

THE BRAND IMAGE OF A SMALL ISLAND DESTINATION: THE CASE OF MAURITIUS

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ABSTRACT

It is acknowledged that brand image has an impact on the behavior of individuals. It influences the tourists' pre-purchase decision-making behavior where destinations with stronger images are more likely to be selected. Brand image also influences post-purchase decision-making including evaluation and future behavioral intentions. Furthermore, brand image is also essential for the destination to ensure a strong positioning in the competitive business environment. Despite the growing body of work on brand image, there is scant empirical evidence on the topic especially regarding small island destinations. This paper builds upon an existing research that was carried out on tourists' perspectives of the brand image of the small island of Mauritius. The purpose of this study is to determine if this small island destination benefits from a strong positioning through its brand image attributes. Strong and weak brand image attributes are identified and implications discussed.

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KEYWORDS: attributes, brand image, destination, Mauritius, positioning, tourism, word-of-mouth

INTRODUCTION

Destination marketers are striving to promote and position their respective destination by creating positive images in the minds of tourists to select their destination ahead of others. Ongoing developments in the tourism industry, competition among tourist destinations, changing customer expectations and habits are factors that have urged tourist destinations to be conceived as brands since they have to be managed in a strategic manner in order to be successful (Beerli and Martin, 2004). The brand image of destinations is essential due to three main reasons. Firstly, brand image influences the tourists' choice of the holiday destination. It represents tourists' "mental picture formed by a set of attributes that define the destination in its various dimensions" and "exercises a strong influence on consumer behaviour in the tourism sector" (Beerli and Martin; 2004: 623). Tourists usually lack information about destinations they have not previously visited and hence destinations with stronger images are more likely to be chosen. Secondly, brand image influences post-purchase decision-making behaviours including evaluation (satisfaction) and future behavioural intentions (Bigné *et al.*, 2001; Chen and Tsai, 2007; Chon, 1990; Joppe *et al.*, 2001).

Thirdly, a strong brand image is essential for the destination to ensure a strong positioning in order to entice potential tourists. Destinations with a strong, coherent, distinct and recognisable brand image will create a positive opinion of the destination (Beerli, 1998) and will have a higher likelihood of being chosen. Mauritius, an island covering 1,860 square kilometres with 1,227,078 inhabitants is a well known holiday destination for beach-resort tourists. It is located in the Indian Ocean and lies 600 kilometres to the east of Madagascar. Tourism is one of the main pillars of the Mauritius economy. The recent marketing efforts of the government and Destination Marketing Organisation has contributed to create the brand image of Mauritius. The Government has recognised the importance of creating a destination brand and has assigned a budget of USD\$ 10 million (340 million Mauritian Rupees) for the year 2008/2009 (Deloitte 2008) for developing the destination brand. However, due to increased competition among destinations, more efforts has to be placed in creating and maintaining a strong brand which has become a prerequisite for this small developing island wishing to compete amongst other international existing and

emerging tourism destinations. Despite the growing body of work on brand image, there are limited studies on the brand image of Mauritius and small islands in general. Therefore, the aim of this study is to assess tourists' perceptions of the brand image of the destination. The paper discusses if Mauritius benefits from a strong positioning through its brand image attributes among European tourists and also identifies the strong and weak attributes of the destination.

This paper is organised as follows: Section 2 provides a review of the literature on brand image. Section 3 presents the methodology adopted in conducting the research including the focus group and the questionnaire design. Section 4 provides the results and Section 5 presents the discussion. The last section concludes the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Branding is one of the most important strategies in marketing but is relatively recent in its application to the tourism industry (Gnoth, 1998; Pritchard and Morgan, 1998; Cai, 2002). Aaker (1991) has proposed one of the most popular definitions of a brand where it is defined as a distinctive name and/or symbol such as a logo or trademark used to recognize the goods of one seller, or group of sellers, and to differentiate them from competitors attempting to provide similar products. Branding also ensures consumers of consistency in the quality of the product and consequently allows marketers to manoeuvre with a greater level of pricing freedom (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1989). Cai (2002: 722) defines destination branding as the selection of a "consistent element mix to identify and distinguish a destination through positive image-building". These mental pictures represent what tourists observe, feel and experience about the destination. Hankinson (2004) argues that destination images can be placed on a continuum. Firstly, organic images are developed over a long period of time. They emerge from the exposure of what the tourists derive from formal information sources such as newspapers, radio and TV news, documentaries, periodicals, dramas, novels, and non-fictional books as well as from classes on geography and history (Gunn, 1997). These organic images are replaced by induced images that are created by the efforts of destination marketers whose aim is to maintain, improve or change these organic images. The third stage of the spectrum consists of "experiential" images that develop after having experienced the destination. Images embody a simplification of a large number of associations and pieces of information linked to the destination or the holiday experience (Medway and Warnaby, 2008).

