



# Tourism destination branding in Malawi: A supply-side perspective

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## Abstract

Destination branding is a multi-faceted and is an often poorly understood concept that requires the involvement of various stakeholders in a destination. Through in-depth interviews of selected stakeholders and review of policy documents, this study investigated how tourism stakeholders in Malawi understand destination branding, how they collaborate in a quest to brand the destination and their evaluation of the status of Malawi's tourism brand. The study made use of Hankinson's Relational Network Brand Model as a guiding framework. Study participants were drawn from both the public and private sectors and general citizenry. The study found that destination branding is generally equated to marketing communications or put simply, tourism promotion. It was also found that there is often very poor coordination between the government and the private sector in the process of destination branding. It was the view of most stakeholders that the destination's brand personality needs to be adjusted so that it should reflect changing tourist needs. Furthermore, findings revealed that inadequate infrastructure, poor service quality, low adoption of ICTs and unsustainable resource use practices have put the country at a disadvantage as a tourist destination against other countries in the region. Practical implications are discussed, and recommendations are suggested accordingly.

**Keywords:** tourism, destination branding, stakeholder collaboration, brand model, Malawi.

## Introduction

The international tourism industry is the world's largest, most diverse and fastest growing industry (Bilen, Yilanci, & Eryüzlü, 2017). Realizing its potential in job creation foreign currency injections, most non-industrialized countries have identified the development and promotion of tourism to stimulate economic development and contribute to poverty reduction (Snyman, 2017). However, due to the competitive environment in which global tourism operates in, most of these countries have turned to destination branding (DB) to effectively differentiate themselves. However, the concept is misunderstood by various practitioners (Bianchi, Pike, & Lings, 2014; Olins & Hildreth, 2012). For instance, many destination management organizations (DMOs) equate the elaborate process of destination branding with the development of 'slogos' (logos and their associated slogans) (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005). Unfortunately, logos and slogans are not brands and that much as the two receive a lot of attention, they do not really contribute much to the differentiation of places over extended periods of time (Govers, 2013).

In Malawi, tourism has been identified as one of the key economic sectors that, if appropriately developed and marketed, can help diversify its economy as its economy is primarily agricultural based. Despite the country's rich and diverse tourism resource base, the performance of its tourism sector remains less than satisfactory (Magombo, Rogerson, & Rogerson, 2017). This challenge is not exceptional to Malawi as many other countries in the sub Saharan region have struggled to attract significant numbers of international tourists. Van Wijk, Go, and Govers (2008) suggest that Africa's 'troublesome' image as a tourist destination has significantly contributed to



this problem (2008:1). This is a critical challenge as the decision-making process to visit a particular destination is influenced by the image of the tourist destination (Becken, Jin, Zhang, & Gao, 2017; Yen & Croy, 2016). In a quest to be a premier tourist destination in the region, Malawi has tried to brand itself. As Malawi is trying to brand itself, its neighbours are doing the same (Amalu, 2013). With each destination claiming a unique cultural heritage and support services, most destinations are becoming substitutable (Ayikoru, 2015; Hanna & Rowley, 2019).

Most of the DMOs that have embraced destination branding have not applied the concept holistically. Almost all destinations now use a slogan, and they equate such slogans and their accompanying taglines to branding (Govers, 2013; Pike, 2005). This seems to be part of a bigger problem in place reputation management as Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2011) aver that the complex relationships between brand, image, identity, and creative and competitive destinations are not well understood. Branding, however, should be thought of as a holistic and ongoing process closely links marketing activities and autonomous aspects of the destination (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017; Kavartzis, 2009). Considering the foregoing, the study seeks to explore how different stakeholders, represented by individuals, understand the concept of destination branding. The study also aims to investigate the level of collaboration among the stakeholders, as led by the DMO, in the branding process. Further, the study aimed to understand the stakeholders' evaluation of the status of Malawi's growing tourism brand.

## Literature review

### Destination Branding

Despite debates on when the concept of brands was first applied in trade, scholars agree that the concept was present in business way before the industrial revolution (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017; Gartner, 2014). Even though the application of the concept to destinations has been considered a new phenomenon, the topic has been previously studied under the lenses of destination image studies (Almeyda-Ibanez, 2017). Still, the application of the concept to destinations has been informed by corporate branding practices (Kladou, Kavartzis, Rigopoulou, & Salonika, 2017). However, it has been argued that, compared to consumer products or services, destinations are very complex in nature. Perhaps this is the reason the import of terminologies and methodologies from the commercial world to destination management is not straightforward (Braun, 2012). Such difficulty is seen in the lack of agreement of what destination branding is and what goes into the process of branding a destination (Kladou et al., 2017).

One of the earliest works on the concept is that of Ritchie and Ritchie (1998:18) who defined destination brand as "a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that identifies and differentiates the destination". This definition, argue Kladou et al. (2017), simply substituted the terms 'goods' and 'services' with the term 'destination'. Several scholars have also attempted to define destination branding (Cai, 2002; Morrison & Anderson, 2002; Quinlan, 2008).

