

The Customer Perspectives of KwaZulu-Natal Tourism Brand Image and Brand Loyalty

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Abstract: Sub-Saharan Africa's tourism destinations have become increasingly similar, and competition among them has become quite intense. As such, destinations with strong brands may perform better and hold more value than those with unbranded offerings. This research aims to measure the tourists' perceptions of the brand image associated with KwaZulu-Natal attractions in South Africa, and to determine their level of loyalty. A questionnaire survey of 411 respondents revealed that the majority of travellers are attached to the KwaZulu-Natal destination and are more likely to return. As a result, KwaZulu-Natal tourist destination marketers should capitalise on the destination's brand features to further strengthen its status as a cultural and natural destination in South Africa and around the world. Further recommendations for enhancing this destination brand and its communication are presented in this paper.

Keywords: Tourists' Perceptions; Brand Image; Brand Loyalty; KwaZulu-Natal; South Africa

1. Introduction

Tourism destinations are growing more and more similar, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. As a result, there is now intense rivalry. In order to keep visitors loyal, a destination's brand image has to be effectively managed. In sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa is a popular travel destination that takes pride in providing both domestic and foreign visitors with cultural and natural experiences. One of South Africa's provinces, KwaZulu-Natal, provides genuine natural and cultural experiences because of its rich culture and mostly beautiful natural surroundings. A successful brand, according to Ataniyazova, Friedman, and Kiran (2022), is a recognisable offering that is presented in a way that the customer or consumer considers as relevant, unique, and adding value in relation to fulfilling their needs. Visitors do not pay for services. Instead, they may be paying for tourism-related service brands (Giannopoulos, Piha, & Skourtis, 2021; Mhlongo & Ezeuduji, 2021). Destinations with strong brands are likely to perform better and retain more value than those with unbranded offerings. Therefore, it can be argued that consumers' perceptions of a tourist destination's brand image are likely to influence their decision to choose the destination in the future as well as their post-selection perception of the destination (Mhlongo & Ezeuduji, 2021; Ezeuduji, Deen, de Klerk & Mhlongo, 2024). Brand loyalty to a destination is considered to be an attitudinal construct. It can be argued that travellers' loyalty to a destination is influenced by their experiences there, which are influenced by a variety of factors (Yen, Quynh, Dinh, Mai, Duyen, Hong, & Duc, 2024; Mhlongo, 2020). As competition and the importance of loyal tourist's increase, destination loyalty has gained greater recognition in destination management and marketing research (Chen, Huang, Wang & Chen, 2020; Kusumah, 2024; Matyusupov, Bande & Castro-González, 2024; Mariutti & Giraldi, 2020).

The literature on destination brand loyalty is explored in the academe (Behboodi, Arabshahi & Danishwar, 2024; Sobaih, Gharbi, Brini & Aliane, 2025; Singh & Bashir, 2024). However, there is a dearth of literature on tourists' brand loyalty to sub-Saharan African regions, such as KwaZulu-Natal. This research aims to measure the tourists' perceptions of the brand image associated with KwaZulu-Natal attractions in South Africa, and to determine their level of loyalty. This study is significant since its findings will support Tourism KwaZulu-Natal's marketing efforts to continue to attract and retain valuable tourists and improve tourists' spending in the local economy. Destination managers will have a better understanding of how tourists perceive KwaZulu-Natal as a tourism destination before launching direct marketing campaigns to reinforce positive perceptions and improve offerings to counter negative feedback. This study will also add to the body of knowledge on destination promotional strategies in similar sub-Saharan African or international destinations. The impact of brand image and loyalty on the selection of a destination, product, or service has been extensively studied, but largely outside of Sub-Saharan Africa (Gli, Tweneboah-Koduah, Odoom, & Kodua, 2024; Matiza, 2022; Mohammed, Mahmoud, & Hinson, 2022). Tourism has a significant impact on the local economy in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), one of South Africa's nine provinces. According to Statistics South Africa (2023), KZN contributes approximately 16.4% to South Africa's national Gross Domestic Product (GDP), surpassing the Western Cape's 15% but falling considerably short of Gauteng's 35% contribution. Many local communities in South Africa are implementing tourism development strategies as one of the main components of their local economic development initiatives, as tourism is widely recognised as a viable tool to boost local economies in sub-Saharan Africa (Ijatuyi, Yessoufou

& Patrick, 2025; Strydom, Mangope & Henama, 2019). In order to enhance marketing tactics and competitive advantage, the study attempts to determine the elements that draw tourists to KwaZulu-Natal and how they view the province's brand. It focuses on measuring how visitors perceive the destination's accessibility, physical ambience, affective meanings, symbolic representations, and brand loyalty. These perceptions were also contrasted with the profiles of tourists. The literature review of the key concepts associated with the field of research is given in the following section. In this study 'tourists', can also be referred to as 'customers', or 'travellers'.

