

SOUTH AFRICA'S KWAZULU-NATAL TOURISM DESTINATION BRAND ESSENCE AND COMPETITIVENESS: TOURISTS' PERSPECTIVES

Sinolwazi S. MLAMBO

University of Zululand, Department of Recreation and Tourism, Private Bag X1001, KwaDlangezwa 3886, South Africa, e-mail: snolwazi.mlambo@gmail.com

Ikechukwu O. EZEUDUJI*

University of Zululand, Department of Recreation and Tourism, Private Bag X1001, KwaDlangezwa 3886, South Africa, e-mail: ezeudujii@unizulu.ac.za

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Abstract: This study aims to find out tourists' perception of the KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa) brand essence and brand competitiveness as a tourism destination. Questionnaire survey of 406 respondents revealed that tourists are mostly satisfied with visiting KwaZulu-Natal. Most of the tourists are willing to return and they are willing to recommend KwaZulu-Natal to others. Tourists view KwaZulu-Natal as a competitive destination. This study recommends that KwaZulu-Natal destination management organisation should continue to work towards improving the quality standards of the destination, as outlined in this paper, to help it to be able to compete more strongly in the national and global tourism marketplaces.

Key words: brand essence, brand competitiveness, tourism, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

A deeper conceptual understanding of branding concepts is required before place branding can be regarded as a mature area of study. It is important to delineate the place branding construct by identifying the concepts that form and reflect it and the variables that moderate its implementation and impact (Hankinson, 2015). This paper dwells on two concepts which are central to the place (tourism destination) branding construct: the brand essence and brand competitiveness.

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

Previous studies on tourism destination brand essence, brand equity, brand image, brand loyalty, brand competitiveness, etc. have been done in the African continent and beyond by several authors (such as Chinomona and Maziriri, 2017; Ezeuduji et al., 2016; Ezeuduji et al., 2014; Giannopoulos et al., 2011; Pike and Mason, 2011; Crouch, 2010; Dwyer and Kim, 2003; Vengesai, 2003). Though authors such as Crouch (2010) and Dwyer and Kim (2003) proposed generic conceptual models of destination competitiveness, few studies have indeed focussed on specific models for specific destinations. The authors of this paper argue that there is still a dearth of research on tourism destination brand. From the literature reviewed, much of the available studies were conducted outside sub-Saharan Africa. This study therefore explores how tourists visiting KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa (one of the nine provinces of South Africa) perceive this destination's brand essence (functional and emotional attributes or benefits) and brand competitiveness, as a precursor of further conclusive research. The study will also evaluate if this destination offers a clear value position which is essential for the tourists in making their travel decision. Highlights from the State of the Province Address report that tourism has a significant contribution in the KwaZulu-Natal local economy, and continues to grow from a R9 billion contribution (at the time of writing this paper, 1 US Dollar = 14.4 South African Rand) to the Provincial Gross Domestic Product in 2014 to more than R10 billion by 2018 (Tourism KwaZulu-Natal, 2019). Ezeuduji and Nkosi (2017) observed that the province of KwaZulu-Natal is well liked for its heritage and cultural offerings. They further state that its rich heritage (cultural and natural) is a key anchor to its tourism industry. Tourism is viewed a viable tool to improve local economies in sub-Saharan Africa, and tourism development strategies are being adopted by many local authorities in South Africa as one of the key parts of their local economic development initiatives (Abrahams, 2019; Ramukumba, 2019; Strydom et al., 2019). The next section of this paper presents an overview of the literature review conducted regarding the study objective.

OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

Dwyer and Kim (2003) state that there are indicators of destination competitiveness. Amongst these indicators is the quality of service offered within a destination. Perceived quality refers to consumers' feelings concerning the quality of a product or service associated with brand or destination (Keller, 2001; Kim et al., 2003; Low and Lamb, 2000; Yoo et al., 2000). The quality of service can be measured by, but not limited to, the performance standards in service delivery, programmes to ensure or measure visitor satisfaction, development programmes to enhance quality of service and attitudes of customs or immigration officials. Service quality is central to the development of strong service leading brands since it improves perceived superiority, and assists to differentiate brands in competitive markets (Nam et al., 2011). Tourists who are satisfied with the service level of a destination are likely to return to that destination. Hassan et al. (2010) state that a community within a tourism destination can also participate in destination service quality and branding, via creating a unifying focus to aid all public, private, and non-profit sector organizations that rely on the image of the place and its attractiveness. This can lead to increased respect, recognition, loyalty, correcting out-of-date, inaccurate or unbalanced perceptions;

* Corresponding author

improving stakeholder income, profit margins, and lodging tax revenues; enhancing civic pride and advocacy; and expanding the size of the 'pie' for stakeholders to get a larger share, rather than having to rely on pricing to steal their share (Hassan et al., 2010).

