



DESTINATION REBRANDING PARADIGM IN ZIMBABWE: A STAKEHOLDER APPROACH

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Abstract: *The main aim of this paper is to explore stakeholder involvement in the development of a brand as well as in the rebranding exercise in order to produce high brand value. Most researchers concur that stakeholders play an imperative role in destination branding as they deal directly with the tourists. The tourism industry as a whole is characterized by intangible services which require proper management. The intangibility of these tourism products and services determine a destination's possibility of being chosen by potential tourists. A positive image will attract tourists, allow revisits as well as attracts new customers be it via marketing or word-of-mouth as well as enhancing customer satisfaction. Based on literature review, a conceptual model on attaining high brand value is proposed. Brand image; brand awareness as well as brand loyalty in relation to stakeholder influence were reviewed since they have an effect on brand value. The paper observes the importance of stakeholders in destination rebranding.*

Key words: *Branding, Rebranding, destination, stakeholders, brand*

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INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry in Zimbabwe had contributed significantly to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for a notable period of time (Ndlovu 2009). This resulted in the growth of support industries for example the growth of Tour Operators, Travel Agencies as well as construction of hotels and restaurants. Karambakuwa *et al* (2011), Muchapondwa & Pimhidzai (2011) go on to argue that before the turn of the century, large numbers of tourists arrived and organizations such as hotel chains and Tour Operators had a key role on tourism issues.

However, Zimbabwe's image as a tourist destination has been marred by political, economic and social challenges in the last decade leading to the reduction in tourist arrivals (ZTA, 2008). Empirical evidence by Muleya (2002) has shown that due to the economic, social and political situation that prevailed in Zimbabwe after the turn of the century, the tourism sector has produced its worst performance in the ensuing period than any period since the country gained independence. The Brand "*Africa's paradise*" was marred by images of economic hardships and sanctions, political power struggles and erratically enacted and enforced regulations and laws (Ndlovu and Heath, 2013), yet destinations are fighting for increasingly discerning tourists in search of the impressive and interesting places to visit (Hosany *et al*, 2006). As a result of all these problems, the destination re-branded itself in 2011 to "*Zimbabwe: A world of wonders*".

Tourism is a highly competitive environment with most destinations offering more or less the same product; tourists are facing a wide range of variety (Hosany *et al*, 2006). In order for a destination to be recognized by potential tourists, there is need for strategic positioning establishing an acknowledged brand image. According to Kotler *et al* (1996), positioning a destination can be best described as the act of designing its offer and image so that it occupies a distinct and valued place in the target tourist's mind. Consequently, destination management has become a serious concern in trying to convince "lookers" to "bookers".

Nworah (2006) postulates that the key to luring visitors is to differentiate the destination and to market it to potential visitors. Tourism stakeholders such as Tour Operators and the hoteliers must be involved in decision making as they deal directly with tourists. This is supported by Bjork *et al* (2012) who states that views of tourism players are critical in



creating a brand image. In another view, the Destination Marketing Organizations (DMO's) and the enterprises are involved in the building and marketing of tourist destination services (Grängsjö 2003). If the tourism players are not involved, there is likely to be a gap between what is being marketed by the DMO's and what is actually being sold in the market. It is therefore imperative to involve stakeholders in destination brands. Many academics have argued that places are too complex to include in branding discussions as they have too many stakeholders with too little control (Morgan, 2003, Nworah, 2006, and Page, 2007). Against this background, the paper proposes a conceptual model for stakeholder involvement in creating a vibrant brand.

BRANDING IN PERSPECTIVE

Branding is considered to be one of the most powerful strategies for market positioning which makes the product or service noticeable for the customers among its competitors (Crawford- Welch, 1998). According to Kolb (2006) branding of a product or service is a process of creating a slogan that together with a symbol or logo communicate to the customers the image of the products or services along with its features, benefits and values it offers. In another view, branding is not only imposing the created image; the consumers also influence the brand through their perceptions (Gregory, 2007). Thus the branding process aims to make sure customers perceive the product or service as desired by the company, basing the branding strategy on real facts and product strengths. According to Keller (2007), "the key to branding is that consumers perceive the brand different compared to other brands in the same product category". Branding then aims to differentiate products and services and create a good image.

