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Managing the tourist destination image: The case of Africa

Abstract

The tourist destination image is becoming increasing detrimental to the success of individual tourist destinations. More-so, for African tourist destinations which are often victims of the negative global stereotypes and perceptions that exist of the continent. With this in mind, this paper explores the concept and role of destination image in the wider tourism context and goes on to utilise literature to establish the impact of the tourism destination image to the ability of African tourist destinations to increase tourist arrivals to their locations. This paper posits the conceptual destination-brand identity and image as a strategic framework in the formation, communication and effective stakeholder targeting of a positive destination identity by African destination management organisations. This paper goes on to briefly describe each step in the conceptual destination-brand identity and image. Importantly this paper advocates for African destination management organisations to proactively manage their identities in order to positively influence the images that their countries have as tourist destinations in light of increased global competition for tourists in the global tourism market. Finally we identify the need for further qualitative research to explore the subjective nature of tourism destination identity and image management, as well as, recommend the need to establish insights into the management implications of the conceptual model of destination-brand identity and image for African destination management organisations.

Key words: tourist destination; destination brand-identity; destination-image; destination management organisations; Africa

Introduction

Global tourism is forecast to account for at least 1.6 billion travellers and over US$2 trillion in tourist spending in the year 2020 (Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Hudson, 2008; Srivastava, 2012). Africa's global share of tourist travellers in 2020 is anticipated to be between a conservative 5% (TICAD, 2009) and an optimistic 6.3% (UNWTO, 2013). It is therefore not surprising that African governments have begun to recognise the potential of the tourism industry as a driver of economic development on the continent and thus are actively investing in developing the tourism sectors in their respective countries (Nkurayija, 2011; UNCTAD, 2008; Lwegaba, 2013). The economic benefits of tourism are well documented (Leppe, 2004; Fayissa, Nsiah & Tadasse, 2007) and tourism on the African continent in particular is viewed as a catalyst for economic diversification, job creation, poverty alleviation, economic generation and stability (Mitchell, 2010; Nkurayija, 2011; Nowak & Sahli, 2010; UNWTO, 2013).

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However, given Africa's natural tourist resources one may question why the continent is projected to only attract between 5% and 6.3% of all global travellers by 2020. Van Wijk, Go and Govers (2008), points to Africa's 'troublesome' image as a continent and tourist destination as the prime raison d'être. Similarly and Lwegaba (2013) identifies Africa's 'unfortunate' image as an obstacle to the region's competitiveness in the global tourism market, ascertaining that there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that Africa faces a huge challenge in counteracting the continent's prolonged negative image and perceived risks a tourist destination. In as much as the success of a tourist destination is dependent on the generic factors of tourist destination competitive advantage (amenities, tourist attractions, activities, infrastructure& accessibility), Alexander and Njenga (2013) believe that the perception that exists of the place (tourist destination) is an overall key determining factor. Marshalls (2007) goes as far as ascertaining that the final decision to visit a particular place is based on the image of the tourist destination and to this end, Perner (2005 in Marshalls, 2007) posits that despite having a competitive advantage empirical studies have indicated that the image of a country is also significant in the promotion of a particular country as a tourist destination.

This paper acknowledges the importance and relevance of a country's image to its attractiveness as a tourist destination. With particular reference to Africa, this paper briefly explores the concept of tourist destination images (TDI) and Africa's image as a tourism region. This paper aims to address the gap that exists between the reality of the African continent as a tourist destination and its perceived image within the global tourist market. In order to bridge this gap, this concept note posits the conceptual model of nation-brand identity and image as a strategic response to the image challenges facing African tourist destinations in increasing tourism inflows to their locations.

The tourist destination image

The destination marketing concept has evolved in the last two decades. One such evolution is the idea that tourist destinations can be viewed as brands, much like conventional corporate, service and product brands (Hudson, 2008). However, destination branding and the application of branding theory to places is relatively new, is in its infancy and not well documented in generic marketing literature, despite destination brand image being identified in tourism literature as being a key component to destination loyalty (Hosany, Ekinci & Hysal, 2006).