BRAND ESSENCE

The functional and emotional benefits that tourists derive from visiting a destination are defined by Ezeuduji and Nkosi (2017) as brand essence. Brand essence, if crafted to reveal a clear value position of a destination, can offer a strategic competitive advantage to a tourism destination (Ezeuduji and Nkosi, 2017). Unlike many commercial products and services, the purchase of tourism offerings is usually infrequent (Wijethunga and Warnakulasooriya, 2014) and consists of a large amount of planning beforehand. The image of a destination is equally vital to tourists in their decision making. Hence, potential tourists are most likely to select a destination that has the most favourable image (Wijethunga and Warnakulasooriya, 2014) and can provide the benefits demanded for when taking a trip outside of their usual environment. The benefits (functional and emotional) received when travelling to a destination are communicated through the brand essence of a destination. Emotional and functional benefits of visiting a tourism destination constitute the brand essence of that destination (Chen, 2012), De Chernatony and Harris (2010) suggest that emotional and functional benefits are part of what is captured by the brand essence, and Aho (2001) states that emotions play a huge part in tourists' experience. Tourists react to their emotions when making a travel decision. The benefits, both functional and emotional, received when travelling to a tourism destination are communicated through the brand essence of the destination. Functional benefits can be described as the primary purpose for travelling to a destination, such as motivation to travel. The physical attributes of the destination also contribute to functional benefits (Ezeuduji et al., 2016). However, some authors (such as Chuang, 2007; Goossens, 2000; Kwornik and Ross, 2007) posit that tourists are mostly influenced by their emotions to make purchases. Emotions play a vital role in defining unforgettable experiences (Tung and Ritchie, 2011). Gnoth (1997) states that tourist's emotional reactions are essential precursors of post-consumption behaviours and previous studies point out how emotions affect tourists' satisfaction (such as Del Bosque and San Martín 2008). Ezeuduji et al. (2016) describe emotional benefits as intangible attributes of travelling to the destination that the tourist did not expect to receive, such as self-development, wellness and new experiences.

BRAND COMPETITIVENESS

Tourism is now a worldwide industry. In the past fifty years the tourism industry has grown to be one of the biggest industries in the world, playing a vital role in the economies of many countries. People's increase of leisure time, disposable income, and development of efficient transport are making it easy for visitors to gain access to most countries. Tourism has also become a social phenomenon and with its growth, it has made marketing a complex and crucial tool in the competitive global marketplace of tourism destinations. Every destination and country partakes in tourism, even those traditionally closed countries such as North Korea or Iran (Yeoman et al., 2005). Pearce (1997) posits destination competitiveness as the techniques and methods that can be used to analyse and compare the diverse attributes of destinations in the context of planning. Brand competitiveness is a brand's possession of competitive advantage. The ability to create competitive advantage can be identified as competitiveness, whereas competition is the market condition of the brand. The ability to outdo other brands by providing better offerings through price and product or quality service is a competitive advantage. Competition only exists if there are other brands to compare the brand to (Baumann et al., 2017).

The evaluation of the main destination components can offer better understanding of the competitiveness of such destinations. Competitiveness in tourism destinations has also been discussed from an environmental perspective (Mihalic, 2000), while Porter (1990) states that competitiveness could be seen as a synonym of productivity. It has been said that competition in the tourism industry is escalating, therefore each country, province or city needs to enhance their services to remain relevant in the industry. According to Morgan et al. (2002), today's tourists are not asking 'what can they do on holiday?' but 'who can they be on holiday?' Tourists are gradually looking for diversion, culture and self-discovery. These create the basis of an emotional connection that marketers can exploit through branding.

