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Regional Spotlight

South Africa's place brand: A marketing axiom to South Africa as a tourism destination?

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1. Introduction

Destination branding is a specialised form of tourism-oriented strategic marketing communication aimed at competitively differentiating and promoting a destination's unique value proposition (Zenker, Braun, & Petersen, 2017). However, destination marketers must be cognisant that contemporary destination branding occurs within a broader global environment dominated by competing generic place brands (PBs) (Souiden, Ladhari, & Chiadmi, 2017). PBs are grounded in nation branding theory and may be characterised as:

... a network of associations in the place consumers' mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioural expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place's stakeholders and the overall place design (Zenker et al., 2017, p.17).

Nation branding theory posits that this *network of associations* influences the behaviour of external consumers (tourists, investors, international students, migrants) towards a country based on their interaction with one or more of the six dimensions of a place – the governance, investment and immigration, tourism, exports, culture and heritage, and/or the people of the country – referred to as the Nation Brand Hexagon (NBH) (Dinnie, 2008). Thus, from a nation branding perspective, tourists form their own perceptions of a place, and the resultant subjective PB image may influence their cognitive, affective and conative behaviour towards the place as a tourism destination (Chaulagain, Wittala, & Fu, 2019; Nadeau, Heslop, O'Reilly & Luk, 2008). Behavioural economic theory supports the role of PBs in influencing tourist behaviour, advancing the notion that consumers [tourists] are principally irrational and predisposed to biases in their problem-solving and decision-making processes, which are influenced by intrinsic (the PB as a value proposition in the mind of the tourist) and/or extrinsic (the PB as an existing perceived image/reputation informing the tourist) stimuli (Belloso, 2010; Kao & Velupillai, 2015).

While place and destination brands are not mutually exclusive constructs, place branding is significantly more multi-dimensional than destination branding and focuses beyond the tourist (Ma, Schraven, de

Bruijne, de Jong, & Lu, 2019; Souiden et al., 2017; Zenker et al., 2017). More so, PBs tend to be organic in nature, appealing to multiple stakeholders, while destination brands are more inclined to being induced within the minds of tourists in particular as a result of the competitive differentiation efforts of destination marketers (Pedeliento & Kavaratzis, 2019; Zenker et al., 2017). Given the *superseding* influence of the PB on tourist perceptions of a place/country, an inextricable link between PBs and the tourist decision-making process may be hypothesised, whereby PBs are utilised as summative informational points of reference to frame tourism consumption decisions, including the evaluation of the destination brand (Avraham, 2018; Nadeau, Heslop, O'Reilly, & Luk, 2008). Thus, PBs contextualise the generic value proposition of the place in the minds of tourists and potentially influence all subsequent evaluations and decisions related to the place as a tourism destination through a *halo effect* (Lindblom, Lindblom, Lehtonen & Wechtler, 2017; Martinez & Alvarez, 2010). The contemporary cases of Finland, Sweden (Pedeliento & Kavaratzis, 2019), South Africa (Avraham & Ketter, 2017) and Iran (Khodadadi, 2019) particularly illustrate the complexity of marketing destinations within the halo effect of their respective PBs.

Tourists, as consumers, must assimilate vast amounts of organic and induced PB information about a place as part of their decision-making process (Avraham, 2018; Chaulagain et al., 2019). Equally, as tourists become more circumspect about their decisions, the subjective and idiosyncratic nature of their behaviour makes it imperative for tourism destination marketers to better understand and model the behaviour of tourists (Han, Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2019). This *regional spotlight* illustrates the PB-tourism destination nexus in the case of South Africa (SA) – a premium tourism destination on the African continent – by exploring the influence that the country's *immigration*, as a PB element, has on tourists' behaviour towards SA as a tourism destination.

1.1. The SA place brand: tourism destination nexus

In 2017, SA was the highest-ranking African country on the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index: 53rd of 136 tourism destinations globally (World Economic Forum - WEF, 2017). Interestingly, while

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SA's 'country brand strategy' was ranked 5th of 136 in the world, the country was also ranked 40th of 136 countries for the "effectiveness of marketing and branding to attract tourists" (WEF, 2017). This suggests that, while SA has a relatively strong PB strategy, there may be deficiencies in its destination marketing efforts to attract tourists. One hypothesis regarding this discrepancy may be that, while SA may have a strong PB strategy, the country's ability to attract tourists is potentially being stymied by its overall generic PB as the superseding marketing axiom.

