



From fantasy to reality: identifying the destination brand constructs that influence the brand performance in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The study was conducted with an aim to establish the main sources of identity for Zimbabwe tourism destination brand. Two perspectives were used for the analysis looking at real attributes of tourism and perceptions as the likely sources for improved Zimbabwe tourism destination brand identity. The study applied a QUAL to QUANT sequential mixed method through first establishing themes using a qualitative research and then use the themes to construct a survey questionnaire which was used for a quantitative research. Therefore, both in-depth interviews and questionnaires were used to gather data for this study. The results from the in-depth interviews showed that perceived brand identity can be achieved from discussions with friends and relatives, pictures in magazines, international music, local music, newspapers, church discussions, social media discussions and public discussions. For projected brand identity the respondents informed the common sources as being the national media, local tourism magazines, regional tourism magazines, national tourism websites, carnivals, exhibitions and expos. These responses were further investigated using a research survey in order to assess their relationship to the already established brand equity variables which are: brand image, brand awareness, perceived brand quality, brand loyalty and brand association. The survey revealed that projected identity mechanisms help in improving brand awareness and perceived brand quality. Brand awareness is improved using national media, national tourism websites, carnivals, exhibitions and expos, and yet, perceived brand quality can be achieved through local tourism magazines and regional tourism magazines. From a perceived brand identity perspective, the study informed that it affects all the brand equity variables such that brand awareness is enhanced by local music and church discussions, perceived brand quality by pictures in magazines, brand image by international media and newspapers, brand loyalty by public discussions and brand association through social media discussions and discussions with friends and relatives. The study therefore recommended a fusion of perceived and real attributes in order to improve Zimbabwe tourism destination brand identity. It also recommended that a further study should be done towards establishing core strategic brand identity prism for tourism destinations.

Keywords: Brand identity, destination branding, brand equity, perception, tourism attributes, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Globally, there is growing competition which is forcing tourism destinations to apply any strategy that improves their market identity and differentiation. Mak (2011) announced that the image of a



tourism destination impacts on its brand identity. However, in view of this study, Zimbabwe tourism destination has received negative media publicity in the past years which has contributed immensely to a negative brand image. This has manifested to a negative brand identity for the tourism destination in prospective and traditional markets. There has been a decline in the number of tourists' inflows and their revenue contribution to the Gross Domestic Product and Balance of payment. García et al. (2012) noted that there is a need to build concepts that promotes a positive brand identity through differentiation.

Gastal (2003) postulated that image is the most dominating factor in a tourist consideration when making a travel decision. This is the situation with the Zimbabwean tourism destination brand demise where negative image downplayed its global market performance. Lin et al. (2010) in their effort to find a point of commonality between brand identity and brand image have concluded that even with some similarities, the two concepts are different. This study assessed these concepts as related from a Zimbabwean destination branding perspective. This is because, Zimbabwe tourism brand became unpopular as a result negative image influenced by a negative socio-economic and political environment in the country. The subsequent effect has been a destroyed international brand identity. However, both brand identity and brand image are considered as key elements for improved brand equity amongst brand awareness, perceived brand quality, brand loyalty and brand association. In the construct of this study it considered the view of Knox and Bickerton (2003:1001) who propounded that brand equity, brand identity and brand architecture should be looked at in order to conform to the dynamics of a business environment. Since the image of Zimbabwe destination has been tarnished to destroy positive identity of the brand, there was a need to conceptualise the brand equity through this study. As agreed by Konecnik (2014:9), the concept of destination branding is still in its infancy. In order to improve on the perception of a tourism destination there was need to consider the overall perception that the potential tourists have on the destination. It was crucial to understand how Zimbabwe is viewed as a in its target markets. Also it is not only about the perception of the tourists that lead to an improved brand identity, but the efforts of destination marketers to work on projecting a better image in their targeted markets. This study then helped in determining the variables to be used in order to improve global identity of the Zimbabwean destination brand. These variables were then classified as either based on general perception of the tourists or based on real attributes in existence.