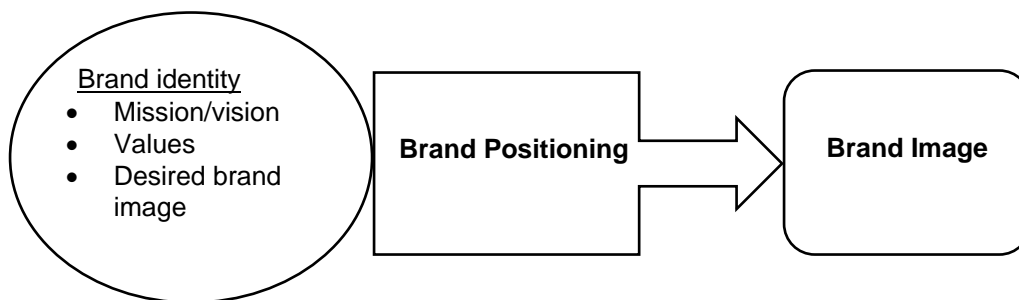
Similarly, most of the definitions put emphasis on symbols as central elements of branding. Indeed, it has been argued that authorities and consultants alike promote only one element of destination branding, namely promotion, while ignoring the broader branding elements (Ashworth & Kavartzis, 2009; Govers, 2013). Considering the critiques against the prior definitions, Blain, Levy, and Ritchie (2005:337) offered a definition that has been widely cited as the most comprehensive in literature and was adopted in the current study:

Destination branding is the set of marketing activities that (1) support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that readily identifies and differentiates a destination; that (2) consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel

experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; that (3) serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; and that (4) reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk. Collectively, these activities serve to create a destination image that positively influences consumer destination choice.

The definition hints on the importance of executing destination branding by combining the efforts of both the supply (the destination) and demand (the traveller) sides since both sides stand to benefit from the process' successful outcomes. A destination is a complex entity hence its branding should take into consideration a wide variety of activities under one identity to form and project a multi-faceted yet coherent and mutually supportive whole (Campelo, Aitken, Thyne, & Gnoth, 2014; Gilmore, 2002). This gives credence to the importance of stakeholder collaboration and partnerships in destination branding (Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017).

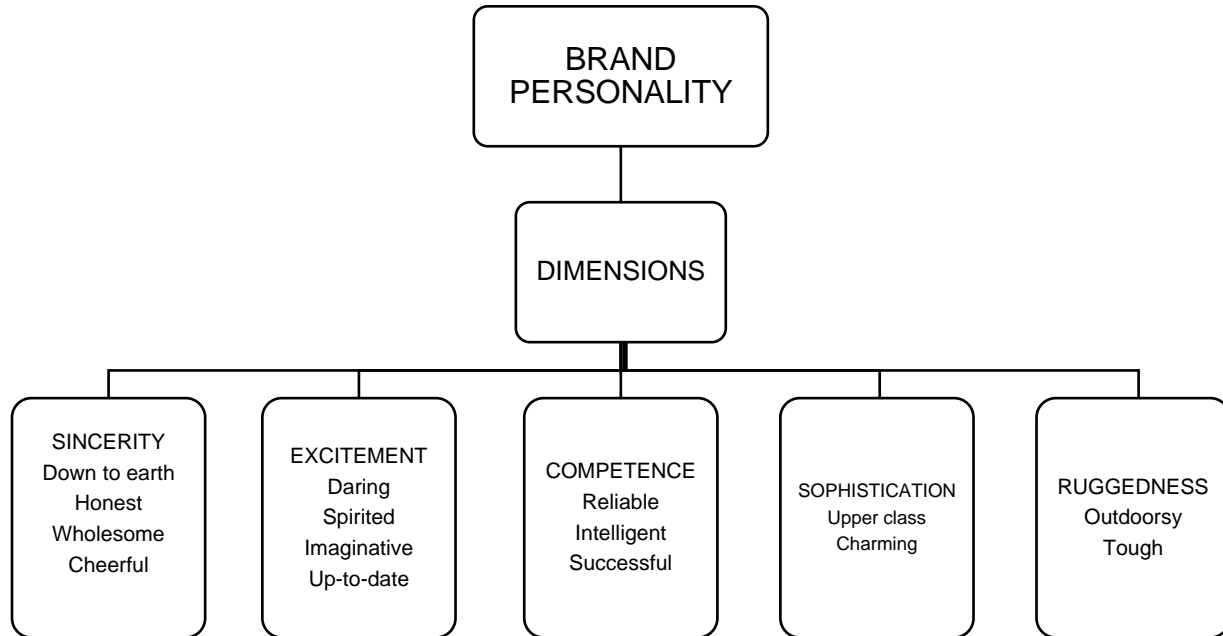
If effective brands are created, destinations benefit through increased potential to differentiate against destinations with similar offerings, enhanced emotional relationships with visitors and increased yield for tourism enterprises. Travellers' benefits come in form of easy decision making through reduced information search, reduced risk and likely enhanced brag value (Miličević, Mihalič, & Sever, 2017; Pike, 2009). Also, destination brands give the potential tourist a picture of what to expect in the destination since destination brands reflect local habitudes and communal practices of the local people that colour the tourism experience (Campelo et al., 2014). To the destination a brand represents an identity whereas to the traveller, a brand represents an image and the two are connected by a link referred to as brand positioning (Pike, 2004) (see Figure 1 below).



