



Tourists' profile and perceptions of a destination brand essence: KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Abstract

Tourism destination brand essence entails the functional and emotional benefits that tourists enjoy for visiting the destination. This study explored how tourists perceive the destination brand essence of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. These perceptions were compared with tourists' socio-demographic characteristics. Much of the models and earlier studies on destination brand essence were respectively constructed and conducted outside the KwaZulu-Natal region of South Africa. This research conducted in KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa is more exploratory than conclusive in nature but used a market-orientated approach to identify the tourists' brand essence perceptions of this destination. A structured questionnaire survey of 406 tourists (domestic and international) in KwaZulu-Natal provided data for analyses. Tourists surveyed reported a very positive brand essence perception of KwaZulu-Natal as a tourism destination, especially in terms of the emotional benefit of the positive memory the destination evokes. The study results will help the destination managers in KwaZulu-Natal to continue to develop the functional attributes that will evoke positive emotions among visitors. Comparative studies in other African regions to seek comparable and differentiated regional attributes, will add to the knowledge and enhancement of individual brand positioning in the global tourism marketplace.

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

Introduction

Tourism destination's brand essence, is described as the functional and emotional benefits that tourists derive from visiting a destination. Brand essence, if crafted to reveal a clear value position of a destination, can offer a strategic competitive advantage to a tourism destination (Ezeudji & Nkosi, 2017). Brand essence captures the core spirit of a brand, and its functional and emotional benefits (de Chernatony & Harris, 2010). It identifies the brand's competitive advantage as well as the benefits received when choosing a brand over its competitors (Light, Kiddon, Till, Heckler, Mathews, Hall & Wacker, 2012). Functional benefits can be described as the primary purpose for travelling to a destination, for example tourist attractions and activities. The emotional benefits can be described as the intangible benefits received during the visitor experience while at a destination. These could be the benefits that tourists were not expecting to be part of, such as self-development and health benefits (Chen, 2012).

Previous studies on tourism destination brand essence, brand equity, brand image, brand loyalty, brand competitiveness, etc. have been done in the African continent and beyond by several authors (such as Chinomona & Maziriri, 2017; Ezeudji, November and Haupt, 2016; Ezeudji, Lete, Correia, & Taylor, 2014; Giannopoulos, Piha, & Avlonitis, 2011; Pike & Mason,



2011; Crouch, 2010; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Vengesayi, 2003). Though authors such as Crouch (2010) and Dwyer and Kim (2003) proposed generic conceptual models of destination competitiveness, few studies have indeed focussed on specific models for specific destinations. The authors of this paper argue that there is still a dearth of research on tourism destination brand. From the literature reviewed, available studies were conducted in other destinations outside of KwaZulu-Natal. This study therefore explores how tourists visiting KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa (one of the nine provinces of South Africa) perceive this destination's brand essence (functional and emotional attributes or benefits), as a precursor of further conclusive research. Tourists' profile will be compared against these brand essence perceptions. The study will also evaluate if this destination offers a clear value position which is essential for the tourists in making their travel decision. 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). The next section of this paper presents an overview of the literature review conducted regarding the study objectives.

Overview of Literature

Authors such as de Chernatony and Harris (2010) suggest that emotional and functional benefits are part of what is captured by the brand essence, and Aho (2001) states that emotions play a huge part in tourists' experience. Tourists react to their emotions when making a travel decision. The benefits, both functional and emotional, received when travelling to a tourism destination are communicated through the brand essence of the destination. Functional benefits can be described as the primary purpose for travelling to a destination, such as motivation to travel. The physical attributes of the destination also contribute to functional benefits (Ezeuduji, November & Haupt, 2016). However, some authors (such as Chuang, 2007; Goossens, 2000; Kwortnik & Ross, 2007) posit that tourists are mostly influenced by their emotions to make purchases. Emotions play a vital role in defining unforgettable experiences (Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Gnoth (1997) states that tourist's emotional reactions are essential precursors of post-consumption behaviours and previous studies point out how emotions affect tourists' satisfaction (such as del Bosque & San Martín 2008). Ezeuduji et al (2016) describe emotional benefits as intangible attributes of travelling to the destination that the tourist did not expect to receive, such as self-development, wellness and new experiences.