Research objectives

- To highlight the main sources for improved Zimbabwe tourism destination brand identity
- To discuss if Zimbabwe destination brand identity is based on general perceptions or reality of offerings in the country
- To establish the most dominating sources for improved Zimbabwe tourism brand identity looking at drivers of perception and existing reality
- To determine the relationship between sources of brand identity and all the brand equity variables

Statement of the problem

Zimbabwe tourism destination brand has a negative global market identity due to socio-economic and political upheavals happening in the country as noted in other previous research. However, there are no clear standpoints to help in understanding the real sources of Zimbabwe tourism destination's brand identity. Since the destination marketers are striving to improve their projected images so as to improve brand identity and attract tourists, it is important to understand if projected images are the only pillars for improving destination brand identity in Zimbabwe. Reality of construct being what the destination marketers are projecting to the outside world whilst perceived image is within the minds, feelings emotions and understanding of tourists in their



personal capacity. Even with De Chernatony and McDonald (1992:3) informing on the brand identity variables to consider for a destination, they did not clarify on the relationship between perception and reality. Also in line with this study, Knox and Bickerton (2003:1001) acknowledged that there is need to have a brand identity and brand equity model that meet with market dynamics. Relationships between brand identity and brand equity variables namely brand awareness, brand image, perceived brand quality, brand loyalty and brand association, have not been assessed in the Zimbabwean context. The study therefore investigated on the issues affecting Zimbabwe tourism destination brand identity failure, looking at both projected and perceived identity so as to link them with tourism destination brand equity variables. This is in support of Tasci and Gartner (2007) who informed that there should be a connection between projected image and tourists' perceived image. Giannopoulos et al. (2011) further suggested that synergies and co-ordination between tourism stakeholders is vital in destination branding. This study therefore helped in unpacking brand identity and image issues besides having an attempt from some existing studies (Morgan and Pritchard, 1998; Merrilees et al., 2005; Pike, 2008).

Literature Review

Brand identity

Several researches have been done in relation to tourists from a demand perspective in tourism destination branding, with somewhat a dark left in relation to brand identity and its development from a supply side (Konecnik, 2002). Brand identity has become a vital area which helps in building a positive image through correlating various unique sets of brand elements (Rainisto, 2003). It shows that tourism destinations should strive to build a positive identity in their target markets as it is one of the tools that can help in improving their positive image. This is because, people interact with the world that is dominated by information, services, products, structures, people and buildings carrying out different messages and meanings, each giving a different identity (Lacerda, 2004). It is from this perspective that brand identity has become a crucial part of overall brand equity, such that the aggregate perception of a brand is driven by its positioning and personality (Upshaw, 1995). To this extent, it shows that brand identity is also driven by its personality. It is only when a personality is exposed to the world, when identity is built. As announced by Davidson (1997), brand identity is recently viewed as an iceberg, which is separating brand identity by looking at its visible and invisible aspect, with the invisible part gaining importance. In this regard, Aaker (1996) announced that brand identity has a texture and depth, and strategists should consider a brand in the form of: a product, an organization, a person and a symbol.

These aspects of brand identity are supported by the view of van Riel and Balmer (1997), that brand identity should be equated with visual identity. Tourists judge a tourism destination brand from the offerings it presents that have a visual inspection before and after they make their consumption. Cai (2002), therefore produced a model informing that destination branding revolves around formations of brand element mix, brand and brand image building also with a key focus on brand identity. In this case it shows that destination branding helps in communicating a destination's unique identity which will differentiate it from its competitors (Govers & Go, 2009). Brand identity in destination marketing can be assessed as a composite of elements that create synergies of communication looking at visual, auditory and other sensory elements (Kapferer, 1998). There is a need to improve on the uniqueness of a tourism destination through branding, mainly looking at on the elements that promotes positive identity and a promise of high value. Kaplanidou and Vogt's model (2003), announced that destination brand identity is a synthesis of unique brand associations which provides a promise of value to the customers directed from the