**Figure 1.** Brand identity, brand positioning and brand image (Source: Pike, 2004:75)

Destination image as an attitudinal concept consisting of the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a tourist has of a destination (Crompton, 1979). Brand image is one of the most critical success factors for destination branding, as it reflects tourists' perception of the destination in terms of its qualities and associations, usually mentally processed by the tourists in meaningful ways and held in memory (Lai, Khoo-Lattimore, & Wang, 2019). Closely related to brand image is the concept of destination brand personality. Aaker (1997) defines brand personality as the list of human traits linked to a brand (Hosany *et al.*, 2006).

In branding destinations, stakeholders need to identify and project the traits by which their destination should be identified. For brands to be effective, it is imperative for destinations to establish a brand personality that connects the destination with the tourists' self-image through the tourists' needs and motives for visiting (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006). Aaker (1997) developed the Brand Personality Scale which constitutes five dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness) and each dimension has its own facets that are associated with human characteristics (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Dimensions of brand personality (Source: Aaker, 1997: 31)

Identifying the right brand personality is important since people, as explained by the self-image congruence theory, like to visit destinations that reinforce their own concept of self as per who they are and what they would like to be (Kim & Malek, 2017; Matzler, Strobl, Stokburger-Sauer, Bobovnick, & Bauer, 2016). Thus, a destination needs to communicate a brand personality that conforms to the behavioral traits of its target market(s). Brand positioning is what the brand represents on the minds of consumers relative to its competitors based on its offerings (Li, Cheng, Kim, & Li, 2015; Upshaw, 1995).

To position a destination effectively, the strong attributes that are perceived as important by visitors and give the destination a competitive edge to the destination should be identified (Chacko & Marcell, 2007; Saqib, 2019). A destination is determined by a network of meanings and values attached to it and its branding should similarly be determined by the meanings given to it by those whose place it is (Campelo et al., 2014). Therefore, the involvement of various destination stakeholders is very critical to the success of the destination branding process.

### **Destination Branding Stakeholders**

Strategies and actions should be enacted to consider the wishes of all the stakeholders in destination branding. Buhalis (2000) stated that stakeholders might include indigenous people, businesses and investors, tourists, tour operators and intermediaries, and interest groups. The public sector is concerned with planning developments, carrying out inspections, advancing the appeal of public tourism and carrying out marketing programmes to promote the destination (Kotsi, Balakrishnan, Michael, & Ramsøy, 2018; Vasudevan, 2008).

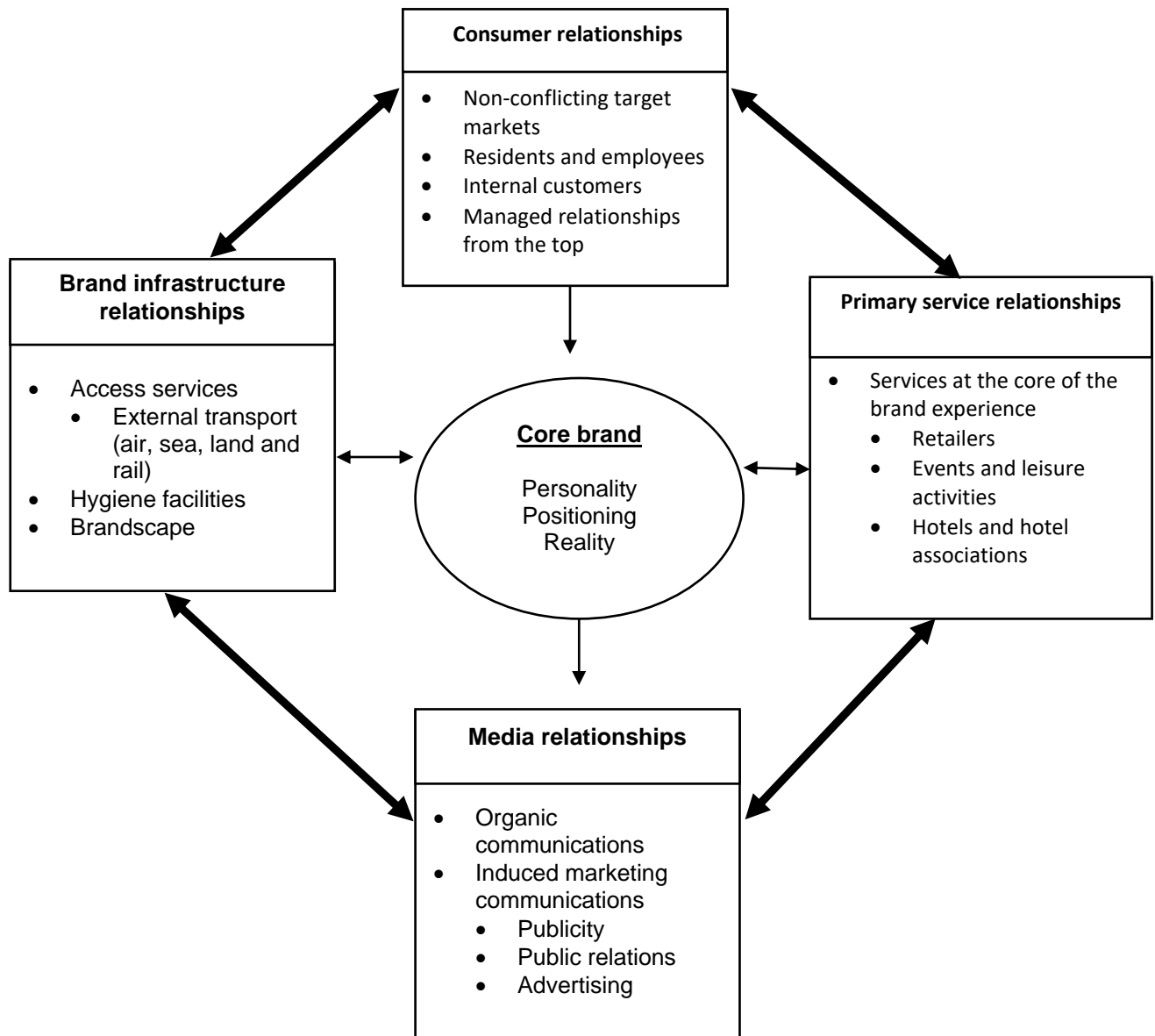
The private sector's main role is geared towards the provision of accommodation, food and beverages and shopping and entertainment facilities (Anuar, Ahmed, Jusoh, & Hussain, 2012). Resident involvement mobilises local pride and enhances self-confidence by making locals more aware of the values and uniqueness the place might represent and come to be associated with



