



# Tourists' perceptions of a destination brand Image: KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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## Abstract

A tourist's destination image entails the emotional interpretation and evaluation that he/she has regarding a destination, resulting from personal knowledge and beliefs. This study explored the tourists' destination brand image of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. Much of the previous studies on destination brand image were conducted outside the African continent. This study conducted in KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa is exploratory in nature and used a market-orientated approach in seeking to identify the tourists' brand image perceptions towards this destination. A questionnaire survey of 411 domestic and international tourists in KwaZulu-Natal provided data for descriptive, bivariate and multivariate analyses. Tourists have a very positive image of KwaZulu-Natal brand as a tourism destination, especially in terms of its unique nature and culture offerings. The study results will hopefully help the destination managers in KwaZulu-Natal to optimise their marketing strategies towards strengthening their nature and culture offerings to suit tourists' needs and wants, and at the same time maintain and create opportunities for tourists who are more interested in meetings, events, sand-sea-sun, and visiting friends and relatives. Comparative studies can be conducted in other African regions to seek individual regional positioning in the global tourism marketplace.

**Keywords:** Brand image; tourism destination; tourist perception; KwaZulu-Natal; sub-Saharan Africa.

## Introduction

De Chernatony and McDonald (1998: 20) have defined a successful brand as "an identifiable product, service, person or place, augmented in such a way that the customer or consumer perceives relevant, unique, added values which match their needs most closely". Tourists as tourism customers do not just pay for services, they pay for the service brands (de Chernatony & Harris, 2010; Ezeuduji, Lete, Correia & Taylor, 2014). Kapferer (1997) argues that brand value originates from consumers' awareness of the brand, how they trust it, and the image the brand has for them. Destinations with strong brand will therefore likely perform better and possess more value than destinations with unbranded offerings.

It follows therefore that the perceived brand image of a tourism destination will have an impact on the destination selection process of tourists, the post-selection evaluation of the destination and the decision whether they will prefer the destination in the future (Chi & Qu, 2008; Ezeuduji & Nkosi, 2017). The effects that destination brand image has on the selection of a destination have been studied by various authors, but mostly outside this selected study area, KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa (such as Anastassova, 2011; Artuger, Cetinsöz & Kilic, 2013; Ezeuduji, Lete, Correia & Taylor, 2014; Shestakov, 2012). KwaZulu-Natal is one of the nine provinces of South Africa and highlights from the State of the Province Address report that tourism has a significant contribution in the KwaZulu-Natal local economy, and continues to grow from a



R9bn contribution to the Provincial Gross Domestic Product in 2014 to more than R10bn by 2018 (Tourism KwaZulu-Natal, 2019).

Destination image has been shown to affect the behavioural intention of tourists (Chi & Qu, 2008). These authors (Chi & Qu) posit that a positive brand image has an impact on tourist satisfaction and the behavioural intentions of tourists. They also argue that destination image is an important factor that motivates tourists to want to visit a particular destination. In other words, the way tourists perceive a destination can hinder their willingness to visit the destination or even recommend it to friends and relatives. It means therefore, that tourism destinations need to always be on their toes in providing excellent service to tourists, marketing their destination in a way that attracts tourists to the destination, and paying attention to those factors or tourists' experiences that end up making tourists loyal to the destination brand.

The researchers hence argue that it is important that the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa identifies the driving factors that make tourists want to visit it as a destination and identify the tourists' brand image perceptions towards this province, so that they can also improve where need be, in terms of their marketing strategies. This will enable the province of KwaZulu-Natal to maintain a competitive advantage over other national and international tourism destinations, in relation to tourists' demand. The researchers assessed how tourists perceive KwaZulu-Natal brand image as a tourism destination, as this study is market-orientated. The researchers explored (research objective) how tourists perceive the KwaZulu-Natal brand image dimensions, such as its symbolic representations, affective meanings, physical atmosphere, and accessibility as a tourism destination (Amujo & Otubanjo, 2012; Anholt, 2011; Artuger, Cetinsöz & Kilic, 2013; Bruwer, Pratt, Saliba & Hirche, 2017; Ezeuduji, November & Haupt, 2016; Hosany, Ekinci & Uysal, 2007; Jraisat, Akroush, Alfaouri, Qatu & Kurdieh, 2015; Mabkhot, Shaari & Salleh, 2017). Comparisons were also made between tourists' profile and perception of the aforementioned brand image dimensions. The next section presents an overview of the literature review done regarding the study objective.