Dias and Cardoso (2017) state that competitiveness of tourist destinations directly depends on how the actual tourists and potential tourists perceive the destination. Hamel and Prahalad (1990) perceive the concept of competitiveness to be associated with the three categories, namely: relative market position, sustainable competitive advantage and core competences of the firm. Winzar et al. (2018) discuss competitiveness by looking at Ma's (2000) work on competitive advantage which has these three assumptions: firstly, competitive advantage which is not automatically linked to an enhanced performance level, secondly, competitive advantage and performance which are two different constructs and lastly, competitive advantage which is context specific in that it relates to competitive dimensions between the company and other competitors in the market place. The background of competitiveness is that it is only relevant when there are competitors to compare the brand to.

Qu et al. (2011) reported that tourists are usually offered various destinations or attractions to choose from but the destination must be a brand that stands out in order for the tourists to choose it from the whole lot. Many destinations offer similar quality accommodation, scenic views and friendly people, however a competitive destination needs to be unique as a brand. The main attractions (such as natural and cultural attractions, historical sites and built environment) may motivate the tourists to travel to a destination, but infrastructure can also play a role in the tourists' decision to travel to that destination. This study therefore explores how tourists visiting KwaZulu-Natal region of South Africa assess this destination's brand essence (functional and emotional attributes or benefits) and competitiveness compared to the other destinations they have visited. The next section of this paper presents the research design and methods of data collection and analyses.

METHODOLOGY

This study explores tourists' perceptions of a destination brand essence and competitiveness, therefore a quantitative research method using a structured questionnaire survey was used to collect data from respondents. The questionnaire variables emanated from the literature study and authors' personal knowledge of the destination. Veal (2011), Ezeuduji (2013) and Tummons and Duckworth (2013) all support the use of questionnaire survey in collecting quantified data from respondents. The authors of this paper argue that tourism is a mass phenomenon, hence quantified data are mostly used to make management decisions. Domestic and international tourists visiting major tourist attractions in KwaZulu-Natal (see Figure 1) were surveyed (such as King Shaka International Airport, Richards Bay Airport, Hluhluwe Game Reserve, and Talana Museum). A non-probability sampling method called purposive sampling, was employed to sample actual tourists among the general population for a period of 7 months (December 2017 to June 2018), cutting across both peak and off-peak seasons. Veal (2011) states that in non-probability sampling methods, the absolute size of the sample is more crucial than the sample size relative to the research population. Veal also argues that the criteria to determine sample size entail the required level of precision in results, the proposed details in analysis, and the available budget. 420 tourists were surveyed, however 406 questionnaires received were usable for data analysis.

IBM's SPSS Statistics, version 25 (IBM Corporation, 2017) supported data analyses. First stage of data analyses employed descriptive statistics (frequencies, mean and standard deviation); and the second stage of data analyses used multivariate analysis (Reliability test using

Cronbach's Alpha) and bivariate analyses (Spearman's Correlation tests) to support addressing the research objective. Bivariate analyses were done at a 95% confidence interval, and reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient employed a cut-off point of 0.7 to explain internal consistency or reliability of variables used to explain brand essence dimensions (Bühl and Zöfel, 2005; George and Mallery, 2003; Hair et al., 2005; Iwu et al., 2018). These variables are set in the questionnaire to have ordinal responses, hence were presented in the questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale. From the reliability test results, both brand essence dimensions (functional attributes and emotional attributes) and brand competitiveness dimension show internal consistency.

As it is common in social sciences, population distributions of the ordinal dimensions (brand essence variables) were statistically found not to be normally distributed (Kolmogorov-Smirnov's and Shapiro-Wilk's tests of normality yielded p-values of less than 0.001). This study therefore conducted non-parametric tests (Spearman's Correlation) to establish relationships of variables. The use of Spearman's correlation tests for comparing ordinal variables were supported by Veal (2011). The results obtained from these analyses are presented and discussed in the following section.