Brand image has been recognised as a key factor for consumers in selecting a destination (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). It is acknowledged that tourists' selection of a holiday destination is founded on the degree to which the place generates favourable images (Goodrich, 1978; Gartner, 1989). Hence, image determines if a destination has the potential to satisfy prospective tourists (Pearce, 1982). A successful brand image should transmit a message that communicates the product's benefits (Ataman and Ulengin, 2003), emphasise the positive features of the destination, and differentiate it from other 'realities' by the presentation of tangible cues (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1989: 17). A strong and clear brand image can increase consumer confidence and convince consumers to purchase (Ahmed 1991). When there are several competing destinations, a clear and strong brand image enable destinations to occupy a strong positioning and entice customers to purchase. Brand image is therefore essential to the success of a destination (Leisen, 2001).

Destination branding is challenging because that just like products, destinations have become 'substitutable and difficult to differentiate' (Pike, 2005: 258). Hence, many destinations struggle to build a powerful brand (Prebensen, 2007), and are often unable to distinguish themselves from competitors. In order to become competitive, destinations promote specific attributes. Several studies have attempted to identify the brand image attributes of different countries (Embacher and Buttle, 1989; Echtner and Ritchie, 1993; Walmsley and Jenkins, 1993; Kozak and Rimmington, 2000). The empirical evidence shows that the brand image attributes of destinations may differ from one another. Destination should

make a rigorous analysis of its image by combining together the different image attributes in order to develop a strong brand image and position the destination. As opposed to attributes, the term holistic image (Morgan, Pritchard and Pride, 2002; Hankinson, 2004) is used to express the overall image of the brand (Gartner, 1986). This is congruent with Ahmed (1991) who argues that evaluations of overall image and its attributes would be different; therefore, both should be measured to better understand the positioning of a destination.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the perceptions-minus-expectations approach has been borrowed from the service quality methodology and applied to the measurement of a destination's brand image attributes. Measuring the gap between expectations and perceptions of tourists will determine if the brand image attributes of Mauritius being projected prior to the visit are in line with the reality as observed by tourists after their experience. Therefore, the following null-hypothesis is proposed:

H1. There is no positive gap between expectations and perceptions of the brand image attributes.

The destination product is an experience, thus the difficulty to determine the likelihood of consumer satisfaction prior to purchase and consumption (Levitt, 1981, Dean and Lang, 2008). Although consumers of destination brands generate sets of expectations prior to consumption (Metelka, 1981), their expectations may not match the performance of the brand image attributes. Research that reveal the link between expectations and perceptions have been numerous and the most well-known carried out by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) to measure service quality by using the SERVQUAL instrument. The gap model has also been used by other researchers to evaluate image of destinations. A study carried out by Chaudhary (2000) uses the pre- and post-trip gap to investigate the image of India as a tourist destination. O'Leary and Deegan (2005) measure the image of Ireland by the gap between performance and importance across specific destination attributes rated on a Likert-scale.

Another widely used model is the disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver 1980, 1989, 1993; Oliver and Bearden 1985; Oliver and Burke 1999) to measure customer satisfaction. Performance is 'positively disconfirmed' if it exceeds expectations, and performance is 'confirmed' if it meets expectations. Performance that does not match expectations is 'negatively disconfirmed' (McCullough *et al.*, 2000:122). These two models and the performance-only model (Pizam, Neumann, and Reichel, 1978) have been used to measure tourist satisfaction with destinations (Kozak and Rimmington, 2000). However, there is continuous debate about the most appropriate method used to measure customer satisfaction. Nevertheless, many researchers agree that the measurement depends on the purpose of the study (Yuan and Jang, 2008).