2. Overview of Literature

2.1 Tourism Destination Brand Image

Brand image, according to Baùbuła (2024), represents how travellers perceive a specific brand, which involves all of the brand associations that customers have in their minds (Ghorbani & Westermann, 2025). A strong brand image sets one brand apart from competitors and is necessary for attracting tourists (Yavuz & Madran, 2024). KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) is internationally recognised for its vibrancy, cultural diversity, elegance, and natural beauty. It is regarded as entertaining, culturally rich, calming, and inspirational. The province's name, meaning "place of the Zulu people," symbolises its strong cultural identity, drawing tourists interested in Zulu customs and traditions, such as the Reed Dance ceremony held in Nongoma every August. Major events such as Durban July, Fact Durban Rocks, and the Pietermaritzburg Royal Show serve as important attractions, reducing seasonality and increasing tourist numbers (Connell, Page, & Meyer, 2015). Customer perceptions and attitudes of a destination influence purchase behaviour and brand support (Luo, Dey, Yalkin, Sivarajah, Punjaisri, Huang, & Yen, 2020; Mariutti & Giraldo, 2020).

A positive destination image promotes favourable attitudes and repeat visits (Suban, 2025). A key element of tourism marketing, destination brand image has been extensively researched (e.g., Mandagi, Pasuhuk & Kainde, 2024; Zhang, Mustafa & Lin, 2025; Li, Hyun & Kim, 2024; He, Yang, Wu & Zou, 2025). It acts as a pull element that differentiates one destination from another (Zolak, 2024; Liro, 2021). Travellers' perceptions have a significant effect on the variety of attractions KwaZulu-Natal has to offer, including national parks, museums, and beaches. Customers' experiences are shaped by their views of destination features, which have an impact on brand image (Güzel, Ünal & Şahin, 2024; Tahir, Adnan & Saeed, 2024). A destination's image is influenced by a variety of information sources (Kovalenko, Dias, Pereira & Simões, 2023) as well as past experiences or knowledge (Hamdy, Zhang & Eid, 2024). Overall, destination brand image is important in attracting visitors and influencing their behaviour, determined by factors such as physical atmosphere, accessibility, emotive meanings, and symbolic representations (Yuan & Vui, 2023). In this study, it is theorised that positive destination brand image will foster destination brand loyalty.

2.2 Tourist Destination Brand Loyalty

Customer loyalty, according to Leung, Chang, Cheung, and Shi (2022), is distinct from brand image, trust, commitment, and equity and results from post-consumption experiences. As defined by Sharma (2024), brand loyalty is characterised by commitment and recurrent purchasing behaviour together with favourable feedback about the brand. Travellers' opinions of a destination have a strong impact on whether or not they will return (De Los Reyes & Dael, 2023). Brand loyalty is essential in the tourism industry (Abouseada, Hassan, Saleh & Radwan, 2023; Suhan, Nayak, Nayak, Spulbar, Vidya Bai, Birau & Stanciu, 2022; Zhao, Cui & Guo, 2022). Positive brand perceptions boost loyalty, according to studies (Abbas, Islam, Hussain, Baqir & Muhammad, 2021; Dam & Dam, 2021; Budiman, 2021). As stated by Mohammed, Mahmoud, and Hinson (2022), brand loyalty is the dedication of consumers as demonstrated by their attitudes and repeated purchasing patterns. As noted by Suban (2025), destination brand influence tourists' attitudes, motivation, and contentment, which affects their intention to revisit. Singh and Bashir (2024) distinguish three types of destination loyalty: behavioural (future visit intentions), attitudinal (emotional attachment and recommendations), and composite (a combination of the two).