The image of a tourist destination is according to Kotler and Gertner (2002) the sum of all believes and impressions held by consumers about a particular place. Every country has an image, whether or not the country consciously manages this image (brand) and these images are activated by simply mentioning the name of a country, thereby influencing the purchasing, travelling, and investing and relocation decisions of consumers (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). The proactive management of the image of a product, service or more pertinently a tourist destination is generically referred to as branding. Branding can be described as the process of creating an image which is able to engage the hearts and minds of customers (Pitt, Opoku, Hultmen, Abratt & Spyropoulosu, 2007). With this in mind George (2011) describes a Tourist Destination Image (TDI) as the net result of personal beliefs, ideas, feelings or impressions that exist of a tourist destination and goes on to determine that all destinations have images based on their geography, standard of living, climate and natural attractions. Sartori, Moltironi

and Corigliano (2012) view place image in the tourism context as the combination of both tangible and intangible elements that tourists associate with a destination, while Pike (2008) posits that, it would be useful to Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) to consider the destination image as being representative of the identity of the destination and ultimately informing the image of the destination in the minds of tourists. The right brand identity provides a destination with a 'suitable' point of differentiation and represents the positive attributes and associations the DMO wants to influence the perceptions of tourists and form the most competitive TDI for the location (George, 2011).

Aaker (1996) importantly distils the concept of branding in the TDI management context, outlining that the brand identity of destinations is an internal construct (the destination) which represents the desired self-image and aspired market image, and that the brand image is the external construct/orientation, which is the actual image of the destination held by the consumer. It follows then that the TDI is beyond the control of the DMO and that the management of the destination identity is an attempt to proactively and positively influence the consumer. This influence may be at what Boulding (1956 in Avhraham & Ketter 2008) consider to be the 1) Cognitive (what tourists know about the destination); 2) Affective (How tourists feel about the destination); 3) Evaluative (how tourists evaluate the destination and its residents) and/or; Behavioural (whether a tourist would consider immigrating, working, visiting or investing in the destination) levels of place image formation. The TDI therefore, projects the desired characteristics of the destination in line with consumer expectations and the resulting images held by the consumer are what Pike (2008) believes have a significant role in travel purchase decisions.

Africa's image as a tourist destination

Africa is considered to have a significant competitive advantage as a tourist region (Lwegaba, 2013) and there is no doubt that tourism affords African countries considerable socio-economic opportunities given the continent's abundance in both natural and cultural resources (TICAD, 2009). However, as the TICAD (2009) report on tourism in Africa found, the continent's share of the global tourism market is very small, lagging behind the global average. The report goes on to identify the continent's perceived poor safety, security and health situation and this impacts negatively on the continent's potential as a tourist region and results in the often poor brand credibility and confusing image of African nations. Berman (2003) believes that destination 'crisis' is often a result of negative external factors, which then impinge on the marketability and appeal of the destination. This holds true for most African tourist destinations and the media according to the United Nations Economic Commission on Africa (UNECA, 2007) are the main purveyors of the negative identity of the African region. George (2011) also acknowledges the significant role of the media in creating the negative global image of Africa both as a continent and tourist destination. With particular reference to Southern Africa, George (2011) attributes the perception of the region as a politically unstable and tourist-related crime 'hot spot' to often exaggerated and ignorant media coverage.

Kotler and Gertner (2002) warn that the entrainment industry and the media play considerable role in TDI formation since both industries influence and shape the perceptions of places in the minds of their audiences. Such is the case for Africa, whose negative associations with socio-economic ills such

as AIDS (Bostwana, South Africa, Swaziland); political unrest (Kenya, Arab-spring Egypt), human rights violations (Uganda's anti-gay bill); racial and ethnic conflict (Apartheid South Africa, Rwandan Genocide); economic turmoil (Zimbabwe); poverty (Somalia, Ethiopia); and violent crime (South Africa, Nigeria's conflict with Boko Haram); all of which the media has repeatedly and strongly associated with certain locations. These images manifest into stereotypes, which are extreme simplifications of the reality of potential tourism destinations (Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Matiza & Oni, 2014).

It follows then that in order for African tourist destinations to attract more tourists to their locations their TDI's must focus on destination differentiation in order to separate and promote safe and stable destinations from less hospitable locations. In essence in the current increasingly competitive global tourism marketplace the creation of a unique and superior proposition as a destination identity to differentiate one's destination from competitors has become a key strategic linchpin in destination success (Hudson, 2008).