The gap model is applied when it is important to identify areas of shortfalls whereas the performance-only model is used to explain variations in dependent constructs (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1994) as done in this study. Brand image is not completely controlled by marketers. Empirical evidence shows that consumers rely on personal sources of information (Zeithaml, 1981 and Murray, 1991) especially if they have not yet experienced the service (Knowles and Howley, 2000). These sources of information are considered as more credible (Mangold *et al.*, 1999), more influential and less biased than formal marketing-driven communications (Ahluwalia *et al.*, 2000). Word-of-mouth (WOM) communications influences individuals to make their own travel decisions (Andereck and Caldwell 1993; Woodside *et al.*, 2004). Swanson and Kelley (2001) argue that a single positive WOM recommendation can result in favorably viewing the brand. However, a negative signal (through unfavorable WOM) will have more impact than a positive signal of the same magnitude (Dean and Lang, 2008). Empirical evidence also reveals that service consumers rely more on WOM than product consumers (Murray, 1991). This has been observed in the pre-purchase stage where service consumers are more likely to purchase after engaging in WOM than purchasers of goods. Evidence also shows that the most commonly used

information source for travelers before the travel decision was made emerged from WOM from friends and relatives (Beiger and Laesser, 2004). According to previous research findings, the use of WOM information is considerably higher than any other single source of information (Murphy *et al.*, 2007). It has also been demonstrated that there is a significant relationship among tourist satisfaction, intention to return, and positive WOM (Beeho and Prentice, 1997; Pizam, 1994; Ross, 1993). A similar relationship exists among tourist dissatisfaction, willingness to look for other destinations for further trips, and negative word-of-mouth communications (Almanza, Jaffe, and Lin, 1994; Peter and Olson, 1987; Pizam, 1994). The following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: There is a positive relationship between brand image attributes and WOM.

A combination of both structured and unstructured method was used to capture information relevant for this study. The first stage of the research consisted of carrying out focus group interviews with European tourists who are the main market of the destination in order to identify the most common brand image attributes that they associate Mauritius with. Over a period of one week, several tourists were approached in a shopping mall to carry out focus group interviews over coffee. The focus group was carried out with seven tourists. From the discussion, a set of 21 most frequently cited brand image attributes were identified to develop the survey instrument.

The questionnaire was divided into 3 parts. Part A consisted of closed-ended questions to collect demographic and behavioral data. Part B listed 21 brand image attributes for expectations and the same 21 for perceptions where respondents were asked to rate each attribute using a 5-point Likert-scale (1=*not important at all* to 5=*most important*). Open-ended questions were designed to support the tourists' perceptions with regard to the brand image attributes of the destination. The questionnaires were pre-tested among 30 European tourists at the Sir Seewoosagar International Airport of Mauritius. This exercise was carried out to determine if the questions were correctly set and understood. The questionnaires were translated into English and French language, as the United Kingdom and France are the main tourists' generating countries. It was also found that these two languages were widely spoken by tourists from other European destinations. The pre-test revealed that a few Likert-scale questions overlapped. Following this exercise, the questionnaire was revised and the Likert-scale questions were reduced to 18 attributes.

The survey was carried out over 4 weeks. The study was conducted among 400 European tourists originating mainly from France, United Kingdom and other European countries such as Germany, Belgium, Italy and Switzerland. Convenience sampling was used to collect data from European tourists who were keen to complete the questionnaire. Only departing tourists were surveyed, as they would be in a better position to express their views based on the experience with several aspects of the destination.

RESULTS

A list of brand image attributes of Mauritius was derived from the focus group. It is observed from the expectations scores that the highest mean for the functional attributes are related to 'sunny and warm climate', 'white sandy beaches', and 'standards of hotels' with mean values of 4.601, 4.576, 4.410 and respectively (Table 1). On the other hand, the highest mean scores for the psychological attributes were 4.601 for 'peaceful and relaxing' and 4.496 for 'hospitality of locals'. These high values are congruent with the images of Mauritius projected in formal marketing communications over many years. It can be observed that relatively low scores were obtained for 'spa facilities' (2.968) and 'family activities' (2.932).