members of an organisation. Brand identity becomes a strategic tool that reflects the vision of a destination to its potential tourists. Gnoth (2002), concurred by informing that, destination branding is management process which transforms into strategic plan building, in order to form brand identity looking at a destination's competitiveness, and uniqueness. The main objective of destination brand is therefore to inform of the favourable uniqueness of a brand in its target markets. According to Kotler et al, (1993), effective brand identity should therefore help in promoting a destination's character and value proposition with emphasis on conveying a unique character, delivering both emotional strength and mental image. Therefore, communication is vital and it should be one that is suitable and applied by the sender and the receiver, so as to improve the image of a brand which then positively uplifts the perceived identity of the brand (Riezebos, 2003).

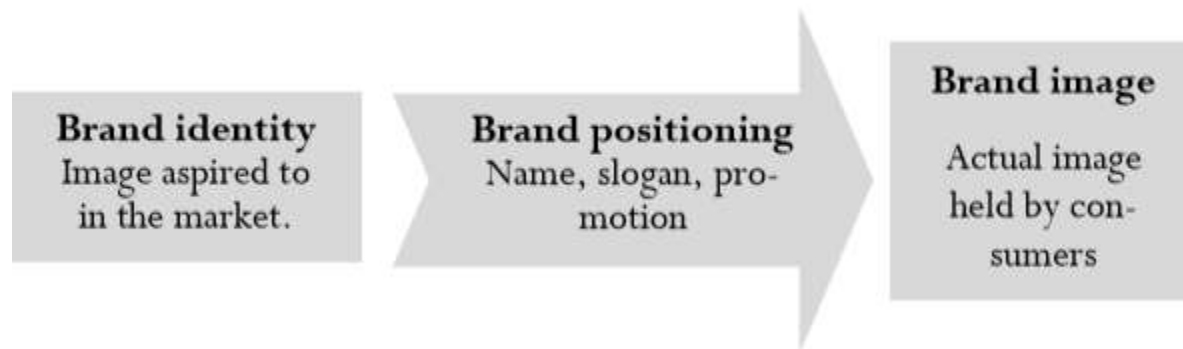


Figure 1.1 Destination brand elements

Source: Pike (2012)

The presentation in Figure 1.1 aligns with the aim of this study which was to find a mechanism that help in improving Zimbabwe tourism destination brand identity. According to Pike (2012) brand identity is built from brand image through effective brand positioning. Even with some highlighted brand positioning elements such as the name, slogan and promotion, the construct of a positive Zimbabwe tourism destination brand identity still needs more attention. It is through this study that specific brand elements were matched with brand equity variables in order to conceptualise brand identity.

Brand perception

In relation to the relationship between brand identity and perception, Upshaw (1995) informed that identity is not a creation of marketers, but it is a perception that consumers develop from what has been created. Keller (1998), concurred through informing that, perception about a brand is reflected by what consumers hold in their memory. In this case, communication plays an important role in developing either a negative or positive perception in the mind of potential tourist. Jalilvand et al. (2011) further postulated that, tourists use their personal communication in order to discuss and share their experience and perceptions. Hence, sensory stimuli which include visual elements should be managed in the form of physical and virtual environments so as to influence perception of the whole tourist experience in their individual decision making process (Agapito et al., 2013). In this regard, tourists make their own judgement in relation to their perception of a tourism destination from what they this, hear and discuss. This is the reason why consumers in general may apply luxury brands in order to give themselves a class in relation to other relevant brands by mainly integrating meaning for each brand's identity (Holt, 1995). Destination branding from this perspective can be regarded as a luring agent that is used to mold the perception of people with regards to a certain destination (Can-Seng, 2004). In this case, the satisfaction of an



individual tourist is an evaluation of the perceived performance when a real purchase is done in relation to the destination image previously held before the consumption (Chon, 1990). This means that destination image plays a crucial role in building perception of a tourist towards a destination. Likewise, as compared to destination brand identity, image is also a catalyst that helps in forming a perception about a tourists' destination personality. Traditionally, perception of a tourism destination has been assessed from a quality perspective making quality perception a main consideration in making a choice between competing destinations (Olimpia, 2011). Therefore, when tourists make identity decisions about a destination as a group, there should be a uniformity of perceptions (Oakes, et al., 1994).

