



Visitor perceptions on Zimbabwe as a tourist destination and implications for policy directions

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Abstract

The tourism industry in Zimbabwe has experienced fluctuating trends in its growth since the dawn of the new millennium. The Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality Industry undertook a visitor exit survey in 2015/2016 period. One of the objectives of the survey was to assess the visitor perceptions of Zimbabwe as a competitive tourist destination. Questionnaires were administered to 34000 departing visitors at the country's three international airports and the border posts during the period July 2015 and June 2016. The results of the survey indicated that there were no significant changes in visitor perceptions of the country before and after visiting Zimbabwe. It further showed that the main factors that contributed to negative visitor perception of the country included high prices, harassment by the police, poor facilities, poor infrastructure and poor quality service delivery. It is recommended that the private sector revisit its pricing model and that the government seriously considers revamping of the country's infrastructure, especially the road and rail systems. It is further recommended that the government and the private sector come up with a training programme for the people who are already employed in the tourism industry so as to improve their skill and hence facilitate improvement of service delivery.

Keywords: tourism, visitor perception, infrastructure development, Zimbabwe

Introduction

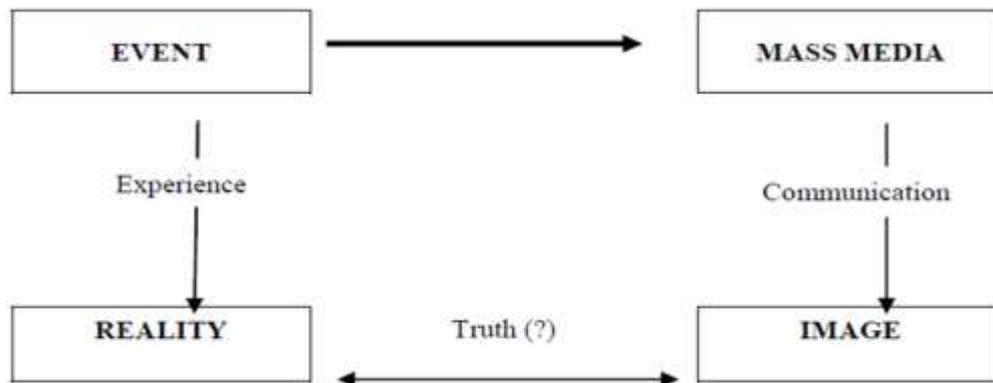
Over the last four decades, tourism has experienced continued growth and deepening diversification to become one of the fastest growing sectors in the world (UNWTO, 2016). International tourist arrivals grew from 278.2 million in 1980 to 445.8 million in 1990 and reached 685.5 million in 2000. Total tourist arrivals stood at 1.2 billion in 2015 (ibid). In Zimbabwe, the tourism sector has experienced an upward trend in international arrivals from 1.2 million tourists in 2009 to 2.1 million in 2015 (Zimstat, 2015). The number of visiting tourists is the lifeblood of any tourist destinations as it is a source of fresh money injected into the economy.

Whenever tourists provide structured feedback on their experiences visiting a destination such feedback should be taken seriously and it should trigger evidence-based policy interventions. The research paper explores visitor perceptions on destination Zimbabwe following the 2015/6 Visitor Exit Survey Report. Whilst the report gives extensive results on a number of areas, this paper focuses on tourist's perceptions after visiting Zimbabwe and their implications for policy. Visitor Exit Surveys provide useful information for policy makers, tourism players and also generate academic inquiry.

Literature Review

Lombardi (1990), argues that there are two ways to recreate a destination image in the minds of the of the visitor, through mass media communication prior to an event or through real experiences that shape ones thinking after they have visited a destination. This theory is depicted in Figure 1. below

Figure 1. Lombardi model of perceptions



Source: Adapted from Lombardi, 1990 Figure 2: Model of Communication

The theory by Lombardi, postulates that tourists rely on abstract truth created by the media in making travel decisions, however, their lived experiences represent to what to them becomes reality and truth. This theory places importance of a destination to always try to influence what perceptions tourists may have prior to travelling to a destination as a first step and secondly to ensure that the lived experiences also generate positive feedback and are not an additional source of negative perceptions.

Corresponding views to this theory is given by Gunn (1988), who argues that destination image is a two-dimensional issue, one created prior to visiting a country on information provided and the second is formed after visiting a destination. Lexow et al., (2004), focused on the negative effects of media prior to travel to test this theory and concluded that when negative things are continuously written about a destination this can affect tourist traffic to a destination.