(Kalandies, Andersson, & Ekman, 2009; Kavaratzis, 2017). Further, involved residents will likely act as brand ambassadors of the destination, especially when they encounter foreign tourists (Szondi, 2007). Involving residents also helps “to build ties with local stakeholders in order to encourage them to become actively involved in changing conditions that affect the quality of their lives” (Malek & Costa, 2014:1). Much as it is known that destination branding is a complex undertaking and should involve multiple stakeholders (Nicolaidis, 2015), a great number of destination branding studies have concentrated on a single stakeholder group (Abimbola et al., 2012), oftentimes DMOs.

### **The relational network brand model**

The Relational Network Brand Model by Hankinson (2004) guided the study (Figure 3). At the centre of the branding strategy is the core brand with its personality, positioning and reality. Accompanying the core brand are four categories of relationships; consumer, brand infrastructure, media, and primary service. The primary aim of the relationships is value creation through interactions among the various players where the focus is the relationship between the customer and the destination brand (Abdalmajid & Papasolomou, 2018). This model was considered suitable for the study because it recognises both brand communication and relationship aspects of brand development (Hanna & Rowley, 2015).



**Figure 3.** The Relational Network Brand Model (Source: Hankinson, 2004,115)

## Research context

Malawi, is a beautiful a country of 16 million people, in southern Africa. Malawi’s economy is predominantly agricultural-based, with the sector contributing to about a third of the country’s GDP (World Bank, 2017). Recently, the government of Malawi identified tourism as one of the potential sectors that can help the country diversify its economy. The country’s major tourist attractions are Lake Malawi, wildlife reserves, landforms and related natural features, cultural heritage and, recently, festivals and events. The destination’s promotion has been built around “its first class wildlife experiences, stunning beaches, water sports, landscapes, culture and much famed lake as ‘God’s Aquarium’” (Malawi Tourism Guide, 2012). Briggs (2010), a travel guide writer, introduces the destination using three catch phrases: ‘The Warm Heart of Africa’, ‘Africa for Beginners’, and ‘The Land of the Lake’. He describes Malawians as a people who “exude a



warmth and friendliness that make most visitors feel instantly home” (p. vii). Over 70% of inbound travellers originate from within Africa, followed by those from Europe and North America (UNWTO, 2013, 2018). Accordingly, the country’s marketing efforts mainly focus on countries like the United Kingdom, Germany and South Africa. In 2017, tourism contributed to 6.7% of total employment and 7.7% of the gross domestic product (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2018). Table 1 shows tourist arrivals and receipts from 2010 to 2016. Limited international marketing, poor product development and poor stakeholder liaison have been identified as some of the barriers to tourism development in the country (Department of Tourism, 2019; Krishnan, 2016). Recently, protests against the handling of the May 2019 tripartite elections by the Malawi Electoral Commission are said to have also negatively affected the tourism image of the country (Andsen, 2019).

Marketing of tourism products and services seems to be the major challenge from the tourism sector’s perspective (Vuorensyrjä, 2016). To address this, the Draft National Tourism Policy proposes marketing and promotion, product development and stakeholder liaison and relations as some of the solutions (Department of Tourism, 2019). These proposed solutions are closely related to the relationships proposed in Hankinson’s (2004) model. The study therefore set out to understand how the destination is effecting such solutions from a destination branding perspective.

Year	Arrivals*	Receipts \$ million**
2010	746,129	45
2011	767,000	36
2012	769,722	35
2013	794,990	33
2014	819,166	36
2015	804,912	39
2016	849,156	43
2017	837,000	31

**Table 1.** Malawi tourist arrivals and receipts, 2010-2017 (Source:\*UNWTO, 2013, 2018; \*\*CEIC/World Bank, 2018, 2019).

## Methodology

The objective of this research was to obtain an in-depth understanding of stakeholders’ views of what constitutes destination branding, how they collaborate to brand the country as a destination and their thoughts on the status of the destination’s brand. Hence the study used in-depth interviews as a data collection method. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to choose study participants. Purposive sampling was chosen because it only involves targets that have a rich knowledge of the research question(s) under investigation (Creswell, 2009). Under snowball sampling, respondents that had been purposively selected were asked for information about people they thought would provide further information about the issue under investigation.