Research Methodology

The study used a sequential mixed methods research design, which was initiated with a qualitative research and was followed by a quantitative research through distribution of survey questionnaires to the respondents. This practice is supported by Flick (2005:17) who propounded that with qualitative research there is structuralism based on the daily routines of participants which then helps in bringing new contribution in any area of research and for this study to develop a new destination branding concept. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) also support the use of a mixed methodology by announcing that it helps in both a quantitative and qualitative research design complementing each other. Creswell et al (2004) agrees on the use of a sequential mixed method in a single research that is in support of the approach taken by this study.

Population and sampling procedure

The participants for the in-depth interviews were selected from the Zimbabwe tourism industry as experts in the area of destination marketing. These were selected using a purposive judgmental sampling method. The total sample for the in-depth interviews was therefore n=5 and their profiles are as presented in Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1 Profile on interviewees

ORGANISATION	n	POSITION	INDUSTRY TYPE	DURATION	DATE
Ministry of Tourisms and Hospitality	1	Principal Officer in Destination Branding	Government Ministry	1 hour 43 minutes	21/03/18
Midlands State University	1	Senior Lecturer	Higher Tertiary Education	1 hour 13 minutes	3/5/18
Victoria Fall Resorts	1	Marketing Officer	Tourism Resorts	49 minutes	1/8/18
Air Zimbabwe	1	Marketing Officer	Air Travel	36 minutes	13/7/18
Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority	1	Consumptive Tourism Officer	Tourism Parastatal	1 hour 4 minutes	25/ 09/18

Surveys

The sample size for the survey research was obtained through first grouping the tourism into three main sectors namely Accommodation, Travel and Resorts. A stratified random sampling was done in order to select respondents from each sector. Lastly a convenience sampling was done in order to distribute survey questionnaires to any respondent who was available at the time when



the research was conducted. The total sample for the research was n=80 constituting of accommodation (45), travel (25) and resorts (10).

Data collection

For the qualitative research, data was collected from the participants using in-depth interviews and for the quantitative research, data was collected from the respondents using survey questionnaires with a 1 to 5 point Likert Scale.

Data analysis

A content analysis was done for the qualitative data in order to establish themes which were then used to develop a survey questionnaire. Quantitative data was developed from general frequencies to percentages, and a further hypothesis test was then done to establish relationships between brand identity and brand equity variables.

Findings and Discussions

Since the study was initiated with qualitative research with the aim to establish themes for a further survey research, the findings revealed themes in two categories, that is those for perceived identity and for projected identity as presented in Figure 1.2 below:

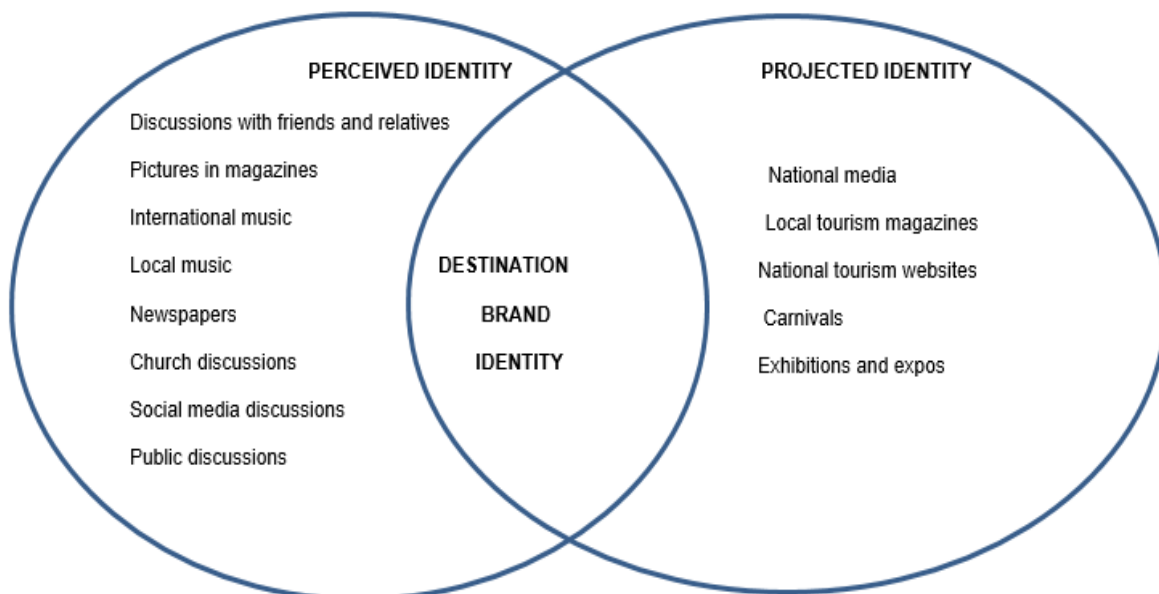


Figure 1.2 Established sources of perceived brand identity and projected brand identity

The results from the in-depth interviews as shown in Figure 1.2 above revealed that, perceived brand identity can be in the form of discussions with friends and relatives, pictures in magazines, international music, local music, newspapers, church discussions, social media discussions and public discussions. For projected brand identity the respondents informed that the sources include national media, local tourism magazines, regional tourism magazines, national tourism websites, carnivals, exhibitions and expos.



These responses were further investigated using a research survey in order to assess their relationship to the already established brand equity variables which are: brand image, brand awareness, perceived brand quality, brand loyalty and brand association. The results from the survey are as shown in table 1.2 below.

Table 1.2 Relationship between sources of perceived brand identity and brand equity variables

Sources of Perceived Brand Identity	Brand Awareness		Brand Image		Perceived Brand Quality		Brand Loyalty		Brand Association	
	n=80		n=80		n=80		n=80		n=80	
Sample	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F
1. Discussions with friends and relatives	16%	13	8%	6	9%	7	20%	16	47%	38
2. Pictures in magazines	4%	3	10%	8	62%	49	22%	18	2%	2
3. International music	38%	30	40%	32	15%	13	3%	2	4%	3
4. Local music	73%	58	20%	16	0%	0	0%	0	7%	6
5. Newspapers	33%	26	59%	47	8%	7	0%	0	0%	0
6. Church discussions	42%	33	21%	17	17%	14	14%	11	6%	5
7. Social media discussions	7%	6	0%	0	0%	0	41%	33	52%	42
8. Public discussions	10%	8	3%	2	3%	2	51%	42	33%	26

The presentation in Table 1.2 above shows that discussions between friends and relatives, as a driver for perceived brand identity had a majority (47%) of the respondents, expressing that it influences brand association. The response is followed by a relative high percentage (20%) that it also influence brand loyalty. The reason might be due to the fact that, after consumption tourists' will give reference to their counterparts in their meetings and discussions of their experience during a travel or consumption of the tourism offerings. As postulated by Lacerda (2004) people interact with the world containing issues that gives them different identities. This has a strong effect on having more associates of a destination brand and it reinforces loyalty, resulting in a lasting positive identity of the brand. The power of these discussions has also been revealed when the majority (52%) agreed that social media improves brand association and 42% informed that church discussions influences brand awareness.