The authors would like to take the theory by Lombardi (1990), further and dwell on the impact of not redressing the negative views that emanate from tourists' visit to destination. It is the authors' argument that when a destination has received feedback from the stay of tourists, it must initiate interventions to address concerns raised. If this is not done it may affect the fortunes of the destination going forward. Ezeuduji et al., (2016: 2) cites a multiplicity of authors who have researched on the destination brand perception and notes that positive perception of a destination leads to repeat visitors and brand royalty. This is a near universal occurrence in tourism and hence countries like Zimbabwe which have prioritize tourism as a major pillar for its economic development, (G o.Z :2010) have to endeavour to ensure that they create an environment that leads to positive visitor perception of the destination.

Methodology

The data used in the paper was obtained from the for the 5th Visitor Exit survey which Zimbabwe undertook from July 2015 June 2016. Data for the survey was collected using a

questionnaire administered to a sample of 34 000 tourists that visited Zimbabwe between June 2015 and July 2016 who were the survey population. The one year period allowed the survey to take care of seasonality of the tourism business. Marshall et al., (2006), argues that a survey research is most appropriate inquiry to make inferences about a large group based on a small number. In other words, it allows for generalisation of findings. A questionnaire was administered to the tourists who were selected using a systematic sampling technique which ensured all visiting tourists had an equal chance of being selected to take part in the survey. The appeal of systematic sampling is highlighted by Elsayir (2014), who believes it is spread more evenly over the entire population than a stratified sample where the strata are drawn separately.

Questionnaires were administered to departing visitors at the country’s three main airports of Harare International airport, Victoria Falls International airport and the Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo International airport. Further questionnaires were administered to departing visitors at the border posts of Beitbridge, Chirundu, Victoria Falls Barrier, Forbes, Nyamapanda, Kazungula and Plumtree.

Results and analysis

The SPSS processing of the data from the survey brought out a number of significant views of visitors to Zimbabwe with regard to competitiveness of the country as a tourist destination. Figure 1 shows the perceptions of visitors before and after visiting Zimbabwe.

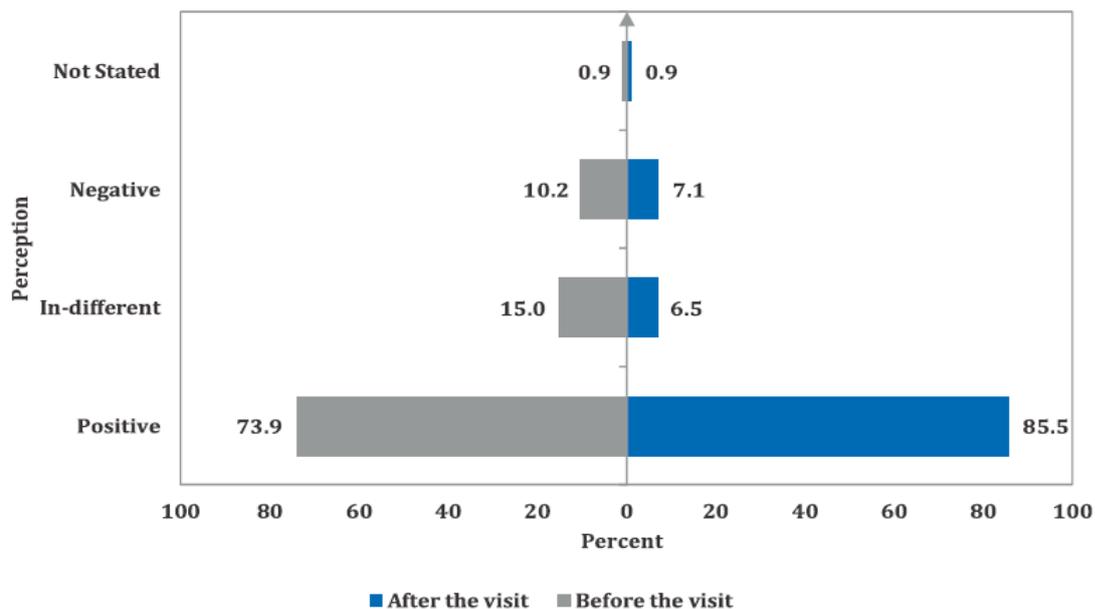


Figure 2. Visitor perceptions before and after visiting Zimbabwe: Source; GoZ, VES 2015/2016

