli community who commented that:

Customers are really difficult to get in rainy season. This period is dry for me, I must tell you. Sometimes I don't get a customer in a month, which affects income generation. You can see how terrible it is. Quite frankly, I don't like this season.

The situation in the provision shops, alcohol shops and restaurants appear to be better than the hotels in terms of sales in rainy season. This is probably because the hotels depend solely on visiting tourists' to use their facilities. According to a respondent:

The seasons of tourism activities in this resort are not to the advantage of us in the family business because in the rainy season we don't get patronage much. Although the local people patronize us by buying the food we cook occasionally, but they do not like paying for food they buy. Most of them buy on credit, which is not good for a small business like this. But we have to sell to them like that if not we will loss our local customers who keep the business going during periods of low visitors to the Mountain Resort.

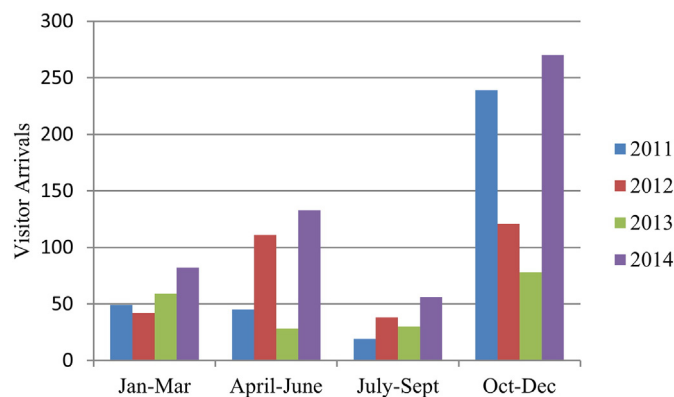


Fig. 7. Visitor arrivals in a hotel in Apah-Ajilli community of Obudu Mountain Resort by quarter, 2011–2014. Source: Chart produced by authors from raw data obtained from the hotel proprietor.

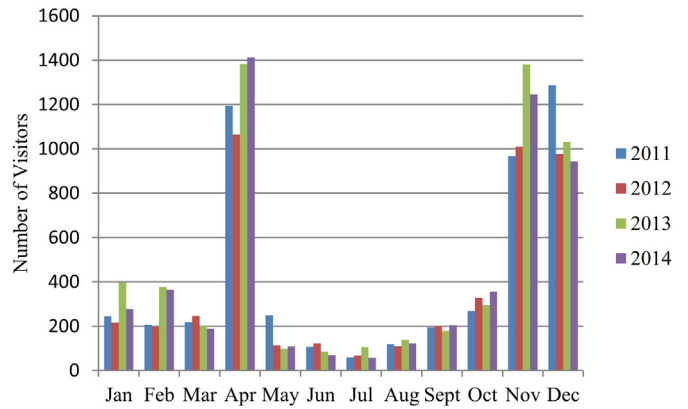


Fig. 8. Monthly visitor arrivals in an alcohol shop in the market square, 2011–2014. Source: Chart produced by authors from raw data obtained from the alcohol shop proprietor.

[Proprietor of a restaurant, an indigene of Okwanu community]

Furthermore, the alcohol shop owners are the second most hit after the hotel owners as they also reported that they do not sell much in rainy season because of low tourists' patronage. They reveal to us that the local people do not have money to buy the kind of drinks they sell as many of them go for local wines. To support this claim, a respondent commented:

My brother, it's not easy in the rainy season here. Sales reduce drastically as a result of low tourist inflow into the Mountain Resort and the locals here are poor people. They can't afford to pay for our alcohol drinks. Many of them like drinking, but go for the local drinks.

[Younger brother of a proprietor of an alcohol shop]

4.3.2. Family survival difficulty

As the respondents lamented on lower sales in rainy season, they also reported that it causes a reduction in their income which usually results to difficulty in taking care of family needs. The younger brother of the proprietor of a hotel in Keji-Ukwu community clarified this as he commented:

Honestly, I am always frustrated when cash flow is low because I need money for my upkeep.