Study participants were from the public sector (Department of Tourism (DoT) official and university academic), private sector (hotel managers, tour operators, a tourism council official, a tourism consultant, a freelance tourism marketer and e-commerce company founders) and general citizenry (a social and political commentator/activist). A total of 17 people was interviewed for the study in January 2016 (see Table 2).



<b>Participant identity</b>	<b>Total</b>
DoT official	1
Academic	1
Hotel managers	2
Ecommerce company founders	2
Tourism operators	7
Tourism consultant	1
Freelance tourism marketer	1
Social and political commentator	1
Festival organizer	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>

**Table 2.** Study participants

Additionally, policy documents, promotional materials and other relevant documents were reviewed to obtain additional information where necessary. Such materials formed part of data sources because they are assumed to contain the blueprints of Malawi's brand initiatives. The interviews were audio recorded and then later transcribed. The transcribed data were thematically analysed using the Miles and Huberman Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis. Guided by the framework, analysis was done in three stages: (1) reducing the data by summarizing and extracting the critical meanings (coding); (2) displaying the data in an organized way (memoing) and (3) drawing and verifying conclusions by explaining the findings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

### **Ethical Considerations**

All research participants were informed at the onset of the interviews that participation was voluntary and assured that their identity would be kept anonymous. They were further informed that anytime they felt like disengaging, they could freely do so. No respondent disengaged from the interviews. Policy documents such as the National Tourism Policy, and promotional materials are freely available in the public domain and on the internet hence they are licence-free (except copyright) and can be investigated and replicated (Jones & Alony, 2008).

### **Findings and discussion**

#### **Stakeholders' understanding of destination branding**

On whether Malawi has been branded as a tourist destination most respondents answered in the affirmative and quickly referred to the 'Warm Heart of Africa' slogan that Malawi uses to promote itself as a destination. This is in line with what has been reported in previous research (Blain, *et al.* 2005; Govers, 2013; Kladou *et al.*, 2017) that many DMOs equate destination branding with





the development of slogans. Respondents believed that the notion that Malawi is a peaceful country with friendly residents which earned it the 'Warm Heart of Africa' slogan are reasons enough to differentiate the destination. Only a few respondents thought of destination branding as a product of several elements in the destination.

In a word, generally, no [Malawi is not branded as a destination]. The challenges that are there are we haven't got a coastline, we have the lake but no ocean, we don't have the beaches of Mozambique and Kenya and Zanzibar<sup>1</sup>. We don't the wildlife that some of the countries have. In some places, I think the infrastructure and the service that is given in some hotels, lodges is a little bit under par.

Kladou et al. (2017) lamented the same challenge in their research. The authors identified as a challenge with destination branding the discrepancies between theory and practice. As found in the current study, most practitioners think of destinations in the very same way as consumer products and services that can just be easily subjected to flowery and often fallacious communications to convince and ultimately deceive the consumer.

### **Stakeholder collaboration**

On collaboration in branding initiatives, the recurrent response was that effective destination branding requires the involvement of various players in the tourism sector. Mostly mentioned were the DoT, hotels, travel agents, tour operators and car hire companies. Nicolaides (2018) states that there must always be an approach to advertising a brand in which stakeholders strive to reach consumers in an honest way without subjectively embellishing and making blatant untruths about their offerings. Marketing must then also be intrinsically linked to a variety of ethical issues that require thoughtful consideration and a sense of moral idealism in which consumer rights and ethical practices are not ignored (Nicolaides 2008; 2019), and the consequences of actions must always be carefully mapped out so that 'the greatest good for the greatest number' can be realised after assessment of the costs and benefits of the desired ethical marketing. On whether collaboration actually happens in branding initiatives, the general consensus was that the DoT only involves the private sector and other concerned non-state actors in the execution or implementation of branding strategies, when the strategies and general policy direction have already been formulated. One respondent explained:

We are not consulted by the [Malawi] government on their plan[s]. We will be informed that they have written a strategy paper and then they share it with us as well as the tour operators and the rest of the industry, when we have not been consulted as such. Not even the Department of Culture [consulted us] when they did their MaCFest [a local arts and cultural festival]. And [as a result] a few people went to the festival in 2012. So, there is not much dialogue on the government side from the private sector.

Literature shows that DMOs have a tendency of leaving out other sectors when it comes to destination branding (Campelo et al., 2014; Vasudevan, 2008). Destinations will hardly be successful in their branding efforts if the government is not proactive in seeking the support of the members of the general public and the private sector, through public and sector-wide consultations, for example. Perhaps the Ministry of Tourism in Malawi has not had the abilities or desire to consult all the members of the trade in the private sector on important issues due to

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<sup>1</sup> Zanzibar is a chain of islands in the Indian Ocean situated about 40 kilometres off the east coast of Tanzania.



capacity and resource constraints that it regularly faces as a public body (Minne, Byron, & Brown, 2014).