There is a negligible change in negative perceptions of the visitors prior to visiting Zimbabwe (10.2%), compared to after their visit to Zimbabwe (7.1%), as is shown in Figure 2. The graph above indicates a mere 3.1% improvement of the negative perceptions of the visitors after they had been to the country. However, the visitors that had positive perceptions about the country before coming to Zimbabwe showed a marked improvement of 11.6% in their perceptions after their visit. Figure 1 further shows an improvement of 8.5% of the perception of visitors who prior to coming to Zimbabwe were in-different about the country. Their experience in the country helped them to develop a more realistic view of the destination.

The finding points to the need for the national tourism organization, Zimbabwe Tourism Authority(ZTA) to intensify their image improvement programmes in the source markets so that the persistent poor image of the country is turned round because once the visitor arrive in the country their holiday experience seem to help to improve of their general perception of the country.

The visitors gave a number of reasons for not coming back to Zimbabwe for their next holiday. The reasons included among others high prices, poor quality services to harassment by the police. Figure 3 shows the relative importance of the different reasons given by the visitors during the survey.

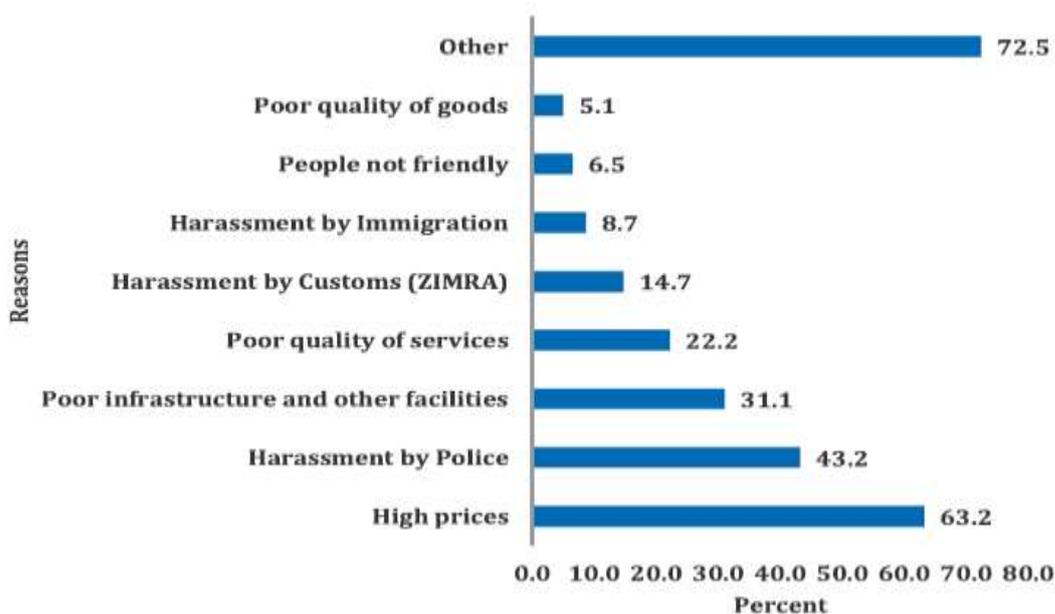


Figure 3: Reasons for not coming Back to Zimbabwe: Source: GoZ; VES report 2015/6

High Prices

Figure 3 indicates that 63.2% of the interviewed tourists would rather choose another destination to visit because of the high prices of products and services they experienced in Zimbabwe. The multi-currency system adopted by Zimbabwe in 2009, especially the use of the United States Dollar as the anchor currency is a huge contributory factor to this development. Visitors whose currencies were weaker than the United States dollar found out that their holidays to Zimbabwe were expensive because of currency differentials.

The situation was worsened by the fact that the products offered were nowhere near the prices being charged. The visitors found themselves being asked to pay a United State rate for a third world product. Product providers have made the situation worse by retaining the high inflation period pricing models where high margins were the norm (Sanderson et al., 2013). This has made Zimbabwe uncompetitive as a tourist destination in Southern Africa and hence the departing visitors found no reason to come back to Zimbabwe for their next holiday.

Tourists taking their holidays in Zimbabwe's neighbouring countries like South Africa, Botswana and Mozambique are able to stretch their budgets because of the exchange rates differentials between their currencies and local currencies like the Rand, the Pula and the Meticals respectively which is not the case in Zimbabwe.



