



IMPACT OF RESORT IMAGE ON TOURIST LOYALTY OF SELECTED TOURISM SITES IN RIVERS STATE

Bessie Obei and Uboegbulam, Gideon Chukwunwem (Ph.D)

Department of Hospitality Management and Tourism University of Port Harcourt

Correspondence E-Mail:gideon.uboegbulam@uniport.edu.ng PHONE N0: 08177242165

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6127-5866>

ABSTRACT:

This study delves into the intricate relationship between resort image and tourist loyalty, focusing on selected resorts within the tourism hubs of Port Harcourt. Employing a cross-sectional survey design, data was gathered from 361 respondents using the Freund and William sampling technique. Both primary and secondary data sources were tapped into, with primary data collection facilitated through a closed-ended questionnaire utilizing a five-point Likert scale. Descriptive statistics, aided by SPSS version 23.0, were leveraged for data analysis.

The study's findings underscore a positive and substantial correlation between resort image and tourist loyalty. This pivotal relationship highlights the significance of a resort's image in shaping visitor loyalty. Consequently, recommendations are made for the improvement of destination security and increased investment in image-building and marketing strategies. By bolstering security measures and enhancing their image, resorts in Port Harcourt can not only retain existing tourist loyalty but also attract new patrons, fostering sustainable growth and success in the competitive tourism landscape.

KEYWORDS:

Resort Image, Tourist Loyalty, Tourist Behavior



INTRODUCTION

In the global landscape of tourism, destinations face fierce competition for attracting tourists. This heightened competition necessitates that destinations not only cultivate and uphold a favorable image but also craft enticing tourism offerings, all while striving to ensure visitor satisfaction and loyalty to foster sustainable tourism development. Individuals tend to form comprehensive perceptions of travel destinations, commonly referred to as "destination images." These images encompass a spectrum of beliefs, emotions, impressions, and knowledge associated with a destination. Such impressions can stem from direct travel experiences, indirect influences from reference groups, or information gleaned from various tourist-oriented communication channels, including mass media and the internet (Byon and Zhang, 2010). It is imperative to recognize that these destination images play a pivotal role in evaluating travel decisions, including destination choices, intentions for future visits, and the inclination to recommend a destination to others. Moreover, there exists a well-established expectation that the perception of a destination significantly influences the loyalty of visitors (Li, Patrick, and Zhou, 2008), and empirical evidence posits a positive correlation (Aksu et al., 2009). While establishing an appealing and positive destination image remains crucial, it is equally vital to provide, ensure accessibility to, and maintain the quality of tourist products and services that align with tourists' expectations. This multifaceted approach is essential for achieving and fortifying tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Destinations, aspiring to attain sustainable competitive advantages within the travel and tourism sector, must identify and delineate the distinctive features of their travel destinations, ultimately crafting an image that resonates with visitors (Glinska and Florek, 2013). This image should evolve to align with the changing preferences of travelers and tourists, all with the overarching goal of positively influencing their loyalty behavior.

The concept of customer loyalty, known for its assumed influence on recurring behaviors, initially emerged within the marketing discipline and garnered significant attention across research, academia, and various business sectors. It is widely acknowledged that customer satisfaction exerts a positive impact on post-purchase behavior (Alegre & Cladera, 2009) and brand loyalty (Sanchez and Andreu, 2009), ultimately benefiting companies in economic terms. Satisfied customers tend to return to a company for future transactions, while loyal customers display a heightened willingness to maintain their patronage even when prices experience an uptick (Bigne, Sanchez and Andreu, 2009). Loyal customers also contribute to a more positive word-of-mouth communication, resulting in additional business (Petrick, 2004; Lau and McKercher, 2004).

This concept extends its relevance in the context of travel and tourism, where it takes the form of destination loyalty. Common behavioral measures of destination loyalty within the literature encompass repeat visits to a familiar destination, the declared intention to revisit, and word-of-mouth recommendations (Alegre and Cladera, 2009). Building upon this notion, Moreira and Iao (2013, 2012) specifically defined brand loyalty as recurring behavior associated with a preferred brand, predicated on the knowledge formed about that specific brand. Within the tourism context, destination loyalty garners particular attention amid the intensifying competition among rival destinations and the growing emphasis on securing visitor loyalty to a given destination. Destination loyalty is characterized by repetitive behaviors or patterns of positive or negative behaviors toward a destination (Moreira and Iao, 2013). Loyal visitors, often impervious to price fluctuations, constitute the most lucrative market segment.