## Overview of Literature

A destination brand is a way to differentiate a destination from its competitors, a way to communicate destination's uniqueness to tourists and establish a unique image that all destination stakeholders can constantly use (Amujo & Otubanjo, 2012; Anholt, 2011; Mabkhot, Shaari & Salleh, 2017).

Destination brand image has been studied and defined by various authors (such as Artuğer, Çetinsöz & Kiliç 2013; Bruwer, Pratt, Saliba & Hirche, 2017; Ezeuduji, November & Haupt, 2016; Gao & Zhang, 2009; Hosany, Ekinci & Uysal, 2007; Jraisat, Akroush, Alfaouri, Qatu & Kurdieh, 2015; Keller, 2003; Lopes, 2011; Morrison & Anderson, 2002; Nel & Strydom, 2004). Keller (2003) defines brand image as the perceptions about the brand, and brand associations as they are held in customer memory. Therefore, a brand image emanates from the total sum of impressions that customers receive from many sources, all of which combine to form a brand personality.

Brand image can be said to be driven by the way in which a group of people or an individual perceives a product or service, a brand, an organisation or a destination. Lopes (2011) summarises that the overall image of a destination is constituted of cognitive and effective components, and destination image can influence the tourists' decision to visit a particular destination. Hence the author (Lopes, 2011) reports on the importance of the destination image and how it affects the market and plays a vital role in the tourists' choice of destination or repeat visit. The image of destinations is also said to range from those based on more unique features, from events to feelings (Bigne, Sanchez & Sanchez, 2001).



The South African name - KwaZulu meaning 'the place of the Zulu people' portrays a strong brand image (see also Ezeuduji & Nkosi, 2017) on its own, as it attracts tourists who are interested in learning more about the Zulu customs and what it means to be Zulu (for example, in Kwa Nongoma there is an annual event called The Reed dance, for virgin Zulu girls; all over KwaZulu-Natal, other Zulu traditions and expressions are prevalent). KwaZulu-Natal as a regional tourism destination should therefore position itself in a way to attract tourists to this destination, emanating from the impact it plays on tourist's motivation, preferences and behaviour towards it. The attitude and image that tourists have towards destinations in KwaZulu-Natal can influence their decision making process to visit the province. If tourists have positive symbolic representations for KwaZulu-Natal, this will work in its favour. The next section discusses the research methods used in collecting data and how these data were analysed.

## Research Method and Design

As this study is based on exploring tourists' perceptions of a destination brand image, a quantitative research method was employed in data collection, using a structured questionnaire survey (where questionnaire variables emanated from literature reviewed and authors' personal knowledge of the destination). Veal (2011), Ezeuduji (2013) and Tummons and Duckworth (2013) support the use of questionnaire in collecting quantified data from respondents. Tourism being a mass phenomenon, quantified data are mostly used to make decisions. Both domestic and international tourists visiting major tourist attractions in KwaZulu-Natal were targeted (King Shaka International Airport, Richards Bay Airport, Pietermaritzburg Airport, Hluhluwe Game Reserve, uShaka Marine World, Durban and Richards Bay beaches).

A purposive sampling method which is a type of non-probability sampling method, was used to sample actual tourists among the general population for a period of 8 months (December 2017 to July 2018), cutting across both peak and off-peak seasons. Veal (2011) posits that in non-probability sampling methods, the absolute size of the sample is more crucial than the sample size relative to the research population. Veal went further to argue that the criteria to determine sample size should entail the required level of precision in results, the proposed details in analysis, and the available budget. 430 tourists were surveyed, however 411 questionnaires received were usable for data analysis.