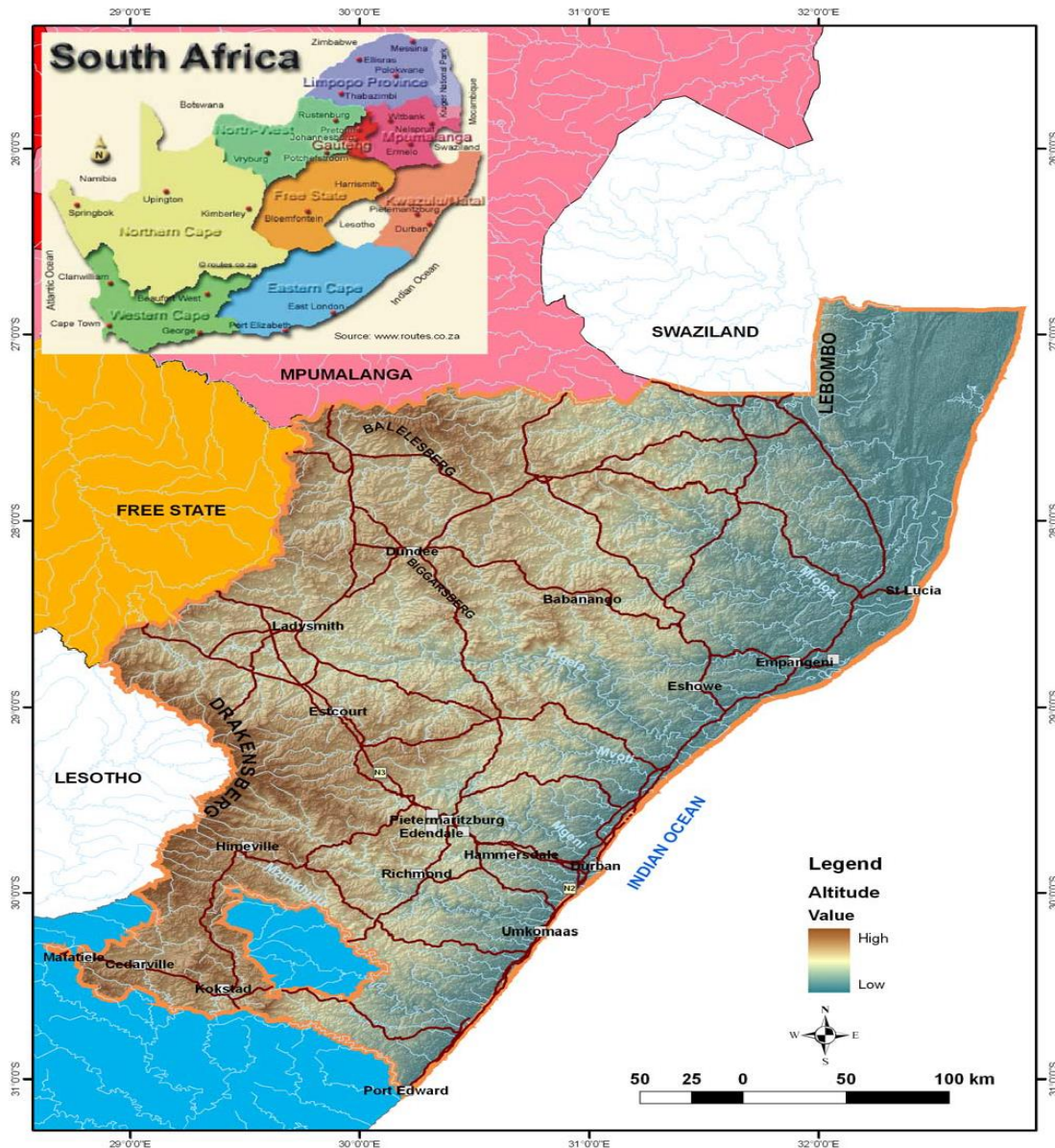


Figure 1. Geographical location of KwaZulu-Natal Province in South Africa

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Highlights of the results in Table 1 show that more tourists above 30 years of age (about 60%) responded to the questionnaire survey, compared to the younger tourists. More than half of the tourists' population are international tourists (53%), and about 30% of the tourists got to know about KwaZulu-Natal through word-of-mouth. Majority of them (about 66%) stayed not more than 10 days in the destination, and many of them (about 62%) are either on holiday or visiting friends and relatives. Good news to Tourism KwaZulu-Natal (responsible Destination Management Organisation) are that 61% of tourists are on return visit; about 83% are either mostly or totally satisfied; about 81% assessed KwaZulu-Natal as little or much better than they expected; and about 72% rated KwaZulu-Natal as little or much better than other destinations they have visited. From these results, the authors infer that KwaZulu-Natal is a favourable and competitive tourism destination in the mind of tourists themselves, and holiday and visiting friends and relatives are the main motives for visiting this destination. Pratminingsih et al. (2014), posit that tourist satisfaction is caused by two dimensions: firstly, it is related to the pre-expectation of the tourist before travel, and secondly, it referred to justification of the tourist on the delivered services after the travel, based on the real experience. Therefore, tourist satisfaction is amplified when their experiences met their expectations.

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

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

In Table 2, we measured the mean scores of how the tourists experienced the functional attributes of KwaZulu-Natal during their visit. This study found that the variables used to measure this brand essence dimension are internally consistent or reliable. The top 5 variables to which the tourists have the highest level of agreements include: 'KwaZulu-Natal has comfortable weather conditions', 'KwaZulu-Natal has excellent accommodation facilities', 'KwaZulu-Natal is unique and has diverse attractions and activities', 'KwaZulu-Natal tourism destinations cater for different types of tourists' and 'KwaZulu-Natal destination is well developed for tourism'. These therefore reveal the top 5 functional attributes that make this destination to be considered better than other destinations that the tourists have visited. However, this study notes that tourists did not