Harnessing Social Media for Promoting Tourism in Africa:
An Exploratory Analysis of Tweets

Introduction
Tourism has the potential to be the engine of a country’s economic development. Some countries, especially those in Africa, rely on tourism for their citizens’ employment. In order to attract more tourists, African countries are constantly looking for ways to promote their cultural heritage sites and institutions. Recently, social media tools such as Twitter have opened new avenues for countries to conduct marketing campaigns.

Overview of Tourism Information
Africa is a continent with a long, rich, fascinating, and mysterious history known only to the locals or curious wanderers. Although existing cultural heritage and unique resources can be a big draw for tourists, Africa is actually a continent waiting to be rediscovered. For example, not many people know that Africa is one of the few places in the world where heritage sites such as rock-hewn churches exist.

Tourism Information via Social Media
One of the most powerful marketing strategies that can empower tourists is to apply emerging tools to make tourist information visible in new ways and new patterns. Twitter offers countries new platforms for connecting their resources with potential users, customers, and/or visitors in a more personal way. Our research aims to shed some light on the broad characteristics of tweets about African cultural heritage. The procedures and methods in this study involved text analysis of publicly available tweet messages. Tweets were acquired via twitter API and Apigee services using combinations of broad search terms such as – Africa and cultural heritage. For the purpose of this study, the tweet datasets were prepared and organized into categorical variables to reflect the – actual tweet messages, tweet usernames, hashtags, retweet counts, location, and user mentions. About 20,000 tweet messages were downloaded and saved as textual documents.

Results and Discussions

There are considerable variations in the scale of tourism development in Africa from least developed ones to most successful tourism destinations (such as Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, South Africa, Kenya, and Mauritius).

Figures depicts results of selected analysis where by choosing terms such as “Africa” or “Tourism” as a node, an attempt has been made to illustrate the predecessors and successors (as in graph theory) of the node. The arrows pointing towards the node (in-degree) are types of predecessors and the arrows pointing away from the node(out-degree) are types of successors.

Summary
One of the main challenges faced by African countries to attract more tourists and economically benefit from tourism is lack of marketing. Those countries that are able to use both traditional and social media tools such as Twitter are able to brand not only their cultural heritage as well as other perceptions and images.

Tourism can help promote peace and stability by creating mutual understanding among nations, cultures, ethnic groups, and religions. With the help of digital telecommunications, social media can be another medium for communications and building bridges to reach the unreachable.

Shimelis Assefa
University of Denver

Abebe Rorissa
University at Albany

Daniel Gelaw Alemneh
University of North Texas