## **The state of Malawi's destination brand**

### **Malawi's core brand: Personality and positioning**

About 20% of Malawi's land surface is taken up by a freshwater lake, Lake Malawi. It is arguably the country's principal tourist attraction. Thus, for so long Malawi has projected itself as a lake destination. In the course of the development of the tourism industry in Malawi, the Department of Tourism has on several occasions tried to change the brand personality of the destination, but such changes have pervasively been made around the lake as an attraction. One respondent stated that:

I should have told you that in the adverts then, we tried to sell Malawi as a honeymoon destination and the adverts showed a picture of the lake and the beach with only a couple of footprints on the sand and the caption was "Where the only footsteps are your own".

The recurrent idea was what sets Malawi apart as a destination is its peaceful and friendly people. Most of the stakeholders were of the view that one of Malawi's strongest personality traits that should be projected as its brand essence is the characters of its people: cheerful, warm and friendly. One stakeholder explained:

It doesn't matter how hard, it doesn't matter if you see a child with no shirt on, just shorts; they will always be smiling. So it's a happy bubbly country which though it has its own problems, it doesn't weigh the people down.

However, some stakeholders argued that the friendly and peaceful personality has been used for too long and with changing tourist wants, it is not enough. Additionally, several respondents argued that the brand personality is becoming generic as other African countries have tried to identify with the slogan 'the Warm Heart of Africa' either by using it wholesome or slightly changing it. To address this, some respondents stated that Malawi needs to project itself as a destination with a diversified range of attractions.

People always fall on the warm heart, warm heart, but obviously that has been done, has been said a lot. What I will say is Malawi is full of surprises; there are still things that they can discover and see. That they never thought it existed. We went to Ntchisi Forest Lodge a few weeks ago and there was a rainforest and suddenly you drive to Nkhotakota and there is a lake and up north the landscape changes again; the Viphya mountains. So, I think it's the diversity and warmth which I think is really a good selling point.

Destination branding should consider tourist needs and as those needs change the brand has to be revised in order to remain relevant (Bock, 2015). The World Bank (2010) also suggested that much as Malawi's positioning based on friendliness is not bad, it is not enough. The study posited that generally tourists do not expect to be treated in an unfriendly manner in a destination; therefore there is need to adjust the message so that it says more than what the tourist already expects. The adjustment of the brand personality seems to be taking place: a recent promotion video by the Department of Tourism ended with a tagline "Malawi, Compact in Size, Rich in Contrast, Big in Hospitality", espousing the diversity of the destination's attractions as compared to its relatively small size.



## **Brand infrastructure**

The majority of the respondents were of the view that the road network and related infrastructure in Malawi has greatly improved in the last two to five years. A tour operator specifically mentioned that German tourists had spoken highly of Malawi's roads as they (the German tourists) like to self-drive when they are in the country, and of course, Germany has the world-class autobahns to use as a benchmark. However, most of the stakeholders lamented the conditions of feeder roads that connect the major urban centres to rural or resort destinations. It was observed that most of the feeder roads are only passable during the dry season and that puts Malawi at a disadvantage as tourists decide to visit other countries during the rainy season. One respondent explained:

I think by and large our roads need to be improved. I should put it that way, particularly feeder roads. Now, there are others that are particularly bad and I am thinking of the Nyika National Park which I told you that even the marketing of the country at some stage was based on.

Almost all the stakeholders were of the view that Malawi's air accessibility is a critical impediment to the country's tourism brand as there are no direct flights from major tourist generating countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany or even China into Malawi. Travellers from those countries have to connect through Kenya, South Africa or Ethiopia. Ironically, the former two are well established African destinations themselves and therefore it does not come as a surprise that tourists just decide to end their trips in those two countries. Time is of essence in travel and any destination that takes relatively too long to travel to is bound to be at a disadvantage. One stakeholder commented:

When you only got four airlines coming into the country, [it] pushes the prices up [and] Malawi does not seem to be conducive to go to.

This echoes the findings by Krstic, Jovanovic, Jankovic-Milic, and Stanistic (2016) that for future tourism development in Malawi, the country has to invest in its air transport infrastructure. Even on the major attraction itself, Lake Malawi, infrastructure seems to be a challenge. Findings reveal that there are few reliable water vessels on the lake and the reliable ones are privately owned and very expensive. The biggest motorboat that has plied the waters of the lake for over 60 years, is oftentimes out of service for maintenance, proving an unreliable attraction and mode of transport for travellers on the lake. Most stakeholders stated that Malawi is losing a lot of revenues that could be generated by tourist activities on the lake. The Malawi National Transport Master Plan (2018) posited that lack of integration of water transport and other modes of transport has resulted into Lake Malawi not being used to its highest potential as a tourism resource (Ministry of Transport, 2018).

## **Primary Service Relationships**

The Malawi Annual Economic Report (2014) stated that there is lack of qualified personnel in the industry, and the problem is worsened by small and medium tourism entrepreneurs who are unwilling to engage skilled management staff (Ministry of Finance Economic Planning and Development, 2014). Most of the stakeholders commented that much as the levels of service quality in the industry in the destination cannot be said to be poor in general, there is a lot of room for improvement. Many posited that even most staff that have the requisite qualifications for their jobs do not seem to be able to deliver high quality services. The common feeling was that there is a need to impart tourism and hospitality students and staff with communication, interpersonal and problem-solving skills which concurs with Nicolaidis study (2008). One stakeholder stated:



The understanding of what it means to give a service is not there. If you go to [a hotel and tourism training institution], you can get people there who understand the difference between a white wine glass and a red wine glass, but that's basic. For us, we need to bring it to a level where people entertain the guests, they communicate with the guests, know what the guests want before the guests ask for it. They understand where the guests come from the world, the other world, not this world, that is pretty important for our guests.