REBRANDING DEFINED

Simply defined branding is endowing products and services with the power of a brand (Kotler and Keller, 2006). Hence it entails giving a unique identity image that can be quickly identified by potential tourists. Nilson (2000), states that a brand is really just a symbol with tremendous potential, and that this symbol can be expressed in many different ways. Ooi (2004) assigns destination brands the function of providing stories to tourists around which they can build their experience. Rebranding is not about telling the world what does exist (Ali, 2009). It is about making promises and making sure they are delivered. In other words, rebranding is about adding value to an existing brand. A more comprehensive definition



would be the one offered by Schroeder *et al* (2006) that states that rebranding is the creation of a new name, term, symbol, design or combination of them for an established brand with the intention of developing a differentiated (new) position in the mind of the stakeholders and competitors.

STAKEHOLDER INFLUENCE IN BRANDING

According to Morgan *et al* 2003, successful destination branding requires a strong unified network of stakeholder relationships in order to create a common vision of the destination core brand. The classic definition of a stakeholder is “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (Freeman 1984). But the conditions surrounding organizations working with destination branding, so called destination marketing organizations (DMOs) is very complex (Hankinson 2001; 2009, Wheeler *et al.* 2011). Building a unique destination experience creates brand awareness and a higher brand value. The stakeholder perspective is, however, under theorized in branding discussion as a whole (Gregory, 2007). According to Hatch & Schultz (2003), a corporate brand needs to deal with the requirements of multiple stakeholders especially in developing a successful brand.

First and foremost a brand has to be created for instance a qualitative study was conducted in Turkey on marketing of Turkey as a Tourism destination. Alvarez (2010) argued that centralization of destination marketing inhibits destination growth as it favors developed destinations at the expense of developing destinations. This problem they suggested could be resolved by embracing local authorities and other stakeholders in developing destinations. These views highlight the significant part played by stakeholders in developing a destination. However it does not give details on how and the extent to which the stakeholders can be involved in destination development particularly in branding. Jamal & Getz (1995) acknowledge that place or destination brands are often controlled and owned by many different stakeholders.

The importance of stakeholder involvement is to invest in the destination’s physical environment, such as buildings, infrastructure (Hankinson, 2009) and the overall tourism product. According to Pike (2005) in a study on Tourism Destination Branding Complexity, he argues that, there is a fine balance to be struck between community consensus and brand theory because a top down approach to destination brand implementation is likely to



fail without buy-in from these stakeholders the strategy will flail. The emphasis, therefore, should be on formulating the destination vision through a publicly-driven process based on stakeholder values and consensus, rather than through a more private expert-driven process based solely on market forces (Morgan *et al* 2003). Everyone who comes in contact with the visitors is part of the strategy to make the brand promise a reality hence there is need to involve each and every stakeholder.

Poorly managed partnerships or a lack of them can result in abandonment or refusal of effective brand strategies and a low attention given to logotypes; identity and brand culture (Hankinson 2007). Wheeler *et al*, (2011) conducted a qualitative study on destination brand identity, values and community in Australia. They concluded that destination branding requires a holistic approach which is reflective of the multiplicity of the values that constitute destination places. Wheeler *et al* (2011) findings reinforce earlier work by Alvarez (2010) and Aaker (2002) that branding is not an end but a continuous socially constructed process that accounts for local destination characteristics. The issue of stakeholders therefore cannot be over-emphasized. Properly managed stakeholders are fundamental for successful destination branding (Baker & Cameron 2008).

BRAND IMAGE

Brand image is one of the most popular subjects in the destination branding literature. According to Hankinson (2010) the majority of the focus on destination branding literature has been on creating and communicating destination image. The brand image is the mental perception of the brand in the minds of consumers (Kolb, 2006). Thus the brand image is the sum of the beliefs about the product or service and it can be derived from different information sources. The concept of brand image is closely related to positioning, however brand image represents customer's perception of the product, whereas positioning involves action from the organization (Kolb, 2006). In addition, Anholt (2007) states that often the owner of the trademark is not the owner of the brand, as the brand image resides in the mind of the consumer and not in the company's offices. Customer perception matters because they are the ones who get an actual feel of the brand thereby influencing image. Researchers are however not consistent with their understanding of brand image as the concept is constantly confused with destination identity (Qu *et al*, 2011). It has been shown that image is customer's perception of brand identity which is created by the company.



In any business it is necessary to ensure that customers get maximum satisfaction for a product or service they are paying for. Customers look for value for money. The tourism industry is a highly competitive industry and characterized by many services intangible services (Qu *et al*, 2011). Because a tourist is paying for a service be it accommodation or an activity he/ she is seeking a unique experience, something he/she doesn't experience all the time, (Baker & Cameron 2008). Hence it is imperative that all visitor aspects are well managed in order to maintain a good image which will in turn determine brand value. Cleverdon & Fabricius (2006) acknowledge that if the image is negative, it requires a strategic change prior to image redevelopment.