IBM's SPSS Statistics, version 25 (IBM Corporation, 2017) was used for data analyses. Descriptive analyses (frequencies, mean and standard deviation), bivariate analyses (Spearman's Correlation and Mann-Whitney U tests), and multivariate analysis (Reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha) were done on the digitised data to enable addressing the research objective.

Bivariate analyses were done at a 95% confidence interval, and reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient as a benchmark employed a cut-off point of 0.7 to explain internal consistency or reliability of variables used to explain brand image dimensions (Bühl & Zöfel, 2005; George & Mallery, 2003; Hair, Black, Babin & Tatham, 2005; Iwu, Ezeuduji, Iwu, Ikebuaku & Tengeh, 2018). These variables are ordinal in nature as they are presented in the questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale. From the reliability test results, all the four brand image dimensions (symbolic representations, affective statements, physical atmosphere statements, and accessibility statements) show internal consistency.

As it is common in social sciences, population distributions of the ordinal dimensions were statistically found not to be normally distributed (Kolmogorov-Smirnov's and Shapiro-Wilk's tests of normality yielded p-values of less than 0.001), this research hence conducted non-parametric tests (Spearman's Correlation and Mann-Whitney U). Using Spearman's correlation tests for comparing ordinal variables were supported by Veal (2011).



Mann-Whitney U tests were done to compare means of responses from two independent groups with the aim of validating if they are different from each other. Responses to brand image perception statements were compared with some respondents' profile. Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted based on the following criteria: that the dependent variables (brand image perception statements) have ordinal scale; the independent variables (respondents' profile) have only two groups; and normality of distribution and homogeneity of variance did not prove true in a trial t-test (George & Mallery, 2003; Veal, 2011). The results emanating from these analyses are presented and discussed in the following section.

## Results and Discussion

Questionnaire survey results in Table 1 indicate that more female tourists than males responded to the study. More than 72% of the respondents are relatively young (not more than 40 years of age). Domestic tourists are much more in number than international tourists, and the purposes of travel are predominantly holiday, visiting friends and relatives, and business (seminar, event, conference). Most of the tourists do not stay for more than 10 days in the destination, during the visit.

Good news is that about 79% of them are on return visit, and the level of satisfaction is very high (more than 77% are either mostly or totally satisfied). These results indicate that the destination KwaZulu-Natal is more known as a leisure destination, and product and service offerings are perceived favourably by the tourists.

**Table 1. Profile of the respondents (N = 411)**

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Female	54.5
	Male	45.5
Age group	Less than 20	11.7
	21-30	37.2
	31-40	23.4
	41-50	15.3
	51-60	8.8
	More than 60	3.6
Continent of origin	Africa	70.1
	Australia/ Oceania	4.9
	Asia	3.4
	Europe	14.4
	North America	3.2
	South America	4.1
Type of tourist	Domestic tourists	65.5
	International tourists	34.5
Source of Information about KwaZulu-Natal	Internet	25.6
	Word of Mouth	31.7
	Media (travel magazines and books, T.V)	32.4
	Travel Agency/ Tour Operator	6.8
	Other	3.4
Group travel	Yes	51.1
	No	48.9
Length of stay in KwaZulu-Natal	1-5	49.5
	6-10	31.5
	11-15	8.3
	16 days or longer	10.7



Purpose of visit to KwaZulu-Natal	Business (seminar, event, conference) Business (import and export) Holiday Visiting friends and family Medical Academic exchange Other	13.6 8.0 51.1 18.0 2.9 4.4 1.9
Have you visited any KwaZulu-Natal destination before?	Yes No	78.8 21.2
Level of satisfaction	Totally satisfied Mostly satisfied Moderately satisfied Mostly dissatisfied Totally dissatisfied	40.1 37.2 16.3 4.9 1.5

From the results in Table 2, tourists generally well-enjoyed all the main tourist activities in KwaZulu-Natal, especially the beach experience, history and culture, and food and wine.