The conceptual model of destination-brand identity and image

For any strategic approach to problem solving a situation analysis must be conducted to understand the current situation as it is and make informed strategic decisions to address the identified issue. This paper has thus far established that the TDI is a key determinant in the tourism product consumption decision process of tourists. The paper has also thus far established that Africa as a tourism region faces unique image challenges which impedes the ability of individual African countries to attract tourists to their locations. Although some African tourist locations have more complex image challenges than others nation images fall within six distinct categories identified by Hermann (2010) as: overly attractive image; positive image; mixed image; weak image; contradictory image (where people hold opposite views about some features of the place) and; negative image. Each image category has strategic challenges which must be addressed. For the purposes of this paper we focus on those particularly relevant to African tourist destinations as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1
Image situations of African tourist destinations

Image situations	Strategic challenge
Weak image	TDI improvement depending on the reasons for weak image – e.g. "visibility-problem". Marketing strategy with a clear message and leadership, turning attractive features of the tourist destination into competitive advantage.
Contradictory image	Accentuation of positive TDI while simultaneously trying to change the realities that give rise to negative images.
Negative image	Working out of a long-term strategy for a more positive TDI profile via concrete developments and improvements on the problematic fields / allocation of budgets to development activities.

Source: Hermann (2010, p. 60).

Once the DMO has evaluated the image situation of the destination and charted the strategic approach to counteracting the image situation, the DMO can then initiate the development and implementation of the conceptual model of nation-brand identity and image. The conceptual model of nation-brand identity and image is the conception of Dinnie (2008) and outlines the management of a nation image as a 3-tier process (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Conceptual model of destination-brand identity and image
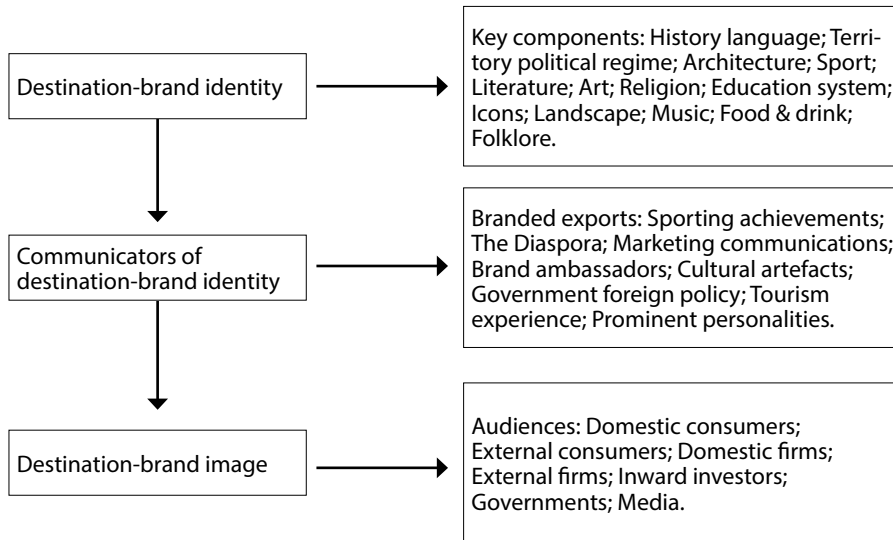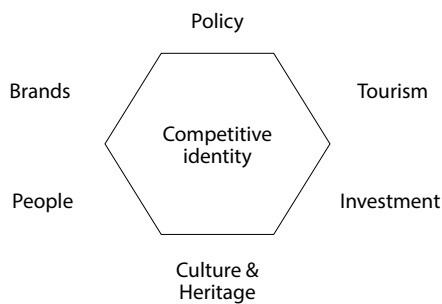

Source: Adapted from Dinnie (2008, p. 49).