collectively agree to these 2 statements: 'KwaZulu-Natal is a clean destination', and 'Local transport in KwaZulu-Natal is efficient'. KwaZulu-Natal destination managers need to improve on the cleanliness and the local transport services of the destination. This study found a high level of positive correlation between the KwaZulu-Natal functional attributes on the one hand; and the tourists' level of satisfaction, the overall judgement of KwaZulu-Natal compared to expectations, and the overall judgement of KwaZulu-Natal compared to other destinations on the other hand.

The improvement of the cleanliness of KwaZulu-Natal can however be primarily affected by the provincial and municipal governments, and the local community members. Provincial and municipal governments employees who are tasked with cleaning the surroundings have to improve on their services, and the local community members should also regularly volunteer to uphold a clean and healthy environment. The results from this study also highlight the need for improvement regarding local transportation. This responsibility falls on travel operators, public and private transport services.

These results agree with Hosany et al.'s (2015) inference that tourists develop strong relationships with destinations as a result of products, services and conditions offered or found in the destination. Dwyer and Kim (2003) further discussed the indicators of destination competitiveness; amongst these indicators is the quality of service offered within a destination. Perceived quality is said to refer to consumers' feelings concerning the quality of a product or service associated with brand or destination (Keller, 2001; Kim et al., 2003; Low and Lamb, 2000; Yoo et al., 2000). We therefore argue that tourists' overall satisfaction has a direct relationship with the quality of functional attributes found within the destination, supporting the finding of Del Bosque and San Martín (2008). The study results presented by this study have strongly demonstrated that the satisfaction level will also result in the tourists forming in their minds a positive brand

image of the destination, and this can lead to brand loyalty. Manzo (2005), and Scannell and Gifford (2010) reflectively argue that tourists may get attached to tourism destinations; and people-place relationships may involve several emotions, seen as positive: emotions such as pride, love and contentment. These can lead to tourists being attached to a destination, and may as well perceive it superior to other destinations.

Table 2. Comparing tourists' expectations and brand essence – functional attributes