3. Methodology

A quantitative research method was employed to collect data for this study, which measures visitors' perceptions of KwaZulu-Natal destination brand image and loyalty. The survey was conducted using a structured questionnaire, with some questions obtained through the authors' personal knowledge of the destination and

the majority of the variables/questions drawn from the literature study. Researchers use questionnaires to collect quantified data from survey respondents, according to authors like Pregoner (2024), Simaremare and Siregar (2024), and Veal (2011). Travel is a common phenomenon. As a result, collecting and analysing quantitative data is suitable to aid in decision-making. Both domestic and foreign visitors were surveyed at the major tourist destinations in the KwaZulu-Natal Province, such as Richards Bay beaches, Richards Bay Airport, Hluhluwe Game Reserve, Durban Central Business District, King Shaka International Airport, Pietermaritzburg Airport, and uShaka Marine World For eight months (December 2017 to July 2018), spanning both peak and off-peak seasons, we used a purposive sampling method (non-probability sampling methodology) to select real travellers from the general population. As noted by Veal (2011), the absolute size of the research sample is more significant for non-probability sampling methods than the sample size with respect to the study population. This study accepts the limitation of non-probability sampling regarding non-generalisability of study findings. In the final analysis, 430 tourists were polled, although only 411 of the questionnaires were usable. To achieve the research purpose, we used IBM's SPSS Statistics, version 25 (IBM Corporation, 2017), for data analysis. Descriptive analyses, bivariate analyses (Mann-Whitney U test), and multivariate analyses (Reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha) were conducted on the data. Statistical tests were performed at a 95% confidence interval for the bivariate analysis, and Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used for the reliability test. To indicate the reliability or internal consistency of the questionnaire variables used to explain the study constructs (brand image and loyalty), a cut-off point of 0.7 was selected (see Abdulsalam, Tajudeen, Ogungbemi & Francis, 2024; Alsaleh, Alfallaj, Almousa, Alsubaie, Akkielah, Mesallam & Sumaily, 2024). The questionnaire's ordinal variables were displayed on a 5-point Likert scale. Variables used to measure brand image and the brand loyalty dimensions showed internal consistency based on the results of our reliability tests. Table 2 contains the variables used to explain the four aspects of brand image (see results and discussion section).

The population distributions of the ordinal dimensions are frequently found to be statistically non-normally distributed in social science research. Similarly, our Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests of normality showed p-values less than 0.001. As a result, a Mann-Whitney U non-parametric test was performed to explore the relationships of the study variables with tourists' profiles. In order to determine if two independent groups are statistically different from one another, the Mann-Whitney U test is often used to compare the means of responses from those groups. As a result, the survey responses to the brand image and brand loyalty assertions were compared to the profiles of the respondents. Based on the following stated criteria, we performed Mann-Whitney U tests: (i) the dependent variables (in this case, brand image perception statements) do have an ordinal scale; (ii) the independent variables (in our case, the respondents' profile) have only two groups; and (iii) the homogeneity of variance and normality of distribution did not hold up in a previous or trial t-test (Veal, 2011).

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows that more female respondents participated in the survey. Young respondents (under 40 years old) dominated the sample. Respondents are largely domestic tourists, and their primary reasons for travel are vacation, visiting friends and family, and business (e.g., seminar, event, conference). A considerable number of respondents did not spend more than ten days in KwaZulu-Natal. The good news for destination managers is that around 79% of respondents are returning, and there is a high degree of satisfaction (more than 77% are either mostly or totally satisfied). From these results, the destination KwaZulu-Natal is perceived as a favourable destination, and its product and service offerings were perceived favourably by the respondents.

Table 1: Respondents' profile (N = 411)

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Respondent's gender	Female	54.5
	Male	45.5
Respondent's age group	20 or less	11.7
	21-30	37.2
	31-40	23.4
	41-50	15.3
	51-60	8.8
	More than 60	3.6

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Respondent's continent of origin	Africa	70.1
	Outside Africa	29.9
Type of tourist	Domestic tourists	65.5
	International tourists	34.5
Did you travel as a group?	Yes	51.1
	No	48.9
Number of days in KwaZulu-Natal	1- 10	81.0
	11 days or longer	19.0
Reason to visit KwaZulu-Natal	Holiday	51.1
	Visiting friends and family	18.0
	Business (seminar, event, conference)	13.6
	Business (import and export)	
	Academic exchange	8.0
	Medical	4.4
	Other	2.9
Repeat visit to KwaZulu Natal destination?	Yes	78.8
	No	21.2
Respondent's level of satisfaction	Totally satisfied with the destination	40.1
	Mostly satisfied with the destination	37.2
	Moderately satisfied with the destination	16.3
	Mostly dissatisfied with the destination	4.9
	Totally dissatisfied with the destination	1.5