Harassment by Police

Another growing source of negative perceptions on the destination from the survey was harassment of tourists by police. Figure 2 shows that 43% of the visitors indicated that they will not take their next holiday in Zimbabwe because of the harassment that they received from the police during their stay in the country. Concerns about police harassment have been raised in a number of fora as well as in a number of studies in the past. For example, Anderson et al (2013: 21) recorded a total of 20 road blocks between Harare and Victoria Falls on 6th January 2013 when travelling between the capital city and the resort town. The report further noted that the police were charging visitors driving foreign registered vehicles in the country for not adhering to local rules which was against the Vienna Convention on road traffic of 1968 to which Zimbabwe is a signatory.

Political pronouncement about police harassment of the motorist, both local and international, has not changed the attitudes of the traffic police in the country. In reality the traffic police have increased their presence in the road and have adopted harsher practices when dealing with motorists, for example at each road block they now have spikes which are used to stop vehicles. These practices are frightening to motorists and are shocking to tourists who would expect police to be concerned about their safety and security.

The traffic police are further notorious for corruption and tourists have sent numerous complaints to the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) and local tour operators about how they had been fleeced by the traffic police. It was therefore not surprising that departing visitors highlighted police harassment as a key factor for them not taking their next holiday in Zimbabwe. It is significant to note that studies carried out in competing destinations (Tanzania, 2013; South Africa 2016) did not raise any negative comments about police treatment of visitors. The attitude and practices of the police is therefore contributing to the unpopularity of Zimbabwe as a tourist destination.

The introduced Tourism Police Units in major tourist destinations that was made during the late 90s in the country have totally been overshadowed by the current unprofessional practices that the police are using on the visitors. The police behaviour is symptomatic of the economic malaises that have plagued the country since 2000. The police like most government departments experience perennial budget challenges and hence motorists are an easy prey for raising funds for the department. However, the ministry of Home Affairs need to take decisive corrective action about the malpractices of the traffic police otherwise the promotional efforts that are being carried out by tourism stakeholders are a waste of resources of both the private and the public sector.

Poor Infrastructure and other Facilities

Results of the survey also indicated that the decade-long economic situation in Zimbabwe has had a negative impact on the infrastructure in Zimbabwe. 31.1% of the respondents mentioned poor infrastructure and other services as a reason for not coming back to Zimbabwe for their next holiday. The views expressed by tourists was not surprising as a recent study that led to the development of Zimbabwe National Tourism Master Plan 2017-2035 (Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality Industry) detailed the dilapidation that has occurred in the country's roads and railways.

The roads are littered with potholes and make travelling very difficult especially for tourists that prefer self-drives. The rail systems are almost moribund with no reliable scheduled departures and very poor conditions and services on the trains. In terms of tourism facilities, the absence of tailor made financing for the sector has affected refurbishment cycles of hotels and other facilities.



Given that the tourists are charged United States dollars for services in the country the qualities of the infrastructure and facilities made the majority of the tourists feel cheated and hence the indication that they will not be coming back to the country any time soon. Word of mouth is a strong mode of advertising in the tourism industry (Ezeuduji et al 2016) hence the negative sentiments expressed by the departing visitors will influence a large number of tourists who were considering Zimbabwe as their next holiday destination. The proliferation of the use of social media by tourists on holiday, for example Trip Advisor and Facebook, meant that the negative perceptions of the visitors were distributed to millions of individuals around the world making the marketing and promotion of Zimbabwe a difficult task for both the private and public sector in Zimbabwe.

The efforts that the Government has made to assist the private sector to upgrade their facilities by allowing duty free imports for capital goods used in the sector has been hindered by lack of appropriately priced funds. The interest rates for loans from banks ranging from 15% to 30% percent per annum have been too high for business in the tourism sector and hence a large number of operators have been able to benefit from the capital duty free facility that the government availed. The tourist facilities in Zimbabwe have therefore remained uncompetitive compared to facilities in other countries in the southern Africa like Botswana, South Africa, Mauritius and Namibia.