The identity of a tourist destination refers to the true picture and situation of the location, while the image is how the location is perceived (Dinnie, 2008). The gap between how the location is perceived by tourists and the reality of the tourist location often represents a negative factor for the location in the purchase decision process of tourists. The rationale of the model is that a place creates an identity which it wishes to be associated with, and strategically communicates this identity, which then results in the formation of an image amongst a target audience. The conceptual model may be described as follows:

Phase 1: Destination-brand identity

The first step in the conceptual model is the formulation of a positive and accurately representative destination-brand identity. Anholt (2002 in Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2011, p. 23), suggests that places communicate with their external environment through six distinct channels and that places (destinations) may utilize these channels individually or in collaboration with each other. These channels make up the model of competitive identity (CI) which is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2
The hexagon of competitive identity

	Policy	The policy decisions of the region's government, whether foreign or domestic gets reported in the media. It is this exposure (public diplomacy) that consumers use to evaluate the governance of a tourist destination.
	Tourism	Tourism promotion activity, as well as first-hand experiences from tourists visiting the destination. This is the most prominent brand identity touch point for DMOs.
	Invest-ment	To business travelers, the way the country solicits and maintains inward investment, recruits foreign talent and its promotes the internationalization of its local companies influences how people view the country.
	Culture & Heritage	Cultural exchange and activities and exports such as famous dance/performing arts group world tours often encourage the interaction between the destination's culture and the outside world projecting and showcasing its unique heritage. This often stimulates interest amongst audiences, sparking interest in the location.
	People	The local population, their leaders, their famous and/or infamous celebrities and sports stars and/or teams and their behavior when abroad and visiting other countries also creates an impression with potential visitors about the location.
	Brands	Where the country of origin is clear, products and services associated with a particular country are also very influential in the global market in forming and creating perceptions.

Hexagon diagram: Competitive identity with surrounding labels — Policy, Tourism, Investment, Culture & Heritage, People, Brands.

Source: Adapted from Anholt (2002) in Morgan, Pritchard & Pride (2011, p. 23).

Hosany *et al.,* (2006) determine that in the current global environment, increased competition has made the creation and management of an "appropriate" brand image and destination personality imperative to effective destination market positioning. Leisen (2001) goes further to consider TDI to be crucial to the marketing success for tourist destinations. How the destination wishes to be perceived by its target audience requires a multi-pronged approach which principally blends the positive aspects the country as a tourist destination wishes to project. Dann (2002) alludes to this, ascertaining that the building of a destination image involves the transforming the reality of the destination by a process of inclusion and exclusion, thereby creating a 'metaphor' suitable to provide the best representation of the destination and visual cliché.

Phase 2: Communicators of destination brand-identity

Once the distinct identity has been created by the tourist location, the next step is to communicate this identity to its target audience. In order to accomplish this, the conceptual model suggests specific communicators that countries may utilise to project their identities. These include:

- Branded exports – the products and services a country exports to foreign markets harness the country of origin effect and may be used to positively communicate the identity of the country. For instance Germany is well known for its precision engineered motor vehicles and is home to prominent vehicle brands, Mercedes Benz and Bavarian Motor Works (BMW). Germany's reputation has made the country a preferred destination for important global business events and conferences such as the Frankfurt Motor Show.

- Sporting achievements – Sport has increased in prominence in the past two decades and now may be utilised as a communication tool by DMOs. An example is football (soccer), with countries such as Brazil gaining global recognition for their ability to play the sport. Brazil as a nation has been able to use their national team "the Samba boys" and its individual starts to raise the prominence of the country as a tourist destination.

- The Diaspora – the Diaspora refers to nationals living in foreign countries. These individuals utilise mainly word-of-mouth to promote and communicate the image of the country as a tourist destination. A good example of this is how people from the Caribbean Islands such as Jamaica encourage the people wherever they are residing to visit the Island for its beautiful beaches and unique culture.

- Marketing communications – Marketing communications refers to the traditional marketing tools to promote a destination. These include advertising; personal selling; sales promotion; public relations and publicity and; direct marketing. An example of marketing communications is packaged holiday tours as a form of sales promotion. These are commonly used for tourist vacations which may include safaris and cruises.

- Brand ambassadors/Prominent personalities – Brand ambassadors and prominent personalities are individuals selected by country's to represent their identity to the rest of the world. Famous and often infamous high-profile individuals may also unconsciously be utilised as communicators of the country as a tourist destination by potential tourists. Personalities/ brand ambassadors include musicians, politicians, actors and sports stars (Bob Marley & Usain Bolt– Jamaica; Pele – Brazil; Barrack Obama – United States; Pope Francis – The Vatican; Nelson Mandela – South Africa, Maria Mutola – Mozambique).