Tourists make identity decisions about a destination as a group such that there should be a uniformity of perceptions (Oakes, et al., 1994). Media has also demonstrated that it is a vital tool in developing perceptions towards a destination and its brand, such that for this study the majority (62%) of the respondents agreed that pictures in magazines have a strong effect on perceived brand quality. This might be due to the fact that pictures have the supremacy to clearly show the offerings represented by a destination brand, thus improving on the tangibility aspect of the tourism service. Van Riel and Balmer (1997) concur by informing that brand identity should be equated with visual identity. To a greater extent it results in improved perceived identity of the tourism brand in the eyes of prospective tourists, since they can even experience a moment of truth before an actual visit, from pictures they view. The power of international music as another source of media has resulted in the majority (40%) agreeing that it can improve perceived brand identity through a positive image creation, with relative high response showing that it also improves on the tourism brand awareness. This might be due to the fact that music can be addictive to an extent of controlling emotions and the way people view certain objects. In this case engaging the selling of Zimbabwe brand in international music might create a positive image and awareness in its global identity. This also agrees with the majority (73%) who informed that local music can improve brand awareness. Media therefore, becomes a strong catalyst for improved



perceived brand identity such that majority (59%) of respondents also agreed on newspapers having a positive influence on the brand image. These responses are supported by Hall and O’Sullivan (1996) who informed that a destination is built upon word of mouth, which then can be specified to tourists’ word of mouth and will result in a strong image of the destination.

Table 1.3 Relationship between sources of projected brand identity and brand equity variables

Sources of Projected Brand Identity	Brand Awareness		Brand Image		Perceived Brand Quality		Brand Loyalty		Brand Association	
Sample	n=80		n=80		n=80		n=80		n=80	
Percentage and frequency	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F
1. National media	63%	50	19%	15	2%	2	12%	10	4%	3
2. Local tourism magazines	12%	10	15%	12	55%	44	8%	6	10%	8
3. Regional tourism magazines	17%	14	2%	2	50%	40	13%	10	18%	14
4. National tourism websites	36%	29	30%	24	15%	12	9%	7	10%	8
5. Carnivals	45%	36	32%	26	5%	4	7%	6	11%	8
6. Exhibitions and expos	47%	38	21%	17	6%	5	13%	10	13%	10

The presentation in Table 1.3 presents the outcomes from the projected identity survey. The aggregate responses from all the variables tested shows that media has great supremacy in building a positive brand identity in various ways.

The majority of respondents that is 63% on national media, 36 % on national tourism websites, 45% on carnivals and 47% exhibitions and expos have been agreed to have a positive influence on brand awareness. This might be due to the fact that this platforms have a wide network that can sell and improve identity of a brand to the world. For instance carnivals and expos can invite people from all over the globe and if a tourism brand receives positive identity at this platform, it is highly possible to have global identity through word of mouth and other accelerators. Also the results informs that the majority of the responses agreed on local tourism magazines (55%) and regional magazines (50%) as a drivers for improved perceived brand quality in a drive to have a positive projected brand identity. The reason might be due to the fact that quality is invisible, making it hard to sell, but it can be tangibilised by the pictures and other presentations that are found in magazines.

Towards conceptual framework for improved destination brand equity through brand identity

As presented in Figure 1.3 below, the outcomes from the study were tested looking at the variables that conceptualised the basis of the research. It was important to test relationships using hypothesis that is: H1- between brand identity and perception; H2-Brand identity and reality; H3-Brand identity and brand equity variables; H4- perceived identity and brand equity variables; and H5- Projected identity and brand equity variables.