Unfriendly People

Both the public and private sector must be concerned that 6.5% of the tourists interviewed would not return to Zimbabwe as they considered the people unfriendly. This was a new development in the nature of tourism to Zimbabwe. Historically the friendliness of Zimbabwean people has been a major selling point for the country. In the majority of countries in Africa local people have shown to be very positive to tourist which is a reflection of the general African concept of ubuntu where foreigners are highly tolerated in the society. The Tanzania study (National Bureau of Statistics report: 39)) showed that 40.8% of the departing visitors mentioned friendliness of the people as one of the key positive things they experienced on their holidays in the country. Similar sentiments were recorded by Ezeuduji et al (2016) in the case of visitors to Cape Town city in South Africa.

In its tourism brand, "Zimbabwe, a world of wonders", the national tourist organization considered its friendly and hospitable people to be its first wonder, followed by attractions like Victoria Falls, Great Zimbabwe monuments, wildlife and culture. It will be essential for authorities to undertake research on views of locals on visitors to the country so that appropriate measures are put in place to address the issue of anti -tourists' sentiment before it takes its roots in the society.

Poor Services

The departing tourists also complained about poor quality of service (22.2%) experienced in the country. The finding of the study served to reconfirm what the tourism industry has been grappling with since the beginning of the economic meltdown which started in 2000. A large number of experienced and qualified personnel migrated to other Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries and overseas (Zimbabwe Council for Tourism, 2014). The industry was left with inexperienced personnel and given the economic challenges that the country is still facing companies have not been able to allocate resource to train their staff in different areas of the tourism industry. The perceptions of departing tourists in Zimbabwe was in total contrast with the perceptions of the tourists departing from Cape Town who mentioned memorable experience and value for money with regard to their holidays in that city (Ezeuduji et al., 2016).



Harassment by Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) and immigration officials

The ports of entry give tourists' their first impressions of any destination. With 14.4% and 8% of the departing visitors mentioning harassment by ZIMRA and Immigration officials respectively, it means that visitors' negative perception of Zimbabwe is intensified the moment they enter into the country. This is a major disservice to the tourism industry as a whole which has been trying to reposition the country as a favourable holiday destination after experiencing negative publicity resulting from the political challenges encountered before the formation of the government of national unity (GNU) in 2009.

Officers manning the border posts, like the majority of government employees in the country, are facing economic hardship on a daily basis. They are therefore not motivated to offer tourists quality service. In some cases, lack of appropriate training in customer care hinder them to be aware of how to treat visitors to the country.

Conclusion

Zimbabwe's image in the source markets has been negative since the commencement of political and economic challenges in 2000. Efforts that were made during the government of national unity and in recent years have not been able to turn around the negative perception of the country. The results of the visitor exit survey gave a clear indication of the continued presence of the challenge. The government and the private sector need to adopt a number of strategies in order create a positive image of the destination which will help to encourage the long-term growth of the tourism sector.

Recommendations

The government will need to undertake massive rehabilitation of the country's road networks. The recently awarding of a tender to rehabilitate the Beitbridge/Harare/ Chirundu highway is a positive and encouraging development. However, the rehabilitation needs to cover both urban and rural areas where roads are in an unacceptable state of repair. The government will need to engage international cooperating partners to source funding for the rehabilitation programmes as its own coffers have no capability at present to finance the programme.

The private sector need to upgrade the tourist product through refurbishment, re-engineering and in some cases through complete over-hall, for examples some of the vehicle of car hire companies should have been removed from the market some ten years ago. The private sector must change its pricing model which is based on high margins which is a hangover from the high inflation period of 2005-2008. A meaningful start has been made by the major hotel groups in the country like Rainbow Tourism Group and African Sun which have commenced offering high discounted room rates to visitors.

The Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality Industry and the private sector need to put in place short term training programmes to addresses the skills gap that are within different components of the tourism industry. The private sector alone does not have the financial ability or the manpower to implement a programme that will effectively address the challenge. Government will need to engage international partners like the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and International Labour Organization (ILO) to provide it with resources to operationalize the programme.

The Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality Industry need to work closely with the ministries of Home Affairs and Ministry of Finance to develop and implement an intensive customer care training programme for the police, customs and immigration officials. This will help these



frontline personal to develop appropriate attitudes and etiquette to handle visitors that come into the country.

The government needs to rethink its current position on the adoption of the United States Dollar as the anchor of its multicurrency system. Given that South Africa is the country's major trading partner it makes economic sense to adopt the rand as the anchor currency. Calls have been made by representatives of different sectors of the economy to adopt the rand as the anchor currency for the country. The tourism industry stands to benefit if this was implemented as products and services in the sector will be priced at rates that are competitive to those of the rest of the SADC member states.

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