**Table 2. Tourists' level of activities enjoyment (N = 411, % Frequency)**

Activities	Highly enjoyable	Mostly enjoyable	Moderately enjoyable	Mostly unenjoyable	Not enjoyable
Nature and outdoors	45.3	30.0	10.6	3.7	1.5
Food and wine	38.1	39.8	14.0	5.4	2.7
Beaches	40.2	42.4	11.5	4.2	1.7
History & Culture	39.1	38.9	15.8	3.0	3.2
Shopping	40.9	33.6	16.4	5.4	3.7

Gao and Zhang (2009) state that tourists' perceptions of a destination such as its brand image are considered to have a big influence on destination choice and brand loyalty, as potential travellers are able to compare the attributes of different destinations during their decision-making process of whether they are going to visit that particular destination or not. Tourists were asked to indicate their level of agreement with brand image statements, which consist of four dimensions (symbolic representations, affective statements, physical atmosphere statements, and accessibility statements). Their responses were compared with their profile.

It is evident from the results, emanating from Mann-Whitney U test, in Table 3 that there were no significant relationships between the tourists' profile and brand image (symbolic representation) statements. Some interesting results were obtained for the 'affective' dimension of the brand image perceptions, where for example, tourists who visited the destination before agree more than first-time visitors that KwaZulu-Natal is a relaxed, beautiful, and exciting destination. It can be said that brand loyalty is built overtime through a collection of positive experiences that requires consistent effort and attention to detail (Manternach, 2010), hence loyal tourists are usually repeat tourists who visit a destination without considering other options available to them. Tourists who are loyal to a destination brand frequently recommend the brand to others, buy more, and also tend to buy more regularly (Manternach, 2010).



The comparison between tourists' profile and brand image (physical atmosphere) statements yields more varied results, where those tourists who visited before agree more than first-time visitors that KwaZulu-Natal destination is calm and quite conservative; group travellers submit the destination has high moral standards; and males agree more than females that the destination is over-crowded. KwaZulu-Natal beaches tend to be over crowded in peak seasons, which may contribute to the crime rate and make tourists not feel at ease when relaxing at the beach with their loved ones. Accordingly, Ezeuduji (2013) strongly advised that strong police presence in the destination and proper policing in South Africa (such as, zero-tolerance for crime, and responsiveness within the South African Police service) can help towards dealing with crime in South Africa, and can help decrease the negative perception that tourists may have towards South African destinations.

Regarding the brand image (accessibility) statements, males and repeat visitors agree more that the destination is developed for tourism. The overall destination loyalty is greatly influenced by the perceptions that tourists have towards the destination image, before traveling to the destination as well as the overall satisfaction of experience received while at the destination (Rajesh, 2013). If the destination experience is pleasurable it is expected that tourists will return or recommend others to visit the destination (Torres-Moraga, Vasquez-Parraga & Zamora-Gonzalez, 2008). The overall destination image is one of the most significant elements to stimulate the intention to revisit the same destination (Andrades-Caldito, SánchezRivero & Pulido-Fernández, 2013; Alcaniz, Garcia & Blas, 2009). It can however be said that tourists have a very positive symbolic image of KwaZulu-Natal brand as a tourism destination, especially in terms of its unique nature and culture offerings. They also submit strongly that it is an exciting, calm, and interesting destination (Table 3).