All the respondents mentioned a serious lack of cash in off-peak needed for family upkeep. A similar comment to the aforementioned was given by another male respondent who suffers the effects of

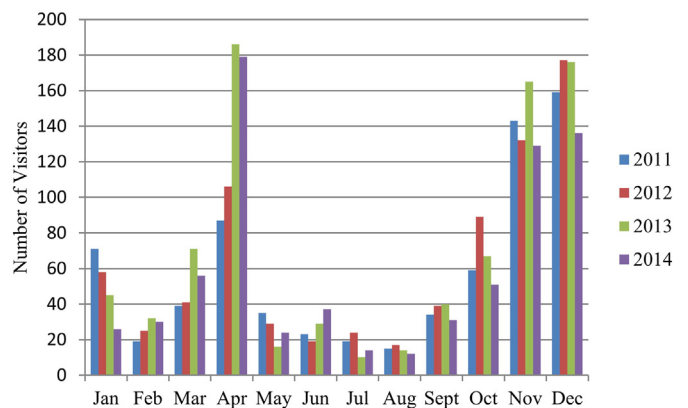


Fig. 9. Monthly visitor arrivals in a provision shop in the market square, 2011–2014. Source: Chart produced by authors from raw data obtained from the alcohol shop proprietor.

seasonality too, but appears not to be too hit by it. The respondent remarked:

In the rainy season, the weather is foggy and cold and tourists' visit is low. This period is usually very difficult for my family. But thank God that I have alternative jobs I do within and outside the Resort to make ends meet in off peak. With this, I don't feel the effects of seasonality much as I would have.

[Proprietor of the hotel in Apah-Ajilli community]

Moreover, findings revealed that the owners of the provision shops, alcohol shops and the restaurants suffer the most in rainy season (off-peak) even though they reported receiving little patronage from the locals. When asked why most of them complained bitterly about the difficulty they face in meeting basic family needs in these periods, the majority lamented that they totally rely on their tourism businesses for survival as there are limited jobs outside tourism in the rural area. According to a respondent:

I don't like the rainy season because life is made difficult for me and my family. I rely mainly on this business and it doesn't bring good profit in rainy season. So sometimes it becomes too tough that I eat into my capital.

[Proprietor of a provision shop, an indigene of Kigol community]

4.3.3. Underutilization of facilities

Only the hotel owners mentioned the underutilization of their hotel facilities in the rainy season. According to two interviewees:

It gets to some point that in two good months, nobody sleeps on my hotel beds. Most times my hotel facilities are not fully utilized in bad season "rainy season".

[Proprietor of a hotel in Apah-Ajilli community]

I have 10 rooms and it is hardly I get one (1) occupied during the rainy season in a month.

[Proprietor of a hotel in Keji-Ukwu community]

4.4. Coping strategies of the operators of family owned micro tourism businesses in off-peak periods

The study participants were asked how they cope with the effects of seasonality in the off-peak and the themes that emerged are presented with their associated comments as follows:

4.4.1. Reduction in prices of goods and lodging charges

This is the most common coping strategies of family tourism business operators in off-peak. Our finding reveals that all the micro tourism business owners adopted this strategy. One interviewee reported:

In the periods outside peak season, the effect is a bit bad because patronage used to be very low. We don't close the business because we have to survive and so we sell to the people of the community and few visitors that visit the Resort for leisure at a reduced price just to keep the business going.

[Proprietor of provision shop, Kigol community]

Similarly, a respondent remarked:

My boss usually gives us a directive to allow any customer we get to bargain. So we tend to reduce our charges just to get more customers.

[Cousin of a proprietor of a hotel in keji-Ukwu community]

In addition, a female proprietor of a restaurant who is from Okpazawge community also stated that:

During off-peak, we do reduce the quality of our food and the price, but still keep it sweet for the local people to buy and eat so that we will not have to be losing too much since most of them buy on credit because of their low financial status.

4.4.2. Opening the business throughout the year

Despite the hard times faced by family owned micro tourism business operators in the off-peaks, they never close the doors of their businesses to few visiting tourists and locals. This was the position of the entire respondents. This is simply because all of them depend on the businesses for survival. However, there appears to be some variation among the businesses on this. For instance, while the proprietor of the two hotels go in search for alternative jobs in rainy season and ask family members to look after their business to catch few tourists' that may visit, the proprietors and the members of the remaining micro tourism businesses keep their businesses open and just make do with what they get. As noted by two respondents:

While I go in search for small contracts, I open my hotel all day with other members to attend to any possible customer.