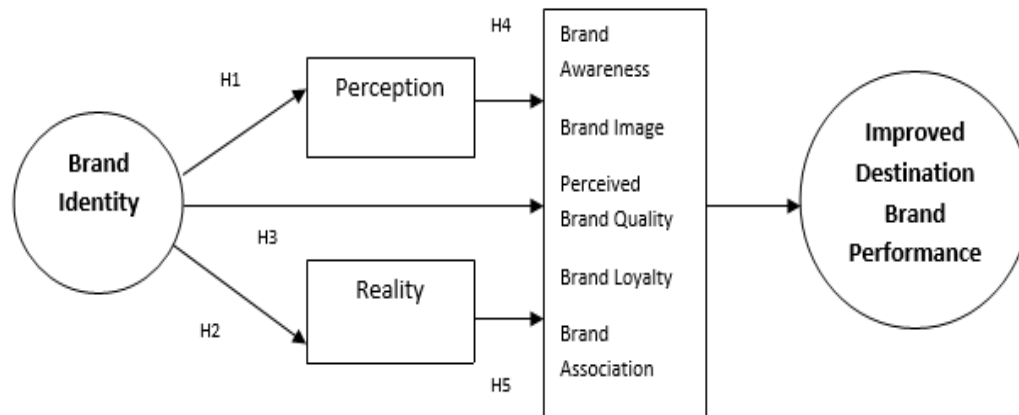


Figure 1.3 Sources of brand identity framework

The presentation in Figure 1.1 tests the relationship between brand identity and the performance of a tourism destination brand equity, from a Zimbabwean perspective. It reveals that brand identity can be derived from the perceptions that tourists have about the destination and its offerings or from the real attributes present in a tourism destination. The assumption being that, when brand identity is improved there will be an elevation of all of the brand equity variables namely destination brand awareness, brand image, perceived brand quality, brand loyalty and brand association. An improvement in these brand equity variables will ultimately become an injector to improved destination brand performance.

The findings from this study therefore, helped in establishing a hypothesis between perceived brand identity and brand equity variables. Also a hypothesis test was done on projected brand identity against brand equity variables. A confidence level of 0.05 was then used to accept H1 or H0. The results therefore revealed the following:

H1: There is a positive relationship between brand identity and tourists' perception ($p < 0.05$).

H2: There is a positive relationship between brand identity and reality projected in Zimbabwe tourism destination ($p < 0.05$).

H3: There is a positive relationship between brand identity and the brand equity variables ($p < 0.05$).

H4: There is a positive relationship between perceived brand identity and all the brand equity variables ($p < 0.05$).

H5: There is a positive relationship between projected brand identity and only two brand equity variables namely brand awareness and perceived brand quality ($p < 0.05$).

The above results shows that p-values obtained from testing the relationship between projected identity and other three main brand equity variables namely brand image, brand loyalty and brand association were negative since they were above 0.05 ($p > 0.05$) hence the study accepted H0 and rejected H1.