**Table 3. Comparing tourists' profile with tourists' brand image perceptions**

<b>Brand image</b>			
<b>Brand image - symbolic representations' statements</b>	<b>Mean score<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>	<b>Compared with tourists' profile<sup>b</sup></b>
KwaZulu-Natal is a peaceful province	1.93	.913	N.S
KwaZulu-Natal is at peace with her neighbouring provinces and countries	2.11	.918	N.S
KwaZulu-Natal local economy is doing well	2.24	.989	N.S
KwaZulu-Natal is rich in cultural and natural attributes	1.81	.916	N.S
Reliability Statistics (Perceptions of brand image - symbolic representations), Cronbach's Alpha =.842, N of Items = 4, Valid cases = 406 (98.8%), Excluded cases = 5 (1.2%), Total = 411			
<b>Brand image - affective statements</b>	<b>Mean score<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>	<b>Compared with tourists' profile<sup>b</sup></b>
KwaZulu-Natal is a pleasant destination	1.71	.858	N.S
KwaZulu-Natal is a relaxed destination	1.76	.841	*Those who visited before agree more
KwaZulu-Natal is a beautiful destination	1.75	.817	*Those who visited before agree more



KwaZulu-Natal is an exciting destination	1.66	.843	*Those who visited before agree more *Those who travelled in a group agree more
Reliability Statistics (Perceptions of brand image - affective), Cronbach's Alpha = .885, N of Items = 4, Valid cases = 404 (98.3%), Excluded cases = 7 (1.7%), Total = 411			
<b>Brand image – physical atmosphere statements</b>	<b>Mean score<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>	<b>Compared with tourists' profile<sup>b</sup></b>
KwaZulu-Natal is a calm destination	1.81	.906	*Those who visited before agree more
KwaZulu-Natal local population has high moral standards	2.12	.893	*Those who travelled in a group agree more
KwaZulu-Natal destination is quite conservative	2.06	.911	**Those who visited before agree more
KwaZulu-Natal destination is over-crowded	2.38	1.209	**Males agree more than females
Reliability Statistics (Perceptions of brand image – physical atmosphere), Cronbach's Alpha = .796, N of Items = 4, Valid cases = 404 (98.3%), Excluded cases = 7 (1.7%), Total = 411			
<b>Brand image – accessibility statements</b>	<b>Mean score<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>	<b>Compared with tourists' profile<sup>b</sup></b>
KwaZulu-Natal destination is developed for tourism	1.91	.903	*Males agree more than females *Those who visited before agree more
KwaZulu-Natal local population is friendly	1.89	.845	N.S
KwaZulu-Natal is an easily accessible destination	1.88	.831	N.S
KwaZulu-Natal destination is interesting	1.74	.812	N.S
Reliability Statistics (Perceptions of brand image – accessibility), Cronbach's Alpha = .830, N of Items = 4, Valid cases = 410 (99.8%), Excluded cases = 1 (0.2%), Total = 411			

<sup>a</sup>Questionnaire were itemised along a 5-point Likert-type scale: 1, Strongly agree; 2, Agree; 3, Neutral; 4, Disagree; 5, Strongly disagree. <sup>b</sup>Mann-Whitney U test significance: N.S, no significant results - \*,  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*,  $p < 0.01$ .

Martenson (2007) states that tourists' satisfaction can be determined by how they experience a product or service. The overall assessment of the destination experience can result in a tourist determining whether the experience was pleasurable or not. According to Puh (2014), the overall image that tourists have of a tourist destination has a vital influence on the overall tourism satisfaction.

According to Correia, Kozak and Ferradeira (2013), satisfaction can be defined as the emotional circumstances that tourists find themselves in after being exposed to experiences at a tourist destination (Ibrahim & Gill, 2005). Thus, Clark and Melancon (2013) state that tourist loyalty can be associated with the destination brand name which can have positive connotations that affect tourists' attitudes that may contribute to their travel motivation and add to their satisfaction. The attitude a tourist has towards a destination can in turn be considered to be an important determinant when deciding to return to a destination. Ezeuduji, November and Haupt (2016) indicate that brand image is centred on the manner by which a group of individuals or an individual sees a specific brand.

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction in terms of their visit to the province of KwaZulu-Natal, and also how they enjoyed the main tourist activities in this destination. The results obtained were then compared (Spearman's Rank Correlation test)



with tourist's perceptions of brand image statements. Results in Table 4 indicate that there are strong correlations between tourists' brand image perceptions and their visit satisfaction or tourist activity enjoyment. These are positive results as they show consistency of positive brand image perception and attitude towards KwaZulu-Natal as a tourism destination. It is no surprise therefore that most of the tourists surveyed are repeat visitors.