Qu, Kim and Im (2011) reported that tourists are usually offered various destinations or attractions to choose from but the destination must be a brand that stands out in order for the tourists to choose it from the whole lot. Many destinations offer similar quality accommodation, scenic views and friendly people, however a competitive destination needs to be unique as a brand. The main attractions (such as natural and cultural attractions, historical sites and built environment) may motivate the tourists to travel to a destination, but infrastructure can also play a role in the tourists' decision to travel to that destination. This study therefore explores how tourists visiting KwaZulu-Natal region of South Africa assess this destination's brand essence (functional and emotional attributes or benefits). The study will also evaluate if this destination offers unique attributes which are essential for the tourists in making their travel decision. The next section of this paper presents the research methods used in collecting data and how these data were analysed.

Research Method and Design

This study explores tourists' perceptions of a destination brand essence, therefore a quantitative research method using a structured questionnaire survey was used to collect data from respondents. The questionnaire variables emanated from the literature study and authors' personal knowledge of the destination. Veal (2011), Ezeuduji (2013) and Tummons



and Duckworth (2013) all support the use of questionnaire survey in collecting quantified data from respondents. The authors of this paper argue that tourism is a mass phenomenon, hence quantified data are mostly used to make management decisions. Domestic and international tourists visiting major tourist attractions in KwaZulu-Natal were surveyed (such as King Shaka International Airport, Richards Bay Airport, Hluhluwe Game Reserve, and Talana Museum). A non-probability sampling method called purposive sampling, was employed to sample actual tourists among the general population for a period of 7 months (December 2017 to June 2018), cutting across both peak and off-peak seasons. Veal (2011) states 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 also argues that the criteria to determine sample size entail the required level of precision in results, the proposed details in analysis, and the available budget. 420 tourists were surveyed, however 406 questionnaires received were usable for data analysis.

IBM's SPSS Statistics, version 25 (IBM Corporation, 2017) supported data analyses. First stage of data analyses employed descriptive statistics (frequencies, mean and standard deviation); and the second stage of data analyses used multivariate analysis (Reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha) and bivariate analyses (Spearman's Correlation and Mann-Whitney U tests) to support addressing the research objective. Bivariate analyses were done at a 95% confidence interval, and reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient employed a cut-off point of 0.7 to explain internal consistency or reliability of variables used to explain brand essence dimensions (Bühl & Zöfel, 2005; George & Mallery, 2003; Hair, Black, Babin & Tatham, 2005; Iwu, Ezeudji, Iwu, Ikebuaku & Tengeh, 2018). These variables are set in the questionnaire to have ordinal responses, hence were presented in the questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale. From the reliability test results, both brand essence dimensions (functional attributes and emotional attributes) show internal consistency.

As it is common in social sciences, population distributions of the ordinal dimensions (brand essence variables) 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 study therefore conducted non-parametric tests (Spearman's Correlation and Mann-Whitney U) to establish relationships of variables. The use of Spearman's correlation tests for comparing ordinal variables were supported by Veal (2011). Mann-Whitney U test was done to compare means of responses from two independent groups with the aim of establishing if they are statistically different from each other. Responses to brand essence perception statements were compared with some respondents' profile. Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted based on the following scientific criteria: that the dependent variables (brand essence 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 obtained from these analyses are presented and discussed in the following section.