SA was one of the first African countries to realise the value of the PB by establishing the International Marketing Council (re-branded as Brand South Africa) in 2002 to manage the negative associations of the country with Apartheid and introduce the new SA to the world (Dinnie, 2008). However, despite its branding efforts, SA is also susceptible to the stereotypical and outdated 'Brand Africa' effect (association with corruption, crime, disease, famine) that impinges on the competitiveness of most African countries in various aspects – including tourism (Knott, Fyall, & Jones, 2015; Matiza & Oni, 2014). Disparagingly, SA itself has been subject to a myriad of negative and controversial contemporary events over the past decade, which include xenophobic conflict; endemic crime and corruption; economic decline; and suffering the devastating effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic: invariably influencing tourist perceptions of the country (Avraham & Ketter, 2017). Possibly the most deleterious PB element to SA's tourism sector within the last five years has been its Investment and Immigration dimension (Tourism Business Council of South Africa – TBCSA, 2015).

After hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2010, post-event tourist arrivals to SA were on an upward trajectory, averaging increases of 15.15% in 2012 and 6.1% in 2013 (TBCSA, 2015). Despite the positive PB legacy of hosting the global event (Knott et al., 2015), by 2015 the country experienced a significant decline in tourist arrivals due to a new controversial visa regime. In 2014, the SA government – under the guise of combatting child-trafficking – amended its immigration policy to tighten immigration security protocols which legislatively required tourists to apply for visas in person. In addition, all children under the age of 18 intending to travel to SA had to carry an unabridged birth certificate in addition to their passport and visa. These regulations did, however, have the unintended effect of directly constraining tourism, with conservative estimations at a 13% decline in tourist arrivals and a corresponding 9% decline in tourism receipts in 2015 (TBCSA, 2015). Arrivals from major source markets also declined: China (–27%), India (–25%), Germany (–12%) and Australia (–11%) (TBCSA, 2015). Since 2014, SA has also become less competitive as a travel and tourism destination in terms of visa requirements – dropping from 53rd of 136 in 2013 to 71st of 136 in 2017 on the WEF's (2013, 2017) Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Indexes: a trend buoyed by the country's more stringent visa regime.

The case of SA practically illustrates the influence of PB elements such as immigration on tourism; more so based on the sensitivity of tourists to situations of perceived risk and increased opportunity costs. From a nation branding perspective, tourists to SA may have been negatively influenced by the country's immigration (visa) policy – which invariably had a halo effect on their behaviour towards the country as a tourism destination. Empirical evidence from South Korea suggests that the easing of South Korea's visa policy towards China was positively correlated with tourist arrival increases of up to 64.5% between 2005 and 2009 (World Tourism Organization and World Travel and Tourism Council, 2014) – thus supporting the reasonability of the *halo effect* of immigration policy in the case of South Africa. Concomitantly, a report by the UNWTO (2012) estimated that the economic impact linked to easing visa facilitation and policy/regulation for tourists intending to visit G20 countries (including SA) would amount to between US\$38 billion and US\$206 billion in tourism receipts by 2015. This implies that SA missed out on a share of these tourism receipts and due to a key generic PB aspect: immigration policy.

1.2. Implications of SA's place brand for destination marketing

In terms of international openness, SA is currently ranked 110th of 136 countries (WEF, 2017). This ranking highlights the need for SA to urgently mitigate the negative effect that its immigration dimension has on its competitiveness. This may be achieved by easing the current bureaucratic barriers (birth certificates and in-person visa applications) and implementing more open visa regulations as part of improving the country's PB to encourage tourism. To this end, the SA government has announced new, more tourism-friendly immigration laws to be enacted in 2019. However, the fact that SA implemented the revised immigration laws for more than 48 months before amending them again in 2019, was certainly a lost opportunity in terms of tourist arrivals for SA. Developing countries, especially those in Africa, should benefit from the lessons learnt by SA. Although the PB [immigration] decision has been revisited, better planning and consultation could have prevented SA's challenges. Clearly, the planning, development and promotion of tourism cannot happen in isolation, which further highlights the multidisciplinary nature of tourism and the need for integrated planning between different stakeholders (internal and external). Thus, careful consideration should inform the changing of key PB factors.