[Proprietor of a hotel in Keji-Ukwu community]

In rainy season, it is usually tough for us. The patronage is low, but we all remain in the business and rely on the few tourists' that visit and the locals to patronize us.

[Son of a proprietor of a provision shop, an indigene of Okwamu community]

Additionally, opening the businesses all year round, regardless of the low tourist patronage was made possible because of the mutual understanding of family members. Finding suggests that the majority of the operators sees the businesses as their own and even if nothing much is coming into it in terms of income, they hold the view that they need to be resilient and be responsible in keeping it going. This thinking has made staff to remain in business in off-peak even when it is apparent that it will be difficult for them to derive any tangible pecuniary gain for staying open. According to a respondent:

This business is all ours. We all feed, clothe and survive from it. We also understand ourselves because we are a family and the relationship is cordial. So I think we all have a responsibility to keep the business going all the time irrespective of the situation.

[Proprietor of an alcohol shop]

4.4.3. Stocking the shops with daily consumables

This is the predominant practice among the owners of the provision shops. Our findings indicate that they are the only micro tourism business that stock their shops with basic items that will be needed by the locals such as the staff of the Mountain Resorts who live in the local communities and other members of the local communities doing other jobs outside tourism. Thus, as reported by a respondent:

We sell to the local people around here things like salt, Maggi, sugar and some other things as you can see that there are a variety of goods in the shop. This keeps the business going during off-peak. We decided to make the shop like this so that we will have something to depend on during low patronage by the tourists'.

[Owner of a provision shop, an indigene of Anape community]

4.4.4. Seeking alternative employment

Our finding indicates that only the proprietors of the hotels and one restaurant owner reported seeking alternative jobs within and outside the mountain resort in the off-peak season. According to an interviewee:

I have friends in the Mountain Resort who gives me a small supply to do. I also get some little contract outside this environment in rainy season. So I use the money I get from it to manage my family.

[Proprietor of a hotel in Apah-Ajilli community]

A female operator running a restaurant in Kigol community also reported that:

Sometimes I use to apply for supply to the Mountain Resort hotel. If am lucky, I get a contract to supply food. From there, I use to get extra money to keep the family going in the rainy season.

Furthermore, our finding shows that the initiator of a hotel in Apah-Ajilli community reported rearing animals to sell to take care of the family needs in the off-peak season.

I have some animals I keep and feed them. I have some cows that I usually keep in the rainy season and sell when things become tough. This is really helping out for me. It helps to supplement the contract works that I do in the off-peak season.

4.4.5. Relationship marketing

The idea of being nice to customers in order to enjoy a repeat visit is common to all the family tourism businesses. However, our finding reveals that only the owners of the two hotels take personal information of their visitors in a record book which they usually go into and try to call tourists' who had lodged in their hotels previously when they notice a drop in patronage. To this end, two respondents reported:

I have a customer manifest where I take information of tourists' that visit my lodge. So when it is rainy season and tourists' flow is low as a result of weather condition such as thick fog, I go into the manifest and try to call tourists' to convince them for a revisit. I also tell them to market me to their friends and families. I think that has worked for me.

[Proprietor of a hotel in Keji-Ukwu community]

I do call the mobile numbers of tourists who had lodged in my hotel in previous years and try to convince them about the new things they can enjoy in Obudu Mountain so that they will visit the resort and lodge in my hotel or say good things about us to their friends who may want to visit the Mountain Resort. This approach has worked many times, but it is not reliable.