Results and Discussion

Highlights of the results in Table 1 show that more tourists above 30 years of age (about 60%) responded to the questionnaire survey, compared to the younger tourists. More than half of the tourists' population are international tourists (53%), and about 30% of the tourists got to know about KwaZulu-Natal through word-of-mouth. Majority of them (about 66%) stayed not more than 10 days in the destination, and many of them (about 62%) are either on holiday or visiting friends and relatives. Good news to Tourism KwaZulu-Natal (responsible Destination Management Organisation) are that 61% of tourists are on return visit; about 83% are either mostly or totally satisfied; about 81% assessed KwaZulu-Natal as little or much better than they expected; and about 72% rated KwaZulu-Natal as little or much better than other destinations they have visited. From these results, the authors infer that KwaZulu-Natal is a favourable and competitive tourism destination in the mind of tourists themselves, and holiday



and visiting friends and relatives are the main motives for visiting this destination. Pratminingsih, Rudatin, and Rimenta (2014), posit that tourist satisfaction is caused by two dimensions: firstly, it is related to the pre-expectation of the tourist before travel, and secondly, it referred to justification of the tourist on the delivered services after the travel, based on the real experience. Therefore, tourist satisfaction is amplified when their experiences met their expectations.

Table 1. Profile of the respondents (N = 406)

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Female	49.0
	Male	51.0
Age group	Equal or less than 30 years' old	40.1
	Above 30 years old	59.9
Origin	South African	47.0
	Non-South African	53.0
Continent of origin	Africa	52.8
	Australia/ Oceania	7.9
	Asia	6.4
	Europe	19.3
	North America	8.9
	South America	4.7
Type of tourist	Domestic tourists	47.0
	International tourists	53.0
Source of Information about KwaZulu-Natal	Internet	26.2
	Word of Mouth	30.2
	Media (travel magazines and books, T.V)	21.0
	Travel Agency/ Tour Operator	20.8
	Other	1.7
Group travel	Yes	46.4
	No	53.6
Length of stay in KwaZulu-Natal	1-10 days	65.6
	11 days or longer	34.4
Purpose of visit to KwaZulu-Natal	Business (seminar, event, conference)	13.4
	Business (import and export)	9.7
	Holiday	45.2
	Visiting friends and relatives	16.9
	Medical	2.2
	Academic exchange	9.7
Other	3.0	
Have you visited any KwaZulu-Natal destination before?	Yes	61.0
	No	39.0
Level of satisfaction	Totally satisfied	34.3
	Mostly satisfied	49.1
	Moderately satisfied	12.3
	Mostly dissatisfied	3.7
	Totally dissatisfied	0.5
Overall judgement of visiting KwaZulu-Natal compared to expectations	Much better	45.7
	Little better	35.7
	About the same	17.3
	Little worse	1.0
	Much worse	0.3
Overall judgement of visiting KwaZulu-Natal compared to other destinations	Much better	34.5
	Little better	37.3
	About the same	23.0
	Little worse	4.8
	Much worse	0.5



Results from Table 2 show that out of the main tourist activities available in KwaZulu-Natal, 'nature, history and culture' are the ones most enjoyed by the tourists. However, an enjoyment score of 71% and above (mostly or highly enjoyable) for all the tourist activities, prove that tourists highly enjoyed their KwaZulu-Natal experience. Dwyer and Kim (2003) state that there are indicators of destination competitiveness; amongst these indicators is the quality of service offered within a destination. Perceived quality refers to consumers' feelings concerning the quality of a product or service associated with brand or destination (Keller, 1993; Keller, 2001; Kim, Kim, & An, 2003; Low & Lamb, 2000; Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000).

Table 2. Tourists' level of activities enjoyment in KwaZulu-Natal (N = 406, % Frequency)

Activities	Highly enjoyable	Mostly enjoyable	Moderately enjoyable	Mostly unenjoyable	Not enjoyable
Nature and outdoors	55.9	33.0	9.1	1.3	0.8
Food and wine	42.0	39.9	13.9	2.8	1.3
Beaches	48.5	34.7	12.5	3.5	0.8
History & Culture	52.6	34.1	10.2	2.3	0.8
Shopping	36.9	34.1	19.2	6.8	3.0

de Chernatony and Harris (2010) suggest that emotional and functional benefits are part of what is captured by the brand essence, and Aho (2001) states that emotions play a huge part in tourists' experience. Branding of destinations allows tourists to recognize a destination and distinguish it from competitive offerings. Therefore, it becomes easier for the tourists to identify the brand they prefer and love amongst other brands (Cevero, 2013). This is in line with Light et al. (2012) position that the brand's competitive advantage as well as the benefits received through a brand determine whether customers can choose a particular brand over its competitors.