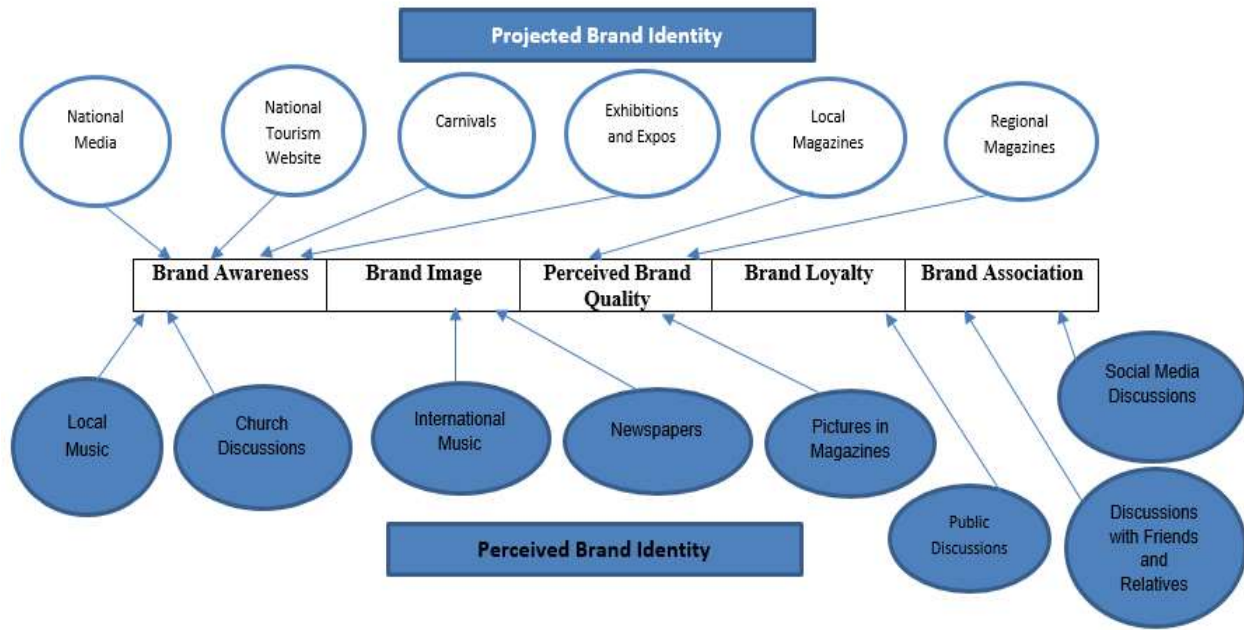


Figure 1.4 Perceived and projected identity contributors to destination brand equity

The presentation in Figure 1.4 above shows that project brand identity affects mainly brand awareness and perceived brand quality. In relation to brand awareness, the main sources for improved brand identity in this study have proven to be: national media, the national tourism website, carnivals, exhibitions and expos. Also, in relation to perceived brand quality brand identity can be improved by local tourism magazines and regional tourism magazines.

Figure 1.4 also revealed that perceived brand identity can affect all of the presented brand equity variables namely brand awareness, brand image, perceived brand quality, brand loyalty and brand association. From a brand awareness perspective, perceived brand identity is influenced by inter alia, local music and church discussions; the brand image is affected by international music and newspapers; perceived brand quality is affected by pictures in magazines; brand loyalty is affected by public discussions and brand association is as a result of discussions with friends and relatives and social media discussions.

Conclusion

The study was based on understanding the contributors to a positive destination brand identity in Zimbabwe mainly looking at the perceptions of the tourists and projections made by tourism destination marketers. The findings of the study were further tested to determine specific brand equity variables affected by the two sources of identity, and these variables were brand awareness, brand image, perceived brand quality, brand loyalty and brand association. The overall results shows that tourists have much more dominance in building destination brand identity as their perceptions influence all of the brand equity variables as compared to projections by marketers. The study informed that projected brand identity only influences brand awareness and perceived brand quality. Media in its various forms has proved to be a strong catalyst in projecting and building perceptions towards a tourism destination and its brand. In this regard it informs that it takes both demand and supply to reach an equilibrium, such that, an amalgamation of contributors for both projected and perceived brand identity will result in a holistic improved



identity of a destination and its brand. It is suggested that a further study should be conducted towards establishing core strategic brand identity framework for Zimbabwe tourism destination.

Recommendations

Destination markers in Zimbabwe should engage with the international media in the marketing of the country as a tourism destination. The study has revealed that tourists' perception about the tourism destination is built from international music played in various forms of media. This can be a platform that marketers should take greater advantage of in promoting a positive brand identity to the world. Social media has proven to be one of the most commonly used platforms for tourists in their discussions that help to develop either a positive or negative perception about a destination brand. Destination marketer should strive to use existing social media platforms, which connect with the rest of the world in order to discuss the developments that promote a positive identity of the destination and its brand.

It is important for tourism destination marketers not only to promise but also to provide prototypes and highly involving familiarisation tours to potential target markets. These should be provided for free to the influencers of specified markets so that they become ambassadors and advocates who are able to change perceptions of potential tourists through a positive word of mouth. There is also need to engage in group platforms which are meant for other discussions like churches, schools and universities and to sell the tourism brand. This is because in these platforms people gather for a common purpose and are likely to collectively engage with the tourism brand for a lasting positive identity. Lastly, the destination marketers should engage in continuous market research programs which are both qualitative and quantitative in orientation. This helps in discovering new insights, prospects and helps to unpack the desires of the tourists. Their perceptions are usually built from experiences which can only be understood through effective research, which then helps to match with the present tastes and preferences of the markets.

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