Another theme that was prevalent is that services such as accommodation in the tourism industry in Malawi are relatively more expensive compared to what its neighbours offer (see Mijiga, 2014). It was revealed that perhaps tourists could do with the current levels of service quality, only if the prices were lower. The respondents claimed that in neighbouring countries tourists get generally the same levels of service quality as offered in Malawi, but at lower prices. Thus, if Malawi is to attain a favourable position as a tourist destination, operators in the industry need to improve their efficiency which could resultantly reduce costs so that prices match service quality levels. Commenting on the issue, one respondent had this to say:

The price needs to match with the quality of the service. Because a tourist will say, "I am starving, I have been patient and there is no one to talk to and it's taking so long and I am paying all this money?"

Indeed, previous research has established for destinations to effectively differentiate themselves and be seen to be different from the competition, they need to offer high quality services and better value for money (Ashton, 2015; Nicolaidis, 2008; Miličević et al., 2017).

### **Media Relationships**

Most respondents were of the view that the private sector is doing a lot in promoting Malawi as a desirable tourist destination. For instance, over 40 tourism operators formed the Malawi Travel Marketing Consortium which runs the website <http://www.malawitourism.com>. Of course, the DoT is a government-subsidized institution and, as is the case with many such institutions in Malawi, it faces funding challenges. One interviewee responded in the following manner:

Under normal situations, an independent body which is free from direct political manipulation and influence is supposed to be in charge of marketing. Take the example of the leading destinations in south-eastern Africa like South Africa, Zimbabwe and Tanzania; they all have independent tourism authorities that market their countries effectively.

Recently, however, the DoT has made some strides in the marketing communications arena by airing adverts to international audiences on the international new network CNN. It was reported that following the adverts, tour operators and other players received an increasing number of enquiries from across the world (Jimu, 2014). Most stakeholders were also of the view that the local media in the country, most of whom have an online presence, have not done much to help in the promotion of the country. Some of the respondents opined that since the local media has an online presence, it can easily promote the country through, for instance, travel columns. It should be noted that there are times of the year when the major newspapers run tourism supplements, but most stakeholder argued that that is not enough. One respondent said the following:

The Daily Times [newspaper] regularly produces tourism supplements – and that's just one example. But they could do more. I took to the websites of the Times Group, Nation Publications and Nyasa Times – none of which has dedicated a single section to Malawi tourism. I checked the South African



biggest newspaper, Mail & Guardian, it has [travel.mg.co.za](http://travel.mg.co.za). I have also seen that Botswana's biggest newspaper, Mmegi, has started developing a tourism section on its website. So, at any rate, our newspapers are not doing enough to market Malawi. Supplements are a good thing, but they are read mostly by Malawians who either are generally not quite keen to tour places of interest in their own country or simply cannot afford.

It was also revealed that the adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for the purposes of tourism promotion was on a lower side due to higher adoption and servicing costs. It was observed that numerous tourism operators such as travel agents, hotels and restaurants do not have websites and social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other social media platforms. Prior research has suggested that African destinations could benefit a lot if they harnessed the potential of ICTs in their branding initiatives (Ankomah & Larson, 2019; Booyens & Rogerson, 2016; Kimbu, 2011).

### **The Role of Local Residents**

The principal view was that the activities of the residents are very crucial in determining visitor experience. Stakeholders observed that generally Malawians are very open and friendly to international tourists. However, most stakeholders posited that the contribution of the residents to the branding effort is limited by several factors.

First, there is a general feeling among many Malawians that the tourism services in the country are generally expensive and hence meant for foreigners whom they perceive to have a lot of money. As a result, domestic tourism (for leisure purposes) happens on a very small scale. This could have an immense impact on image projection to foreign tourists once they are in the country, because it means that an average man on the street does not know much about tourist attractions and services provided near him. One stakeholder said:

I would love to see all Malawians have a positive attitude to tourists as well as general tourism. The belief by most citizens that tourism is for international visitors only de-promotes tourism in one way or the other. There is undoubted proof that for a country/destination to do well in international tourism, [a] good foundation needs to be well laid at a domestic level and such a foundation is domestic tourism.

It has been argued that residents are not just passive beneficiaries but may form part of the core of place branding (Campelo et al., 2014; Kalandies et al., 2009). The Department of Tourism, having realized this started a local promotion campaign titled '*Tidziyamba ndife a Malawi*' (It must begin with us, Malawians). The campaign, aimed at promoting domestic tourism, has had limited success (Kainja, 2016). Perhaps one of the major reasons is that the middle class that can afford tourism services is so thin in Malawi.

Another theme that emerged was conflicts between local communities on one side and protected-area managers and the government on the other on the use of protected natural resources. Several protected areas such as national parks and wildlife reserves in Malawi are surrounded by communities that used to live in the protected areas before their declaration as protected areas. As such, some communities still lay claim to the resources in the areas and have resorted to land encroachment and poaching. Poaching has significantly reduced the appeal of Malawi as a tourist destination as many international tourists visit the country for its wildlife. One respondent explained:

[Back then], when I was escorting people around, I was so excited because then there was some game. I recently went to Kasungu National Park, and



we went on a tour guided by them [park officials]. I teased them; the only elephants were two angry elephants that came by the accommodation facility. The elephants chased the birds because they have been poached out of the park and they think that everyone else near them is unfriendly.