Table 1: Gap Scores for Functional and Psychological Image Attributes

	Expectations Mean	Perceptions Mean	Gap Mean	SD	t-values
Functional Attributes					
White Sandy Beaches	4.410	4.511	0.101	0.956	1.757*
Cultural & Historical Sites	3.317	3.644	0.327	1.428	3.821*
Ecotourism & Nature-based Activities	3.230	3.467	0.237	1.344	2.945*
Family Activities	2.932	3.259	0.327	1.716	3.181*
Standard of Hotels	4.270	4.284	0.014	1.257	0.191
Local Cuisine	3.935	4.076	0.141	1.228	1.905
Festivals, Events & Handicrafts	3.029	3.302	0.273	1.173	3.885*
Medical Expertise	3.522	3.486	-0.036	1.496	-0.401*
Cultural Diversity	3.723	3.971	0.248	1.081	3.827*
Nightlife	3.090	3.302	0.212	1.635	2.164
Spa Facilities	2.968	3.482	0.514	1.614	5.314*
Reasonable Price	4.201	3.899	-0.302	1.268	-5.931*
Golf and Water Sports	3.457	3.763	0.306	1.620	3.147*
Shopping Facilities	3.622	3.482	-0.140	1.380	-1.695
Sunny & Warm Climate	4.576	4.511	-0.065	0.851	-1.268*
Psychological attributes					
Safety & Security	4.158	3.946	-0.212	1.373	-2.577*
Hospitality of locals	4.496	4.543	0.047	0.867	0.899*
Peaceful and Relaxing	4.601	4.568	-0.033	0.889	-0.607
Overall (combined scale of 18 attributes)	3.790	3.840	0.054	0.401	2.503

Table 1 presents the perceptions, expectations and gap scores for tourists' perceptions of brand image of Mauritius. Gap mean is defined as perceptions mean – expectations mean. * Items significantly different between expectations and perceptions scores at probability < 0.05 (two-tailed tests).

Tourists were also required to rate their perceptions of the brand image attributes after their visit. The highest mean values for the functional attributes were obtained by ‘sunny and warm climate’ (4.511), ‘white sandy beaches’ (4.511) and ‘standards of hotels’ (4.284). Moreover, the maximum scores for psychological attributes were observed for ‘peaceful and relaxing’ and ‘hospitality of locals’ with mean values of 4.568 and 4.543 respectively. The lowest score was obtained by ‘safety and security’ (3.946).

The largest positive gap scores were found with respect to functional attributes namely ‘spa facilities’ (0.514), ‘cultural and historical sites’ (0.327) and ‘family activities’ (0.327). The highest negative gap score was obtained for ‘reasonable price’ (-0.302) and ‘shopping facilities’ (-0.14). This figure is supported by the qualitative data obtained through open-ended questions where it was stated that some tourists felt exploited in their shopping activities as prices of goods and services in shops are not standardized. Under the psychological attribute, tourists felt that “safety and security” (-0.212) was the largest gap. Paired *t*-tests were carried out to investigate if there was a statistically significant difference between the expectations and perceptions scores (Table 1). The paired-sample *t*-tests between the two sets across all attributes indicate a statistically significant difference on 12 of the 18 items examined. In addition, the overall gap (defined as perceptions-expectations) score was 0.054 and was statistically different at $p < 0.05$, indicating that H1 is rejected as the destination performed better as compared to the expectations of tourists.

The possible influence of the brand image attributes on WOM was tested by using stepwise regression analysis (Table 2). The study attempts to find the effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable. The adjusted R^2 of 0.077 indicates 7.7 percent of variances in WOM can be predicted by brand image attributes, namely the psychological attributes. The psychological attributes have been found to be statistically significant at $p < 0.01$ and has a negative coefficient. This means that the lower the psychological attributes, the lesser the tourists will recommend the destination to others. This result thus indicates that there are other factors that predict WOM. Hence, H2 is not supported.