Brand Essence – Functional Attributes				
Statements	Mean Score ^a	Correlation with level of satisfaction / expectations / comparison to other destinations ^b		
		Level of satisfaction	Expectations	Comparison to other destinations
1. KwaZulu-Natal is unique and has diverse attractions and activities	1.78	**	**	**
2. KwaZulu-Natal destination is well developed for tourism	1.80	**	**	**
3. KwaZulu-Natal has comfortable weather conditions	1.71	**	**	**
4. KwaZulu-Natal tourism destinations cater for different types of tourists	1.80	**	**	**
5. KwaZulu-Natal has adequate and well-maintained infrastructure	1.90	**	**	**
6. KwaZulu-Natal provides tourists with good value for their money	1.84	**	**	**
7. KwaZulu-Natal has a lot of events for tourists to attend	1.88	**	**	**
8. KwaZulu-Natal has excellent accommodation facilities	1.76	**	**	**
9. KwaZulu-Natal is a clean destination	2.06	**	**	**
10. KwaZulu-Natal has excellent shopping facilities	1.94	**	**	**
11. KwaZulu-Natal has excellent entertainment facilities	1.93	**	**	**
12. Local transport in KwaZulu-Natal is efficient	2.09	**	**	**
Reliability Statistics (Perceptions of brand essence – functional attributes), Cronbach's Alpha =.860, N of Items = 12, Valid cases = 351 (86.5%), Excluded cases = 55 (13.5%), Total = 406				

Notes: ^a Questionnaire were itemised along a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1, Strongly agree; 2, Agree; 3, Neutral; 4, Disagree; 5, Strongly disagree
^b Spearman's Rank correlation test significance. **, p < 0.01

In Table 3, we measured the mean scores of how the tourists experienced the emotional attributes of KwaZulu-Natal during their visit. This study also found that the variables used to measure this brand essence dimension are internally consistent or reliable. The top 5 variables to which the tourists have the highest level of agreements include: 'My visit to KwaZulu-Natal will be memorable', 'My visit to KwaZulu-Natal has been valuable to me', 'I have gained new knowledge and experience during my visit to KwaZulu-Natal', 'KwaZulu-Natal provides tourists with authentic visitor experience', and 'I feel a strong sense of humanity in KwaZulu-Natal'.

It is important to note here that the concept of *Ubuntu* in Zulu language refers to the strong sense of humanity that is highly valued amongst the local populace of KwaZulu-Natal. These results reveal the top 5 emotional attributes that make this destination to be considered better than other destinations that the tourists have visited. However, this study notes that tourists did not collectively agree to the statement: 'I feel safe and secure travelling in KwaZulu-Natal'. KwaZulu-Natal destination managers need to improve on the safety and security of the destination. This study found a high level of positive correlation between the KwaZulu-Natal emotional attributes on the one hand; and the tourists' level of satisfaction, the overall judgement of KwaZulu-Natal compared to expectations, and the overall judgement of KwaZulu-Natal compared to other destinations on the other hand.

Table 3. Comparing tourists' expectations and brand essence – emotional attributes

Brand Essence – Emotional Attributes				
Statements	Mean Score ^a	Correlation with level of satisfaction / expectations / comparison to other destinations ^b		
		Level of satisfaction	Expectations	Comparison to other destinations
13. KwaZulu-Natal provides tourists with authentic visitor experience	1.74	**	**	**
14. My visit to KwaZulu-Natal has been valuable to me	1.66	**	**	**
15. My visit to KwaZulu-Natal will be memorable	1.57	**	**	*
16. I have gained new knowledge and experience during my visit to KwaZulu-Natal	1.71	**	**	**
17. The local people in KwaZulu-Natal are friendly and hospitable	1.78	**	**	**
18. I feel safe and secure travelling in KwaZulu-Natal	2.16	**	**	**
19. I feel a general sense of joy visiting KwaZulu-Natal	1.86	**	**	**
20. KwaZulu-Natal evokes an emotion of love for me	1.96	**	**	**
21. I feel a general sense of inspiration in KwaZulu-Natal	1.97	**	**	**
22. I feel a strong sense of humanity in KwaZulu-Natal	1.75	**	**	**
Reliability Statistics (Perceptions of brand essence – emotional attributes), Cronbach's Alpha =.853, N of Items = 10, Valid cases = 373 (91.9%), Excluded cases = 33 (8.1%), Total = 406				

Notes: ^a Questionnaire were itemised along a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1, Strongly agree; 2, Agree; 3, Neutral; 4, Disagree; 5, Strongly disagree
^b Spearman's Rank correlation test significance. *, p < 0.05; **, p < 0.01