[Proprietor of a hotel in Apah-Ajilli community]

5. 5. Discussions

5.1. Perception of seasonality by family owned micro tourism entrepreneurs

This study yielded results on seasonality experienced in a mountain destination in Nigeria. Some of the findings of this study are in agreement with studies on seasonality in peripheral destinations in temperate climate regions with respect to the perception of family owned micro tourism business operators on seasonality, the effects of seasonality on the operators and business operations and how the operators cope in off-peak periods. There are several areas the research findings differ from those in the current literature. In the first place, in terms of the perception of the micro tourism business operators, findings indicate that the majority opined that there exist three peak periods which covers the months of October to April. These months are all in the dry season when micro tourism operators get most of their patronage from tourists'. In temperate climate regions, a similar scenario is also at play. Here, winter (snow) means that tourists' arrivals are high in mountain destinations that are snow/ski dependent. For instance, the study by Pegg et al. (2012) on the New South Wales, Australia snowy

mountains indicate that the substantial tourism experience in the mountain region is undertaken in winter, even though some tourism entrepreneurs have begun to partially operate all year round. Additionally, peak periods are also experienced in winter in Ottadalen in the eastern part of the Jotunheimen mountain area in Norway (Flognfeldt, 2001). This finding suggests that most mountainous tourist destination all over the world experience a high influx of tourists' in winter or dry season as the case may be.

The recognition of peak and off peak periods by all the family members in tourism businesses signifies that they are well informed of seasonality incidence in their localities and they appeared to be doing everything within their capability to surmount its challenges. Nonetheless, a much more participatory multi-stakeholder approach that brings the local tourism entrepreneurs and managers of Obudu Mountain Resort together for the purpose of understanding issues associated with seasonality dynamics in the local remote environment and how its effects can be best minimized will go a long way in ensuring the sustainability of the destination and the businesses therein.

Moreover, finding reveals that Obudu Mountain Resort experiences a rainy season in summer, which covers the months of April (late) to late October and is often characterized by heavy rain and foggy weather conditions that hinders tourists activities and lessens expectations of their experience. The rainy season in non-mountainous Northland region and central Otago of New Zealand in the southern hemisphere is also in the summer months of December to April when peak periods are experienced (Commons & Page, 2001; Duval, 2004). This suggests that it is the geographical location of a destination, other climate phenomenon and sometimes the activities going on in a destination and not the months of the year that determines the different peak periods experienced.

One of the key findings in this study is that visitor arrivals to the mountain resort and the family owned micro tourism businesses in the three peak periods (November, December and April which fall within Oct-Dec, January-March quarter and also April inclusive) from archival records received from the Resort and the micro tourism business operators is over 55% of the total number of arrivals in the remaining months of the year. By this scenario, there appears to be extreme seasonality in the mountain resort. Getz and Nilsson (2004) opined that a destination is said to be experiencing extreme seasonality when its peak periods attracts 50% or more tourists than it does in off-peak. The situation in Obudu Mountain Resort hotels, the hotel in Apah-Ajilli village, one alcohol shop and provision shop as shown in Figs. 6, 7, 8 and 9 indicates that over 55% of their visitor arrivals are in peak periods. This finding implies that Obudu Mountain Resort and the family owned micro tourism businesses are experiencing extreme seasonality. In this circumstance, heavy pressure will be on the business and its operators, especially when they depend largely on income derived from tourism activities (Getz & Nilsson, 2004).

5.2. Effects of seasonality on family owned micro tourism entrepreneurs' and business operations

In terms of the effects of seasonality in off-peak, finding reveals that the tourism entrepreneurs experience low sales of their goods and services. This is not limited to tropical climate regions. Even in the temperate climate regions, such is also experienced. This scenario has a great deal of impact on the performance of micro and small tourism enterprises (Lundtorp et al., 1999; Baum & Hagen, 1999; Butler, 2001; Goulding et al., 2005). It also confirms several positions that the economic impact of seasonality in the off-peak periods is usually the reduction of income, and profits due to unproductive use of resources and facilities (Manning & Powers, 1984; Williams & Shaw, 1991).

Family survival difficulty was prevalent to all the proprietors and the members of the tourism businesses in off-peak. This agrees with the fact that seasonality usually compounds the problems of operators of micro and small tourism enterprises who are struggling to survive in a

dynamic sector susceptible to variations in several external influences (Snepenger et al., 1990). The family survival difficulty evident in this study is not surprising as the majority of family owned micro tourism businesses experiences extreme seasonality and also depend on their businesses for survival. It also re-echoes Getz and Nilsson (2004) opinion that extreme seasonality can cause financial and personal difficulties for family owned tourism micro business operators that relies on tourism business in rural peripheral areas to live.