Table 2: Regression Results of Functional and Psychological Attributes and WOM

Image Attributes	Coefficients	Standard error	t-values
Constant	1.397	0.067	20.811 ^a
Functional	-0.036	-0.123	-1.853
Psychological	-0.054	-0.195	-2.926 ^a

R² = 0.083; Adjusted R² = 0.077; F = 15.309, Prob. F-statistics 0.000; ^a significant at p < 0.01

This table shows the regression estimates of the equation: WOM = α + β₁(functional) + β₂(psychological). It is found that only psychological attribute is statistically significant on WOM.

DISCUSSION

From the study, it is observed that Mauritius is well positioned in the European market since there is a positive gap between overall perceptions and expectations. The development of a scale to measure the brand image attributes of Mauritius as a holiday destination reveals that although the overall brand image is positive, the measurement of the functional and psychological attributes pinpoints several strengths and weaknesses in specific areas. The destination has attractive functional attributes which address the needs of the tourists and motivate them to travel long distances to reach the destination. The destination is acknowledged for its white beaches ‘cultural and historical sites’, ‘ecotourism and nature-based activities’, ‘family activities’, ‘standard of hotels’, ‘local cuisine’, ‘festivals, events and handicrafts’, ‘cultural diversity’, nightlife’, ‘spa facilities’ and ‘golf and water sports’. The functional attributes illustrates that the destination setting is vital for the tourist experience and consolidates the brand image.

The strongest positive gap for functional brand image attribute was observed for ‘spa facilities’, followed by ‘cultural and historical sites’ and ‘family activities’. The reasons being that the first two attributes are relatively new activities being marketed, and hence tourists’ expectations were relatively low. The marketing efforts have also focused on Mauritius as a luxury honeymoon destination rather than a family destination. The lowest gap score was observed for ‘sunny and warm climate’. This was because the country was under the influence of a cyclone and the perceptions were not equivalent to the idyllic weather portrayed in the promotional materials. Concerning the psychological attributes, the highest positive gap was observed for ‘hospitality of local inhabitants’. In this study, it is identified as the important psychological attribute as it creates an emotional attachment between the tourist and the destination. Shortcomings were observed for ‘safety and security’ and ‘peaceful and relaxing’ attributes.

These findings were supported by the qualitative responses which explained that a few respondents were victims of robbery during their vacation and felt deceived after such an experience. The respondents have also stated that careless litter disposal and vehicles cause a considerable amount of pollution which tends to spoil on a ‘peaceful and relaxing’ environment. The study reveals the importance of psychological brand image attributes in destination branding. The behavior of the host community is identified as the most valuable attribute through the ‘hospitality of the locals’. However, evidence depicts that the lower the psychological attributes, the lesser the tourists will recommend the destination. In this study, the psychological attributes are source of concern as negative behavior of the locals through exploitation of tourists and criminal behavior result in adverse WOM.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to assess European tourists’ perceptions of the brand image of Mauritius. A focus group followed by a questionnaire was administered to tourists. The study reveals that the destination is well-positioned in the European market since it is positively perceived by tourists.

It is hoped that the results of this study will be helpful to academics, DMO and tourism organizations. The future expansion in the projected number of tourists’ arrivals in Mauritius has created major challenges for tourism marketers. The study reported that both functional and psychological attributed

were important on the selection of a holiday destination. Though well positioned in the European market, Mauritius has to continually consolidate its strong brand image attributes and restore its weak attributes to remain a competitive tourist destination. The DMO should continue to focus on developing promotional campaigns that highlight both the functional and psychological attributes as they are ubiquitous in positioning the brand. This will result in effectively positioning the destination in the desired market through a set of brand image attributes which are desired by the tourists before purchase. However, the marketing effort should match the actual experience of tourists so that there is no negative disparity with their expectations. Therefore, it is essential that the DMO manages this combination of brand image attributes upon which the destination's tourism appeal is based to maintain the desired positioning in the target market. The study was carried out with Europeans only and therefore does not capture data on the brand image of the destination in general. Therefore, further studies should be carried out in other markets to identify how to best position the destination in each respective segments.

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