In particular, a brand image is the expression of all objective knowledge, impressions, prejudice, imaginations, and emotional thoughts an individual or group might have of a particular place (Lawson & Baud-Bovey, 1977). Della Corte & Micera (2007) highlight the importance of the image in the actual demand of a destination, not only in the mind of the potential tourists, defining destination image as the whole of beliefs, ideas and impressions a destination can generate in potential and actual tourists' minds. Destinations with recognizable images and tourists' positive perceptions have more probability of being chosen hence the need for proper destination management. Also, the destination image perceived post-visit influences tourist satisfaction and intention to repeat the visit in the future, and their communication with friends and family also known as the word of mouth effect.

Therefore, a brand image depends on the previous experience the traveler had in a specific destination, the degree of familiarity he or she has, his or her geographic origin, social and cultural background and most importantly the expectations one has about that tourism destination (Beerli & Martin, 2004b). Ryan & Cave (2005) revealed in their study of destination image the importance of the role of visitor familiarity with a site. Thus, previous experience will most likely affect consumers' attitudes towards a destination and the activities performed there. Baloglu (2001) has also argued that familiarity with a destination has appeared to be a significant determination of destination image.



BRAND LOYALTY

According to Cleverdon & Fabricius (2006), a destination that has clear, strong, positive and generally accepted associations engenders trust, quality and integrity and these qualities provide the producers or service providers with a competitive advantage. Tourists choose a destination only when they can trust it. More so, trusted brands bring about tourist loyalty in destination rebranding as illustrated below:



Figure 1. Branding Blocks in Tourist Decision-Making Process (Hsu & Cai, 2009)

In order for a destination brand to be successful, Hankinson (2009) argues that, destination brands must go beyond the communication of an image and make the brand promise a reality. To do this the destination must maintain a “competitive advantage in its delivery of a quality visitor experience (Morgan *et al*, 2003). According to Hiscock (2001), the ultimate goal of marketing is to generate an intense bond between the consumer and the brand and the main ingredient of this bond is trust. However, there is a remarkable lack of theoretical and empirical research on the consumer-brand relationship, and the concept of consumer’s trust in a brand is missing even in few extant works on such relationship (Ballester *et al*, 2005).

More so, loyalty is all about customer satisfaction (Oliver, 1981), were satisfaction is an input to attitude. Hiscock (2001) state that the ultimate goal of marketing is to generate an intense bond between the consumer and the brand and the main ingredient of this bond is trust. Loureiro & Gonzalez (2008) provided empirical evidence that tourists’ trust has a positive influence on their loyalty toward a brand. Therefore, destination loyalty plays a pivotal role in determining brand value.

The local people dimension also has an impact on the overall destination image affecting brand loyalty and word of mouth promotion. In actual fact, local people are also stakeholders in the tourism industry. Friendly people result in a more relaxed environment that allows greater satisfaction thus encouraging positive word of mouth promotion and increased brand loyalty. Negative word of mouth discourages repeat visits (Cho *et al*, 2003).



Freire, (2007) also argues that the people of the destination can be used to differentiate their destination brand from the competition.

Rebranding can be a very risky and challenging strategy that can lead to serious damages on brand loyalty as well as brand equity (Aaker, 1991). More so, Muzellec & Lambkin (2006) go on to say this strategy can be a costly practice with certain levels of reputation risk. At the same time it may not be what customers want. This is supported with evidence by Haig (2003) who note that customers may not appreciate the changes and may even feel that they have been betrayed by the brands when core brand values perceived by customers have disappeared after rebranding.

BRAND AWARENESS

Brand awareness is reflected by consumer's ability to identify the brand under a different condition. Repeated exposure creates a positive awareness (Keller, 2003). According to the UNWTO (2007), brand awareness actively pairs the brand and the appropriate purchase cues, which then create a positive image and effectively, promote and communicate the brand. The entertainment industry and the media play a particularly important role in shaping people's perceptions of places; especially those viewed negatively (Simonin 2008), thereby promoting destination awareness.