Furthermore, the underutilization of facilities in off-peak is currently adversely affecting the hotel owners. This is to be expected given the fact that over 55% of tourist arrivals in the hotels in a year occurs in the peak periods, and off-peak occupancy is drastically low. This kind of situation is also evident in tourist destinations in temperate climate regions such as the Danish Island of Bornholm (Getz & Nilsson, 2004), Ireland's tourism (Kennedy & Deegan, 2001), and the Jotunheimen mountain area in Norway (Flognfeldt, 2001). Consequent underutilization of facilities in the off-peak season that has brought about a decrease in revenue generation is regarded by Mathieson and Wall (1982) as the inflexibility of a great deal of capital assets that is unavoidable. By implication, this scenario leads to unbearable adverse inefficiencies with attendant effects of little return on investment (Getz & Nilsson, 2004; Koenig-Lewis & Bischoff, 2005). In addition, the underutilized family house and properties are mostly an essential part of the business and therefore a failure of the business could lead to the loss of family assets which emphasized the magnitude of risk face from extreme seasonality by families in tourism businesses in rural peripheries (Getz & Nilsson, 2004).

5.3. Coping strategies of family owned micro tourism businesses in off-peak season

It was evident in this study that family owned micro tourism business operators in the host communities of Obudu Mountain Resort have adopted some coping strategies to combat the effects of seasonality in the off-peak. Some of the strategies are similar and also differ to those used by micro and small tourism entrepreneurs in temperate climate zones. The coping strategy that is common to all the tourism business owners in this study is a price reduction. This finding is consistent with that of Pegg et al. (2012) in the alpine region of Australia and Flognfeldt (2001) in the eastern part of the Jotunheimen mountain area in Norway. Price reduction is also used by small tourism business owners in lowland tourist destination as noted in the study of Koenig-Lewis and Bischoff (2010). This implies that regardless of the nature of a destination, fierce price reduction is a coping strategy used by tourism entrepreneurs to attract customers in off-peak season. It is based on the notion that low price or cost of obtaining services attracts tourism demand, which has yielded positive results in many destinations.

Reduction of price strategy is recognised by Bar-On (1999) as having a significant influence on seasonal variations because of its strength to change visitation patterns and attracts a significant tourists market segment that are indifferent to the high price of goods and services in some destinations. However, this does not mean that it has always worked well to reduce seasonality as it did not in hotels in the peripheral areas of England (Jeffrey & Barden, 2001). This is an indication that studying and understanding other market segments may probably be a good option for some tourism businesses to be able to combat the seasonality effects (Baum & Hagen, 1999; Cisneros-Martínez & Fernández-Morales, 2015). Moreover, Kandampully (2000) acknowledged the need for managers to have up till date awareness of market evolution and shifts in tourists demand in order to capture and satisfy an unexplored market segment.

One of the key finding of this study is that all the micro tourism business operators' open their businesses throughout the year, largely because of lack of other job opportunities in their rural environment. Also, the cordial understanding that exists between members in business has enabled them to be together in unison when times become

tough in off-peak. This is realizable due to the distinctive resources and competencies that are produced when the family system and the business system intermingle and co-exist in harmony referred to as "familiness" (Basco & Pérez Rodríguez, 2009; Nordqvist & Melin, 2010). Therefore, the family, social capital such as the stability in membership, harmonious interaction and a high degree of interdependence among members as well as interconnection within family members which are features of "familiness" concept (Arregle, Hitt, Sirmon, & Very, 2007) contribute significantly in motivating family tourism business operators to open their business all year round regardless of drastic fall in tourists influx. By implication, this connotes that the "familiness" of family tourism business can relatively reduce the effects of seasonality in off-peak periods. However, the aforementioned finding differs from the happenings in snowy mountain destinations in a temperate climate zone as their tourism business entrepreneurs, largely close their businesses in off-peak season, thereby foregoing the chance of generating additional more revenue by increasing business operations beyond the known snow based peak periods (Bicknell & McManus, 2006; Pegg et al., 2012).