Table 3 results indicate that the top three functional benefits enjoyed by the tourists in KwaZulu-Natal are its: 'comfortable weather conditions', 'excellent accommodation facilities', and 'unique and diverse attractions and activities'. Indeed, the unique attractions and activities (nature, history and culture), supported by quality accommodation and weather conditions can be used by KwaZulu-Natal to compete favourably in the global tourism marketplace.

It should be noted that tourists above 30 years of age perceive KwaZulu-Natal to have more favourable functional attributes / benefits, compared to the perceptions of the younger tourists. Group travellers and short-stay visitors (not more than 10 days) also perceive some of the attributes in Table 3 very favourably. First-time visitors found the accommodation facilities more excellent than repeat-visitors who are now used to them, and more international than domestic tourists are more pleased with the local weather conditions. These results (except the age and group travel relationships) show that when tourists get used to certain benefits, they seem to show less appreciation for them.

More so, tourists who travelled in group, tend to have appreciated the destination more than those who travelled individually. This could be as a result of the group dynamics, where members point out and discuss the destination's attributes, to enhance the group experience. The result showing that the older tourists perceive the destination more favourably than the younger ones, could be as a result of the main offerings found in the destination, those of nature, history and culture. It is common knowledge that the older generation appreciate these more than the younger generation.



Table 3. Reliability test and comparing tourists' profile with tourists' brand essence – functional attributes perceptions

Statements	Mean score ^a	Standard deviation	Compared with tourists' profile ^b
1. KwaZulu-Natal is unique and has diverse attractions and activities	1.78	0.820	**Tourists older than 30 years of age agree more **Those tourists that travel in group agree more **Tourists who did not stay more than 10 days agree more
2. KwaZulu-Natal destination is well developed for tourism	1.80	0.747	N. S
3. KwaZulu-Natal has comfortable weather conditions	1.71	0.826	*Tourists older than 30 years of age agree more *International tourists agree more
4. KwaZulu-Natal tourism destinations cater for different types of tourists	1.80	0.835	*Tourists older than 30 years of age agree more
5. KwaZulu-Natal has adequate and well-maintained infrastructure	1.90	0.797	**Tourists older than 30 years of age agree more
6. KwaZulu-Natal provides tourists with good value for their money	1.84	0.796	**Tourists older than 30 years of age agree more
7. KwaZulu-Natal has a lot of events for tourists to attend	1.88	0.984	N. S
8. KwaZulu-Natal has excellent accommodation facilities	1.76	0.825	*Tourists older than 30 years of age agree more *First-time visitors agree more
9. KwaZulu-Natal is a clean destination	2.06	0.948	N. S
10. KwaZulu-Natal has excellent shopping facilities	1.94	0.912	*Those tourists that travel in group agree more
11. KwaZulu-Natal has excellent entertainment facilities	1.93	0.938	*Those tourists that travel in group agree more
12. Local transport in KwaZulu-Natal is efficient	2.09	1.029	*Tourists who stayed more than 10 days agree more
Reliability Statistics (Perceptions of brand essence – functional attributes), Cronbach's Alpha = .860, N of Items = 12, Valid cases = 351 (86.5%), Excluded cases = 55 (13.5%), Total = 406			

^aQuestionnaire were itemised along a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1, Strongly agree; 2, Agree; 3, Neutral; 4, Disagree; 5, Strongly disagree.

^bMann-Whitney U test significance: N.S, no significant results - *, p < 0.05; **, p < 0.01.

Similar results are also obtained in Table 4, regarding the emotional attributes / benefits of KwaZulu-Natal as a tourism destination. The top three emotional benefits enjoyed by the tourists are: 'positive memorable experience', 'destination value', and 'knowledge and experience'. This shows that this destination has a strong value for positive and memorable experience. Again tourists older than 30 years of age have more favourable emotional experience than the younger ones. Also short-stay visitors (not more than 10 days), non-South



Africans, international tourists, and first-time visitors appreciated the experience more than long-stay visitors, South Africans, domestic tourists, and repeat visitors. The probable explanation of these phenomena has been done earlier.