**Table 4: Correlation - brand image perceptions, visit satisfaction and activity enjoyment**

<b>Brand image</b>	<b>Correlations with levels of visit satisfaction and activity enjoyment</b>					
<b>Brand image - symbolic representations' statements</b>	<b>Visit satisfaction</b>	<b>Nature &amp; outdoors</b>	<b>Food &amp; wine</b>	<b>Beaches</b>	<b>History &amp; culture</b>	<b>Shopping</b>
KwaZulu-Natal is a peaceful province	**	**	**	**	**	**
KwaZulu-Natal is at peace with her neighbouring provinces and countries	**	**	**	**	**	**
KwaZulu-Natal local economy is doing well	**	**	**	**	**	**
KwaZulu-Natal is rich in cultural and natural attributes	**	**	**	**	**	**
<b>Brand image - affective statements</b>	<b>Visit satisfaction</b>	<b>Nature &amp; outdoors</b>	<b>Food &amp; wine</b>	<b>Beaches</b>	<b>History &amp; culture</b>	<b>Shopping</b>
KwaZulu-Natal is a pleasant destination	**	**	**	**	**	**
KwaZulu-Natal is a relaxed destination	**	**	**	**	**	**
KwaZulu-Natal is a beautiful destination	**	**	**	**	**	**
KwaZulu-Natal is an exciting destination	**	**	**	**	**	**
<b>Brand image - physical atmosphere statements</b>	<b>Visit satisfaction</b>	<b>Nature &amp; outdoors</b>	<b>Food &amp; wine</b>	<b>Beaches</b>	<b>History &amp; culture</b>	<b>Shopping</b>
KwaZulu-Natal is a calm destination	**	**	**	**	**	**
KwaZulu-Natal local population has high moral standards	**	**	**	**	**	**
KwaZulu-Natal destination is quite conservative	**	**	**	**	**	**



KwaZulu-Natal destination is over-crowded	**	**	**	*	**	**
<b>Brand image – accessibility statements</b>	<b>Visit satisfaction</b>	<b>Nature &amp; outdoors</b>	<b>Food &amp; wine</b>	<b>Beaches</b>	<b>History &amp; culture</b>	<b>Shopping</b>
KwaZulu-Natal destination is developed for tourism	**	**	**	**	**	**
KwaZulu-Natal local population is friendly	**	**	**	**	**	**
KwaZulu-Natal is an easily accessible destination	**	**	**	**	**	**
KwaZulu-Natal destination is interesting	**	**	**	**	**	**

Notes: Spearman's Rank correlation (two-tailed) test significance: \*,  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*,  $p < 0.01$ .

Mabkhot, Shaari and Salleh (2017) posit that a strong brand image is important to tourists because the brand image differentiates the brand from other competing brands, in their minds. The following last section concludes this study and offer study recommendations.

## Conclusions

Tourists submit strongly that KwaZulu-Natal is an exciting, calm, and interesting destination. They have a very positive symbolic image of KwaZulu-Natal brand as a tourism destination, especially in terms of its unique nature and culture offerings. The study results will hopefully help the destination managers in KwaZulu-Natal to optimise their marketing strategies towards strengthening their nature and culture offerings to suit tourists' needs and wants, and at the same time maintain and create opportunities for tourists who are more interested in meetings, events, sun-sea-sand, and visiting friends and relatives. Comparative studies can be conducted in other African regions to seek individual regional positioning in the global tourism marketplace. The core offering in this destination should continue to be focussed on showcasing KwaZulu-Natal's natural and cultural heritage, while secondary offerings can be made to attract MICE (Meetings, Incentive travel, Convention, and Events / Exhibition) tourists, 3S (Sun, Sea and Sand) tourists, and those interested in VFR (Visiting Friends and Relatives) tourism.

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