In the tourism industry, as in any other business sector, the desire for a loyal customer base prevails, and tourist destinations are no exception. However, the tourism sector faces a pressing challenge,

particularly in the context of security, especially within the Niger Delta region. This security challenge has hampered the growth of tourism, cast a negative light on the affected states, and prompted tourism investors to reevaluate their investments due to uncertainty regarding viability. The repercussions of failing to address the issue of insecurity are evident in the sharp decline in tourism activities and patronage, accompanied by negative word-of-mouth dissemination. If unaddressed, this issue could lead to the obsolescence of the state's tourism sector, depriving it of the economic benefits it stands to gain from tourism.

Given the aforementioned challenge, this study aims to investigate the relationship between destination image and tourist loyalty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

DESTINATION IMAGE

The notion of destination image finds its origins in the concept of brand image, a collection of beliefs linked with a specific brand, extensively explored within marketing and consumer behavior domains. Crompton (1979) succinctly defines destination image as the amalgamation of an individual's beliefs, ideas, and impressions regarding a destination. This construct represents a multifaceted and holistic array of perceptions held by an individual towards a given destination. Echtner and Ritchie (1993) expound that destination image encompasses both functional elements (e.g., climate) and psychological facets (e.g., friendliness of staff). In further granularity, Wang and Hsu (2010) categorize destination image into five dimensions: (1) tourism resources (e.g., heritage), (2) amenities (e.g., shopping facilities), (3) supporting factors (e.g., transportation and communication systems), (4) travel environment (e.g., cleanliness), and (5) service quality (e.g., staff skills and knowledge).

It's imperative to acknowledge that the perception of a destination's image is subjective, varying among individuals, and amenable to examination from diverse standpoints. Within the context of traveler demand, destination image assumes a pivotal role in the decision-making process (Pike and Ryan, 2004). In this process, individuals engage in activities such as information search, alternative selection, satisfaction evaluation, and the formation of behavioral intentions toward the destination (Jenkins, 1999). Furthermore, it is well-established that destination image is influential and shares a positive correlation with traveler satisfaction. The more favorable the destination image, the higher the level of tourist satisfaction, as asserted by Wang and Hsu (2010).

TOURIST LOYALTY

Numerous researchers, including Zhou et al. (2009), Mosahab et al. (2010), Kaura, Prasad, and Sharma (2015), Chao et al. (2015), Huang (2020), and Ismail and Yunan (2016), underscore the paramount importance of customer loyalty in a company's market performance. Customer loyalty, as defined by the intention of customers to repeatedly choose and repurchase products or services from the same company, is considered a cornerstone of success. In the realm of tourism, tourists frequently revisit specific destinations due to the destination's concerted efforts to cultivate their loyalty, a strategy that yields significant benefits (Sriram et al., 2007). When tourists consistently return to the same tourism site, this signifies the attainment of brand loyalty by the destination (Zhou et al., 2009).

This commitment to a particular company or destination is reflected in the tourists' inclination to continue revisiting that destination, eschewing alternatives provided by competitors (Wilson, 2018). In essence, customer loyalty entails a steadfast dedication by tourists to a business or destination,

resulting in sustained patronage and a deliberate choice to abstain from exploring competing destinations. Such loyalty has evolved into a pivotal metric for evaluating a company's triumph in its respective industry, as loyal customers tend to exclusively engage with the products or services offered by that particular company, thereby diminishing their interest in equivalent offerings from competitors.

THE IMPACT OF INSECURITY ON DESTINATION IMAGE AND LOYALTY

Insecurity has emerged as a critical factor affecting the image of tourist destinations globally. The implications of insecurity on destination image are profound and multifaceted, encompassing economic, social, and perceptual dimensions. Insecure destinations often experience a sharp decline in tourist arrivals and subsequent revenue. This is evident in regions plagued by conflicts, terrorism, or high crime rates (Gössling & Scott, 2012). Insecurity deters potential investors from engaging in tourism-related ventures, limiting economic growth and job creation in affected areas (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005).