Table 4. Reliability test and comparing tourists' profile with tourists' brand essence – emotional attributes perceptions

Statements	Mean score ^a	Standard deviation	Compared with tourists' profile ^b
13. KwaZulu-Natal provides tourists with authentic visitor experience	1.74	0.744	*Non-South Africans agree more ** First-time visitors agree more
14. My visit to KwaZulu-Natal has been valuable to me	1.66	0.740	*First-time visitors agree more
15. My visit to KwaZulu-Natal will be memorable	1.57	0.690	N. S
16. I have gained new knowledge and experience during my visit to KwaZulu-Natal	1.71	0.755	N. S
17. The local people in KwaZulu-Natal are friendly and hospitable	1.78	0.803	*Tourists older than 30 years of age agree more **Non-South Africans agree more **International tourists agree more
18. I feel safe and secure travelling in KwaZulu-Natal	2.16	1.089	*Tourists older than 30 years of age agree more
19. I feel a general sense of joy visiting KwaZulu-Natal	1.86	0.835	*Tourists older than 30 years of age agree more
20. KwaZulu-Natal evokes an emotion of love for me	1.96	0.891	**Tourists older than 30 years of age agree more *Tourists who did not stay more than 10 days agree more
21. I feel a general sense of inspiration in KwaZulu-Natal	1.97	0.873	* Tourists older than 30 years of age agree more *Tourists who did not stay more than 10 days agree more
22. I feel a strong sense of humanity in KwaZulu-Natal	1.75	0.869	*Tourists who did not stay more than 10 days agree more
Reliability Statistics (Perceptions of brand essence – emotional attributes), Cronbach's Alpha = .853, N of Items = 10, Valid cases = 373 (91.9%), Excluded cases = 33 (8.1%), Total = 406			

^aQuestionnaire were itemised along a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1, Strongly agree; 2, Agree; 3, Neutral; 4, Disagree; 5, Strongly disagree.

^bMann-Whitney U test significance: N.S, no significant results - *, $p < 0.05$; **, $p < 0.01$.



Further analyses (correlation tests) were done to check for the strength of relationships between the brand essence statements and tourists' enjoyment of activities in KwaZulu-Natal. Results in Table 5 show very strong correlations between tourists' levels of agreement to brand essence – functional attribute statements and their level of activity enjoyment in the destination. This means that the more tourists enjoy these activities, the more they appreciate the functional attributes of this destination, and vice versa.

Table 5. Correlation between level of activity enjoyment and tourists' brand essence – functional attributes perceptions

Brand Essence – Functional Attributes					
Statements	Correlation with activities				
	Nature & outdoors	Food & wine	Beaches	History & culture	Shopping
1. KwaZulu-Natal is unique and has diverse attractions and activities	**	**	**	**	**
2. KwaZulu-Natal destination is well developed for tourism	**	**	**	**	**
3. KwaZulu-Natal has comfortable weather conditions	**	**	**	**	**
4. KwaZulu-Natal tourism destinations cater for different types of tourists	**	**	**	**	**
5. KwaZulu-Natal has adequate and well-maintained infrastructure	**	**	**	**	**
6. KwaZulu-Natal provides tourists with good value for their money	**	**	**	**	**
7. KwaZulu-Natal has a lot of events for tourists to attend	**	**	**	**	**
8. KwaZulu-Natal has excellent accommodation facilities	**	**	**	**	**
9. KwaZulu-Natal is a clean destination	**	**	**	**	**
10. KwaZulu-Natal has excellent shopping facilities	**	**	**	**	**
11. KwaZulu-Natal has excellent entertainment facilities	**	**	**	**	**
12. Local transport in KwaZulu-Natal is efficient	**	**	**	**	**

Notes: Spearman's Rank correlation test significance. N.S., no significant results. **, $p < 0.01$.