Our finding also established that some of the micro tourism businesses like the provision shops have resulted in stocking their shops with items that are daily needs of local community members so that they sell and get some income in off-peak. Other business operators like the hotel owner in Apah-Ajilli community reported rearing cows to sell in off-peak. All of these activities are a demonstration of their resilience to withstand the economic and social effect of seasonality in off-peak season and return to full business activities in peak periods. Additionally, seeking alternative employment and opening the business throughout the year was also identified with the hotel owners and a restaurant owner in this study. This strategy is a common one with many micro and small tourism business entrepreneurs in temperate climate regions (Sundgaard, Rosenberg, & Johns, 1998; Flognfeldt, 2001; Getz & Nilsson, 2004; Pegg et al., 2012). Nonetheless, the attitudes of seasonal closure of business premises among micro and small tourism business operators in temperate climate regions of more developed countries is not surprising as often they do not depend on the businesses for survival as the countries they fall under are characterized by numerous job opportunities and ease of job mobility.

6. Conclusion

Evidence abounds that the current tourism literature extensively discussed the issues on seasonality in temperate climate regions. Such effort has not been extended into studying its effects on family owned micro tourism businesses in tropical climate regions such as sub-Saharan countries and more specifically in Obudu Mountain in Nigeria in order to understand how the operators cope with the seasonal situation in off-peak. Findings suggest that the Mountain Resort experiences extreme seasonality, which extends to the family owned micro tourism businesses in its host communities causing some difficulties. Despite the difficulty, the "familiness" of these businesses has held them together in business all year round.

The variation in tourists' flow in the dry seasons and rainy seasons in the Mountain Resort is not surprising as it's a remote location and it's affected by weather condition. Nonetheless, the low patronage by tourists' over the years is worrisome and calls into question whether the management of the mountain resort and the operators of family owned micro tourism businesses are doing enough to market the destination properly. Destination marketing is very pertinent to destination competitiveness as it betters the image of a destination in the eye of potential tourists' and it helps to erase the negative notion people may have about a destination. It is therefore a matter of responsibility that the management of Obudu Mountain, (in this case the private agencies partnering with the Cross River State Tourism Bureau) intensify effort at linking up with reliable destination marketing organizations capable of regular marketing of the mountain destination.

The dependency of most operators of the family tourism businesses on the businesses for survival is a reflection of their profit making motives and very little or no jobs in the Obudu Mountain environment outside of tourism that are capable of providing steady income to local communities' inhabitants. A possible measure to reduce this overdependence on a destination that will definitely be seasonal because of its location and weather conditions experienced, which is difficult to change, is for the local government in collaboration with the Cross River State to industrialize the environment. In this case, small scale industries capable of providing jobs for the rural people will provide them with alternatives in the rainy season when tourists' flow to the Resort becomes low. However, this would result in some ecological damages such as depletion of valuable forest vegetation from the activities of wood-dependent industries which will lead to associated problems of erosions. As such, sustainable approaches should be adopted in industrializing Obudu Mountain rural environment.

Staying in business throughout the year and adopting various coping strategies is a good idea for family tourism businesses. However, leaving the businesses open even when little or no income seems to be coming in is associated with adverse challenges. Thus, this requires a cost benefit analysis of staying open outside peak season. For many tourism business operators, living and using their homes as commercial premises and at the same time utilizing family members as labour force, the incremental revenues will significantly surpass the variable costs (Getz, Carlsen, & Morrison, 2004). In any case, businesses that use family members will suffer less staying open than those using non-family members as staff and rent shops to run their businesses.

Appendix A. Interview protocol

- (1) Perception of seasonality by family owned micro tourism business operators.
 - (a) Which periods of the year do you experience high and low tourists patronage?
 - (b) Which months of the year do you experience the highest peak and why?
 - (c) Why is there difference in tourists' patronage of your business in peak and off-peak periods?
- (2) Effects of seasonality on family owned micro tourism businesses.
 - (a) How do off-peak periods affect you and your family?
 - (b) How do off-peak periods affect your business operations?
- (3) Coping strategies of family owned micro tourism business operators in off-peak periods
 - (a) How do you cope with scarcity of tourists' in the off-peak?
 - (b) Why did you choose the coping strategies you adopted in off-peak?
 - (c) How effective are your coping strategies?

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