Insecurity fosters negative perceptions of a destination, both among potential tourists and the local population. Media coverage of incidents amplifies these perceptions (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011). Communities dependent on tourism suffer as job opportunities diminish, leading to increased poverty and social unrest (Gössling & Scott, 2012). Insecure destinations are viewed as less attractive and less desirable for leisure or business travel (Sonmez & Sirakaya, 2002). Negative destination images can persist even after security concerns are resolved, deterring tourists long after the actual threats have dissipated (Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2008). Insecurity has far-reaching consequences for destination image, affecting tourism revenue, local communities, and the overall perception of a place. Addressing security concerns is not only crucial for safety but also for preserving a destination's attractiveness and economic sustainability.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Rahman's (2023) research delves into the impact of brand image on customer loyalty, focusing specifically on banking companies in Bangladesh. This study centers on two key sub-constructs, brand awareness, and brand satisfaction, to represent the brand image of these companies. Through a meticulously structured questionnaire, data was gathered from 363 respondents, all clients of ten commercial banks in Bangladesh. Employing the structural equation model (SEM) via SmartPLS, the research discerned a notable influence of both brand awareness and brand satisfaction on customer loyalty within the surveyed banking institutions.

Shivvanshi and Ambagade (2022) conducted a study examining the ramifications of brand image on consumer loyalty in Turkey. Their primary objective was to unravel the roles played by product or service functions of a brand and how consumer perceptions contribute to the growth of brand values. Using a non-probability sampling method, 57 respondents were selected to assess customer satisfaction and loyalty toward their preferred brands. These respondents were tasked with evaluating their favorite brands on a 10-point scale, considering factors such as feasibility, preferences, reach, and local awareness. The results unequivocally demonstrated the impact of brand image on consumer loyalty.

Abbas et al. (2021) embarked on a study investigating the influence of brand image on customer loyalty, with a particular focus on Pakistan. Utilizing a non-probability sampling method, 300 respondents filled out questionnaires to gauge customer satisfaction and loyalty toward their favorite

brands. The respondents assessed their preferred brands using a 5-point Likert scale, responding to 22 statements. Statistical analysis, including SPSS software, was employed to draw conclusions. The findings highlighted the significant relationship between brand image and customer loyalty, mediated by customer satisfaction and brand awareness, although brand image displayed insignificance in relation to brand awareness.

Sharma (2020) delved into the effects of brand image on customer loyalty, considering the mediating roles of customer satisfaction and service delivery in India. Data were collected during the festive season of 2019 from customers who had been associated with four major organized supermarkets in India for at least four years. The research affirmed that brand image exerts influence on customer loyalty, both independently and with the involvement of customer satisfaction and service delivery.

Artuğer (2013) scrutinized the influence of destination image on destination loyalty, using Alanya as the case study. Tourists who visited Alanya district of Antalya between June and August in 2012 constituted the study's sampling group. A survey encompassing scales related to destination image and destination loyalty was employed for data collection. Subsequently, various statistical techniques, including factor analysis, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation analysis, and regression analysis, were employed to analyze the data. The findings underscored a positive and substantial correlation between destination image, generally perceived positively by participants, and destination loyalty, with cognitive image exerting a more significant impact on destination loyalty than affective image.

Sanjaya et al. (2019) conducted a study investigating the influence of destination image on tourists' satisfaction and destination loyalty, with a specific focus on Bukittinggi City, West Sumatra. Primary data were gathered via a questionnaire from tourists who had visited Bukittinggi City at least twice, totaling 384 respondents determined by the Lemeshow formula. Path Analysis, facilitated by SPSS 25 software, was employed for data analysis. The results elucidated that destination image significantly and positively affected destination loyalty and that tourist satisfaction played a mediating role in this relationship.

METHODOLOGY

The research design serves as a conceptual framework that provides guidance for the systematic collection and analysis of data (Bryman and Bell, 2011). In the context of this study, a cross-sectional research design was selected. This choice was made because direct researcher monitoring of the primarily tourist participants was not feasible (Pawar, 2020). The study comprised a sample of 361 respondents, and the determination of this sample size was based on mathematical calculations using the Freund and William formula. Data, both primary and secondary, were collected through a well-structured closed-ended questionnaire featuring a four-point Likert scale. To ensure data reliability, the Cronbach Alpha test was employed with a predefined threshold of 0.7. The instruments' reliability was assessed utilizing the Cronbach Alpha test, supported by the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, 23.0). This study employed a combination of descriptive and statistical inferential methodologies. Descriptive techniques encompassed various statistical methods, including the use of tables, frequencies, percentages, mean values, and standard deviations. To investigate hypotheses one to four, the Pearson correlation coefficient was employed as an analytical tool. This method facilitates the assessment of both the magnitude and direction of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDING

Correlation between Destination Image and Tourist Loyalty

Correlations			
Variables		Destination Image	Tourist Loyalty
	Pearson Correlation	1	.279**
Destination Image	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	361	361
	Pearson Correlation	.279**	1
Tourist Loyalty	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	361	361

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

From the result above, Pearson Correlation Co-efficient is 0.279 while P. value (2-tailed) is 0.000. Since P-value of 0.000 is less than 0.05, we therefore reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis. This implies that there is significant relationship between destination image and tourists loyalty. Our analysis also showed Pearson correlation to be 0.279 and co-efficient of determination of 84% which implies that there is a strong positive relationship between Destination image and tourists loyalty. These finding is in line with the study of Rahman's (2023). The scholars discerned a notable influence of both brand awareness and brand satisfaction on customer loyalty within the surveyed banking institutions. Respondents also unanimously agreed that the quality of facilities, host attitude and service quality are form their image of destination and s such influence their decision to remain loyal or shift to competing destination. Also this study validates the earlier study of Shivvanshi and Ambagade (2022) whose results unequivocally demonstrated the impact of brand image on consumer loyalty. Likewise the study of Abbas et al. (2021) which proved significant relationship between brand image and customer loyalty, mediated by customer satisfaction and brand awareness, although brand image displayed insignificance in relation to brand awareness was upheld

CONCLUSION ND RECOMMENDTION

In conclusion, destination image, security concerns, and tourist loyalty are interconnected facets that significantly impact a destination's success in the highly competitive tourism industry. A positive destination image not only attracts tourists but also fosters loyalty, encouraging repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth recommendations. However, the issue of insecurity, as prevalent in many regions, poses a formidable threat to a destination's image and, subsequently, tourist loyalty. Security concerns can deter tourists, tarnish a destination's reputation, and lead to a decline in visitor numbers. The study recommended the following:

Enhance Destination Security: To mitigate security-related challenges, destination authorities should prioritize safety measures. This includes strengthening law enforcement, implementing surveillance

systems, and enhancing emergency response protocols. Collaborative efforts with local communities and international agencies can contribute to a safer environment.

Invest in Image Building and Marketing: Destinations should invest in strategic marketing campaigns that emphasize safety and positive aspects of the destination. Leveraging social media, online reviews, and travel influencers can help shape a favorable image. Moreover, collaborating with travel agencies and tour operators to promote safe and secure experiences can reassure potential tourists.

REFERENCES

- Abbas,U., Islam, K.M., Hussain and Baqir, M (2021). Impact of brand image on customer loyalty with the mediating role of customer satisfaction and brand awareness. *International Journal of Marketing Research Innovation* , 5(1), 1-15
- Artuğer, S., Çetinsöz, B.C and Kılıç, I (2013). The effect of destination image on destination loyalty: an application in Alanya. *European Journal of Business and Management*. 5(13) 124-136
- Gössling, S., & Scott, D. (2012). *Tourism and Water*. Channel View Publications.
- Moreira, P andIao, C (2014). A longitudinal study on the factors of destination image, destination attraction and destination loyalty. *International Journal of Social Sciences* 3(3), 90-112
- Nunkoo, R., &Ramkissoon, H. (2011). Developing a community support model for tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 38(3), 964-988.
- Rahman, M., Islam, M.andChowdhury, S.I (2023). Influence of Brand Image on Customer Loyalty: A Look from Bangladesh. *Journal of Business Management and Economic Research*, 7(1), pp.11-24
- Reisinger, Y., &Mavondo, F. (2005). Travel anxiety and intentions to travel internationally: Implications of travel risk perception. *Journal of Travel Research*, 43(3), 212-225.
- Sanjaya, S., Wijaya, R and Yulasmi, Y (2019). The effect of destination image on tourists' satisfaction and destination loyalty: Bukittinggi City, West Sumatra. *Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research*, 145, 62-67
- Sharma, P.B (2020). Effect of brand image on customer loyalty. The mediating role of customer satisfaction and service delivery. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Engineering and Technology*11, (6), 1107-1114
- Shivvanshi, R andAmbagade, V (2022). Impact of brand image on consumer loyalty. *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews*. 3(1),611-616
- Sonmez, S., &Sirakaya, E. (2002). A distorted destination image? The case of Turkey. *Journal of Travel Research*, 40(2), 185-196.
- Stepchenkova, S., & Morrison, A. M. (2008). Russia's destination image among American pleasure travelers: Revisiting Echtner and Ritchie. *Tourism Management*, 29(3), 548-560.