Ezeudji and Nkosi (2017) stressed on the need to improve safety and security in KwaZulu-Natal and other South African destinations through police presence and community policing. The local community members are important stakeholders in their tourism development and management, as a downturn of tourism will largely and particularly affect them adversely. Aho (2001) posits that emotions play a huge part in tourists' experience in a destination. Branding of destinations allows tourists to recognize a destination and distinguish it from other competitive offerings. It then becomes easier for the tourists to identify the brand they prefer amongst other brands (Cevero, 2013). This is in agreement with Light et al.'s (2012) position that the brand's competitive advantage as well as the benefits received through a brand determine whether customers can choose a particular brand over its competitors or not. Other authors (such as Chuang, 2007; Goossens, 2000; Kwortnik and Ross, 2007) posit that tourists are mostly influenced by their emotions to make purchases. Emotions play a vital role in defining unforgettable experiences (Tung and Ritchie, 2011). In this regard, Gnoth (1997) states that tourist's emotional reactions are essential precursors of post-consumption behaviours and previous studies point out how emotions affect tourists' satisfaction (such as Del

Bosque and San Martín 2008). According to Donio et al. (2006), satisfaction and commitment are valid indicators of brand loyalty, and customer satisfaction is a matter of value perception, measured as congruence between expected and perceived values.

Table 4. Comparing tourists' expectations and brand competitiveness

Statements	Mean Score ^a	Brand Competitiveness		
		Correlation with level of satisfaction / expectations / comparison to other destination ^b		
		Level of satisfaction	Expectations	Comparison to other destinations
23. KwaZulu-Natal is rich in cultural and natural attributes	1.57	**	**	**
24. KwaZulu-Natal tourism destinations offer quality products, service and valuable experiences to tourists	1.67	**	**	**
25. KwaZulu-Natal offers unique cultural and nature experiences	1.66	**	**	**
26. KwaZulu-Natal is an amazing destination	1.79	**	**	**
27. I feel connected to this destination, KwaZulu-Natal	2.00	**	**	**
28. KwaZulu-Natal has a good image as a tourist destination	1.94	**	**	**
29. KwaZulu-Natal is a well-known destination	2.03	**	**	**
30. KwaZulu-Natal is one of the best destinations in the world	2.08	**	**	**
31. KwaZulu-Natal would be my preferred choice when choosing a destination to visit	2.08	**	**	**
32. I would recommend KwaZulu-Natal to my friends and family	1.59	**	**	**
Reliability Statistics (Perceptions of brand competitiveness), Cronbach's Alpha =.875, N of Items = 10, Valid cases = 378 (93.1%), Excluded cases = 28 (6.9%), Total = 406				

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

^b Spearman's Rank correlation test significance. *, p < 0.05; **, p < 0.01

The results in Table 4 also show very strong correlations, explaining that the feelings that tourists had in the destination, which make them see the destination as very competitive, have a positive impact on tourists' level of satisfaction, and fulfilment of expectations, especially when compared to other destinations. Dwyer and Kim (2003) state that there are indicators of destination competitiveness; amongst these indicators is the quality of service offered within a destination. Perceived quality refers to consumers' feelings concerning the quality of a product or service associated with brand or destination (Kim et al., 2003; Low and Lamb, 2000; Yoo et al., 2000). The last section of this paper concludes this study and proffers study recommendations.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aims to find out tourists' perception of the KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa) brand essence and brand competitiveness as a tourism destination. This research explored how tourists view the KwaZulu-Natal brand essence and if they regard it to be competitive compared to other destinations. The results revealed that tourists are mostly satisfied with visiting KwaZulu-Natal; they indicated that the destination has value for their money. Most of the tourists are willing to return and they are willing to recommend KwaZulu-Natal to others. Tourists see KwaZulu-Natal as a competitive destination. The study makes recommendations that the KwaZulu-Natal should position itself more strongly as an international tourist destination as significant international visitors are attracted to this destination. The service providers should focus more on providing tourism packages inclusive of transport, as a significant number of tourists reported that local transportation in KwaZulu-Natal is not efficient. Local communities in KwaZulu-Natal should work hand-in-glove with the police to improve safety and security in the destination, especially in and around the tourism facilities. These recommendations will assist the managers of the KwaZulu-Natal tourism destinations to improve the quality standards of the destination and help it to be able to compete more strongly in the national and global tourism marketplaces.

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