Excessive marketing enables destination (brand) awareness. This could be so through the use of Internet, brochures' as well as word of mouth; hence visitor management must be properly managed (Morgan *et al*, 2003). Whatever destinations do must be able to motivate potential tourists. Dewar *et al* (2001), note that, once motivations of visitors have been identified, it is essential to give attention to the needs of different target groups. More so, it is important to note that the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) has introduced other forms of tourism in creating destination awareness, (Mutana & Zinyemba, 2013). Previously people were used to the traditional way of tourism whereby tourists would only come to visit attractions such as the Victoria Falls and Great Zimbabwe. The issue of culture, eco tourism and other issues had been overlooked. As a result of rebranding, there has been a great improvement in brand diversity. This resulted in the development of Cultural tourism, eco tourism and township tourism. Events such as carnivals have also assisted in brand awareness as well as brand image enhancement.

Having looked at literature, a conceptual model was proposed to highlight the importance of stakeholders, especially those that package the destination (DMO, Tour Operators, Travel Agents etc) in the attainment of a high brand value, focusing on brand image, brand loyalty and brand awareness. An empirical study would be important to seek clarity on stakeholder's perceptions and how they can be incorporated in destination rebranding for an enhanced brand value.

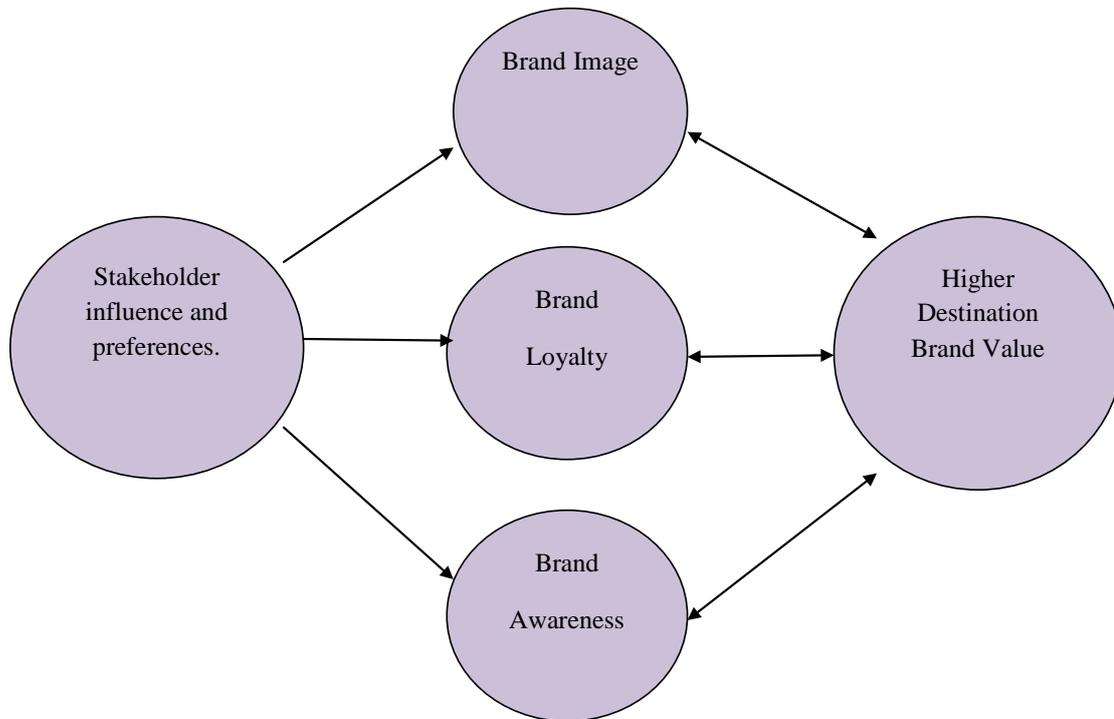


Figure 2: Proposed Model on Stakeholder Involvement in Destination Rebranding.

CONCLUSION

This paper contributes to the prevailing literature in destination rebranding and stakeholder perceptions. It shows a symbiotic relationship that exists between stakeholders, brand image, brand awareness, brand loyalty and high brand quality. For instance, Tour Operators act as an intermediary that is, liaises between tourists and the tourism service and because they act as an intermediary, it is important that they must be involved in (re)branding so as to sell a product they are well versed with. Govers, Go & Kumar (2007), acknowledges that tour operators are important middlemen in the travel-distribution system and they are the first and most influential role players in the tourism flow chain. Also important to note is the fact that Tour Operators are not the only stakeholders in the tourism industry, the community, hoteliers and travel agents are equally important.



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