Some authors (such as Chuang, 2007; Goossens, 2000; Kwortnik & Ross, 2007) posit that tourists are mostly influenced by their emotions to make purchases. Emotions play a vital role in defining unforgettable experiences (Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Gnoth (1997) states that tourist's emotional reactions are essential precursors of post-consumption behaviours and previous studies point out how emotions affect tourists' satisfaction (such as del Bosque & San Martín 2008). The results in Table 6 also show very strong correlations between tourists' levels of agreement to brand essence – emotional attribute statements and their level of activity



enjoyment in the destination. This also means that the more tourists enjoy these activities, the more they appreciate the emotional benefits of this destination, and vice versa.

Table 6. Correlation between level of activity enjoyment and tourists' brand essence – emotional attributes perceptions

Brand Essence – Emotional Attributes					
Statements	Correlation with activities				
	Nature & outdoors	Food & wine	Beaches	History & culture	Shopping
13. KwaZulu-Natal provides tourists with authentic visitor experience	**	**	**	**	**
14. My visit to KwaZulu-Natal has been valuable to me	**	**	**	**	**
15. My visit to KwaZulu-Natal will be memorable	**	**	**	**	*
16. I have gained new knowledge and experience during my visit to KwaZulu-Natal	**	**	**	**	**
17. The local people in KwaZulu-Natal are friendly and hospitable	**	**	**	**	**
18. I feel safe and secure travelling in KwaZulu-Natal	**	**	**	**	**
19. I feel a general sense of joy visiting KwaZulu-Natal	**	**	**	**	**
20. KwaZulu-Natal evokes an emotion of love for me	**	**	**	**	**
21. I feel a general sense of inspiration in KwaZulu-Natal	**	**	**	**	**
22. I feel a strong sense of humanity in KwaZulu-Natal	**	**	**	**	**

Notes: Spearman's Rank correlation test significance. N.S., no significant results. **, p < 0.01.

The authors therefore argue that tourists' overall satisfaction has a direct relationship with the quality of attributes found within the destination, supporting the finding of del Bosque and San Martin (2008). These study results have strongly demonstrated this phenomenon. This satisfaction level will also result in the tourists forming in their minds a positive brand image of the destination, thus leading to brand loyalty. Manzo (2005), and Scannell and Gifford (2010) argue that tourists may get attached to tourism destinations.

People-place relationships may involve several emotions, seen as positive: emotions such as pride, love and contentment, hence leading to tourists being attached to that destination. These results also agree with Hosany, Prayag, Deesilatham, Caušević, and Odeh's (2015), inference that tourists develop strong relationships with destinations as a result of products, services and conditions offered or found in the destination.



Conclusions

Tourists' overall satisfaction has a direct relationship with the quality of attributes found within the destination. This satisfaction results in the tourists forming in their minds, a positive brand image of the destination, which can lead to brand loyalty. KwaZulu-Natal is a favourable and competitive tourism destination in the mind of tourists. Holiday and visiting friends and relatives are the two main motives for tourists visiting this destination.

Tourists in KwaZulu-Natal enjoyed 'nature, history and culture' activities the most, which coincidentally are the core offerings of this destination. Hence, we argue that in KwaZulu-Natal tourism, demand meets supply. This destination can use the unique attractions and activities (nature, history and culture), supported by excellent accommodation and weather conditions to compete favourably in the global tourism marketplace.

Results show that the older tourists (more than 30 years of age) perceive KwaZulu-Natal destination attributes more favourably than the younger ones. This is not surprising, as it is common knowledge that the older generation tend to appreciate nature, history and culture more than the younger generation. In a nutshell, this destination has a strong value for positive and memorable tourism experience.

The study results will help the destination managers in KwaZulu-Natal to continuously develop their core offerings or functional attributes that will evoke positive emotions among visitors. Comparative studies in other African regions and beyond, to seek comparable and differentiated regional attributes, will add to the knowledge and enhancement of individual brand positioning in the global tourism marketplace.

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