Overall, the marketing axiom of perceived reality and its influence on tourist decision-making holds true in the case of SA. Whereas a multitude of PB factors may be influencing tourism to SA, this *regional spotlight* is significant in its highlighting of the effect that a single PB dimension may have on tourism for a particular country. Practically, Fig. 1 illustrates and summarises the PB dimensions that SA destination marketers should be cognisant of when considering SA's PB as a marketing axiom.

The notion that a country such as SA may be positively or negatively perceived as a preferred product/brand by tourists based on subjective biases such as people and governance, suggests that destination marketers must acknowledge that tourism destinations are susceptible to the perceived realities of tourists. As illustrated in Fig. 1, the multi-dimensionality of SA's PB submits that it is paramount for SA to adopt a multi-stakeholder (the government, tourism oriented quasi-government and private sector) approach to ensure a *nexus of interests* in improving the effectiveness of SA's marketing and branding strategies with tourism at the core of PB activity. Therefore, while it may not be a panacea to the image challenges and negative brand effect associated with being located on the African continent, the NBH is a reflexive framework that may be applied as a decision support model to aid destination marketers (SA and beyond) in the evaluation and subsequent management of the PB as a marketing axiom, intrinsic to a more concerted and effective destination marketing strategy.

In conclusion, this *regional spotlight* on SA has important lessons for destination marketers globally, particularly relating to both the uni-dimensional and multi-dimensional influence PBs have on tourism destinations. Firstly, within the contemporary, highly competitive tourism market, destination marketers must be mindful of the increased utility of PBs as heuristic cues for information symmetry in the evaluation of tourism destinations. Thus, the efficiency and effectiveness of the contemporary tourism marketing/branding effort may be inextricably linked to uni-dimensional PB aspects such as immigration (visa) policy (Avraham, 2018; (World Tourism Organization and World Travel and Tourism Council, 2014); Zenker et al., 2017). Secondly, SA (and African) destination marketers in particular should also consider the implications of place and destination brands being dichotomous in nature (Martinez & Alvarez, 2010). This dichotomy is to the extent that PBs are multi-dimensional in nature and may be considered as: determinants of tourism destination images (Nadeau et al., 2008); being very influential of the behaviour of tourists (Chaulagain et al., 2019); being critical to the success of marketing tourism destinations (Ma et al., 2019); and being a salient factor in tourist evaluations of tourist destinations (Zhang, Wu, Morrison, Tseng, & Chen, 2018).



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| Governance | The policy decisions of the SA government, whether foreign or domestic are reported in the global media. It is this exposure (public diplomacy) that tourists use to evaluate the governance associated with SA as a tourism destination. |
| Culture & Heritage | Cultural exchange and heritage-oriented activities such as famous dance/performing arts group world tours often encourage the interaction between SA's culture and the outside world. This projects and showcases SA's unique heritage, thus stimulating interest tourist in SA. |
| Exports | Where the country of origin is clear, products and services associated with SA are also very influential in the global market in forming and creating positive perceptions of SA as a tourism destination. |
| Investment & Immigration | To tourists, the ease of immigration visa procedures when travelling to SA influences how tourists view the country and its openness to tourists. |
| People | SA's local population, its leaders, famous and/or infamous celebrities, its sports stars and/or teams and their behaviour when abroad and visiting other countries also creates an impression with potential visitors about SA as a tourism destination. |
| Tourism | SA's tourism products and promotion activity, as well as first-hand experiences from tourists visiting SA is the most prominent brand identity touch point for DMOs. |

Fig. 1. The place brand hexagon for SA tourism destination brand. Source: Adapted from Matiza and Oni (2014).

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2019.100380>.

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