This echoes a study by Lubbe, Du Preez, Douglas, and Fairer-Wessels (2017) who state that rhino poaching in South Africa, if not addressed, could adversely impact future visitation to game parks. Stakeholders suggested that the local residents in tourist attraction areas should be civic educated on the importance of tourism and natural resource conservation. In fact, previous research has highlighted the importance of resident participation in sustainable tourism development practices for effective destination branding (Dioko, 2016; Paddison & Biggins, 2017; Wassler, Wang, & Hung, 2019).

### **What could be done better?**

Lastly, the study sought the views of the stakeholders on what could be done better or differently for Malawi to compete successfully against other destinations in the region. The first issue was the need to diversify the tourism product and adjust the brand personality over time. Respondents argued that Malawi has a lot of tourism attractions such as, for example, Nyika National Park and Makuzi Beach on Lake Malawi, but many of them are not highly promoted or valued. Majority of the stakeholders were of the view that other than Lake Malawi and other natural features, Malawi could improve its competitiveness if it promoted cultural heritage, events and volunteer tourism as attractions. The Lake of Stars Music Festival, held annually in the country, was cited as a successful example of event tourism. Indeed, research shows that an increasing number of destinations are establishing event portfolios as a strategic initiative to develop their own brands (Capriello, 2018; Turenko & Russell).

Another recurrent view was that operators in the tourism industry need to embrace ICTs in order to reach out to wider audiences across the world. As things now stand, the adoption of ICTs especially in resort areas where most of the attractions are is very minimal. Stakeholders argued that automation of booking systems, for example, could improve the efficiency of the operators and that would improve their appeal to international travelers. One respondent explained:

Online usage is almost non-existent. Almost all the hotels with a presence online are owned by non-Malawian investors from Europe and America. To the Malawian investor, the internet does not exist. And forget about Facebook and Instagram – especially on these, the absence is overwhelming.

ICTs have considerable impact on destination branding. The importance of such tools in destination branding cannot be overemphasized, especially in destinations whose DMOs face funding challenges as is the case with many sub-Saharan African destinations (Novelli, 2015) as online communications could be the only affordable through which destinations and tourism businesses can reach their audience (Benedek, 2018).

Lastly, the need to develop requisite infrastructure was also highlighted. It was a common sentiment among the respondents that even if Malawi was effectively marketed to larger global audiences, it would struggle to service the tourists if they visited the country in big numbers due to a general lack of adequate infrastructure. One respondent said that many tour operators are trying to attract Chinese tourists to the country, but in a general sense the country is not ready for the said target market because Chinese travelers like to travel in large groups and demand luxurious services like air-conditioned coaches, which the country would struggle to offer at the moment. Foroudi, Gupta, Kitchen, Foroudi, and Nguyen (2016) argue that infrastructure greatly



influences the favourability of tourist destinations, hence destinations seeking to stand out from the rest should develop their general and tourist infrastructure.

## Conclusion

First, the study took a phenomenographic approach, albeit a limited one, to the understanding of destination branding. Echoing earlier studies, it was found that stakeholders in the destination emphasise slogans and brand identity and brand positioning in their marketing endeavours. The study also revealed that there is limited consultation and collaboration among stakeholders in the destination branding process. Considering its tourism resource base, it was noted that the country has the potential to become a competitive destination. Some of the problems identified as inhibitors are limited external accessibility, poor service quality and general apathy by residents which is common to several countries in the southern African region. Poaching and other unsustainable resources use activities which emerged as inhibitors as well, issues that are not common in many destination branding studies, most of which have been carried out in developed economies. There was a strong sense that the local media has a civic duty to help in marketing tourism internationally through their webpages, and this is also a theme that is not often prevalent in many destination branding studies.

Considering these findings, the study proposes that a strong platform that encourages collaboration between the government and the private sector and general citizenry needs to be established for consultation and information sharing in the destination branding process. Private sector players like tour operators, displayed a great deal of knowledge about tourist preferences, hence the DoT should regularly consult with these players if they are to create and implement branding strategies that are to speak to the preferences of the intended target markets. The Malawi Tourism Council, an umbrella body of the tourism private sector in Malawi could be used as a platform for collaboration, led by the DoT. It is also necessary that both the public and private sectors invest in core and support infrastructure and staff training for quality service delivery. Innovation in product development also to be considered. Case in point is Lake Malawi where currently the popular activities are only boat riding, swimming and snorkeling. Introducing cruise ships on the Lake, for example, would likely improve its appeal for especially foreign tourists. Deliberate policies need to be implemented to encourage domestic tourism, especially among the youth. This demographic makes much use of social media and postings about their travel experiences could help generate content on the Internet which could further serve the purpose of raising the destination's online visibility.

As with most research, this research was not immune to limitations. First, the study focused on the supply side only. It would be interesting and theoretically enriching to include the views of the demand side, i.e. tourists, in future research. Further, due to the qualitative nature of the study, a limited number of respondents was engaged. For any future study, it would be sensible to take a quantitative approach so that a bigger sample of the population both from the supply and demand sides can be involved.

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