- Government foreign policy - the willingness and openness of the country to foreigners through immigration policy for instance is a key communicator to the openness of the tourist location to visitors. For example Australia is much stricter on visa regulations making the destination not very attractive to tourists from developing countries. On the other hand a visitors/tourist visa to visit South Africa is not as difficult and poses less of a challenge.

- Cultural artefacts – traditional relics and infrastructure may also be a communicator of the country as a tourist destination. A good illustration is how Egypt uses its ancient artefacts from the age of Pharaohs to attract tourists to its pyramids, by hosting global exhibitions on art history from that period to spark interest in Egypt as a destination.

Phase 3: Destination-brand image

The final phase of the conceptual model identifies the intended target audience of the destination whose perception the destination wishes to influence. Audience targeting is important for identity

projection as it ensures that the correct and relevant message reaches the intended audience. This also ensures the effective utilisation of often scarce destination marketing resources. Audiences according to the model include:

- Domestic consumers – These are the locals resident in the country. Domestic consumers form the domestic tourism market and are important to local tourism which contributes to the tourism industry.

- External consumers – External consumers are the foreign tourists resident in a foreign country. They form the global tourist market and are the target of most DMO marketing activities.

- Domestic firms – Domestic firms are local organisations that are part of the local tourist market for tourist destinations. These include government and corporate organisations who are potential event and conference clients. Domestic firms also include local tour operators and travel agents.

- External firms – External firms are government and corporate organisations based in foreign markets. These include large quasi-government entities such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation which host mega events such as the World Economic Forum. These events are lucrative business tourism opportunities. External firms also refer to the international tourism organisations and agencies such as Thomas Cook.

- Inward investors – Attractive tourist destinations also draw in foreign investment into the tourism industry and its related infrastructure. The more attractive a location is to tourists the greater the potential for tourist arrivals, increased tourist spend and ultimately return on investment.

- Governments – Governments are wary of the safety of their citizens, hence DMOs may also target foreign governments with positive messages relating to their locations in order to improve inter-government relations. In cases of crisis it is common for the governments of the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada to issue travel warnings to their citizen, advising them against visiting countries they consider unsafe. This is detrimental to tourist locations perceived to be unsafe, as such warnings often result in negative global media coverage, projecting the negative associations even more.

- Media – the media is probably the most important audience for DMOs. Apart from paid for public relation and advertising, the news media is an independent entity which makes its own assessments about situations in individual countries and often open to its own interpretation of the identities and events in a country. As is the case with the image of Africa the international media has been criticised for focusing on the negative aspects of the continent often projecting exaggerated and sensational information and often as is the case, not correcting outdated information relating to the continent. Hence, good media relations play an important role in TDI formation.

Management implications for African destination management organisations

This paper briefly explored the concept of tourist destination image (TDI) and its relevance to African tourist destinations. Africa has a distinct image challenge which to a large extent has contributed to the continent's inability to command a larger share of the global tourist market. This paper established that tourism serves a major developmental role on the African continent with tourism related income often being the key driver for economic diversification, sustainable economic development and poverty

alleviation on the continent. The conceptual model of destination-brand identity and image offers a logical approach to TDI management, which is a critical challenge for African DMOs.

There is an urgent need for proactive activities aimed at addressing the image challenges associated with both the continent as a tourism region and individual countries as distinct tourism destinations. This model offers tourism managers an initial framework for achieving sustainable TDI. The image of countries is highly subjective, with countries having unique challenges; hence the conceptual model serves as a generic framework and is dynamic in its ability to accommodate the image marketing objectives of different locations. It is important for individual DMOs to establish the image they are associated with in order to determine the strategic approach to remedy their current image situations. It is imperative that DMO managers are proactive in managing the images of their locations by actively managing the identities of their locations. This paper posits the conceptual model as a methodology for African DMOs, however, further qualitative research is required to establish strategic implications of the conceptual model from the perspective of DMO managers and practitioners. Further research is also required to establish the validity of the conceptual model as an adaptation of the nation-brand identity and image conceptual model by Dinnie (2008).

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