The study's findings (reflecting on Tables 1, 2, and 3) are consistent with Mhlongo and Ezeudji's (2021) findings that tourists' views toward a destination greatly impact their decision to return. Most respondents were repeat tourists, indicating an encouraging attitude and loyalty to KwaZulu-Natal as the destination of their choice. Yen, Quynh, Dinh, Mai, Duyen, Hong, and Duc (2024) define brand loyalty as frequent visits by tourists who have a good opinion about a destination brand. The study finds that satisfied tourists are more likely to return, stay loyal, and suggest the place to others (Baptista et al., 2024; Mhlongo and Ezeudji, 2021). In this study, respondents rated their agreement with brand image assertions based on four dimensions: symbolic representations, emotive, physical atmosphere, and accessibility, which were then compared to their profiles. The results in Table 2 reveal that there are no significant connections between respondents' profiles and brand image: symbolic representation assertions. However, some intriguing findings were discovered regarding the affective dimension of brand image assessments. For example, those who have previously visited KwaZulu-Natal agree more than first-time visitors that it is a relaxing, beautiful, and thrilling destination. According to Manternach (2010), brand loyalty develops over time through a series of pleasant experiences that necessitate significant and persistent effort, as well as careful attention to detail. As a result, loyal tourists are typically repeat visitors to a destination who do not examine alternative options. This study conducted statistical comparisons of respondents' profiles and brand image: physical atmosphere statements. This produced more variable outcomes. Respondents who have visited previously agreed more than first-time tourists that KwaZulu-Natal is quiet and conservative.

Group travellers stated that the destination has high moral standards. Male respondents agreed more strongly than female respondents that the destination is overcrowded. It should be mentioned that KwaZulu-Natal beaches are overcrowded during peak seasons, which may contribute to a greater crime rate and a sense of unease among tourists while relaxing on the beach. Mhlongo and Ezeudji (2021) suggest a robust police presence and proper policing in South Africa (zero tolerance for crime and quick response within the South

African Police Service). This has the potential to reduce crime in South Africa while also improving tourist perceptions of South African attractions. In terms of brand image: accessibility statements; male respondents and repeat tourists were more likely to agree that KwaZulu-Natal is developed for tourism. The findings of this study indicate that travellers have a very positive symbolic image of the KwaZulu-Natal brand as a tourism destination, particularly in terms of its unique nature and cultural attractions. They also claim that it is an exciting, relaxing, and interesting destination (see Table 2).

Table 2: Comparison between respondents' profile and tourists' brand image perceptions

Brand Image			
Brand Image: Symbolic Representations' Statements	Mean Score^a	Standard Deviation	Compared With Tourists' Profile^b
KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) local economy is doing well	2.24	.989	N.S
KZN is at peace with its neighbouring provinces and countries	2.11	.918	N.S
KZN is a peaceful province	1.93	.913	N.S
KZN is rich in cultural and natural attributes	1.81	.916	N.S
<i>Reliability Statistics (Perceptions of brand image: symbolic representations), Cronbach's Alpha = .842, N of Items = 4, Valid cases = 406 (98.8%), Excluded cases = 5 (1.2%), Total = 411</i>			
Brand Image: Affective Statements	Mean Score^a	Standard Deviation	Compared With Tourists' Profile^b
KZN is a relaxed destination	1.76	.841	*Repeat visitors agree more
KZN is a beautiful destination	1.75	.817	*Repeat visitors agree more
KZN is a pleasant destination	1.71	.858	N.S
KZN is an exciting destination	1.66	.843	*Repeat visitors agree more *Group travellers agree more
<i>Reliability Statistics (Perceptions of brand image: affective), Cronbach's Alpha = .885, N of Items = 4, Valid cases = 404 (98.3%), Excluded cases = 7 (1.7%), Total = 411</i>			
Brand Image: Physical Atmosphere Statements	Mean Score^a	Standard Deviation	Compared With Tourists' Profile^b
KZN destination is overcrowded	2.38	1.209	**Male respondents agree more
KZN local population has high moral standards	2.12	.893	*Group travellers agree more
KZN destination is quite conservative	2.06	.911	**Repeat visitors agree more
KZN is a calm destination	1.81	.906	*Repeat visitors agree more
<i>Reliability Statistics (Perceptions of brand image: physical atmosphere), Cronbach's Alpha = .796, N of Items = 4, Valid cases = 404 (98.3%), Excluded cases = 7 (1.7%), Total = 411</i>			
Brand Image: Accessibility Statements	Mean Score^a	Standard Deviation	Compared With Tourists' Profile^b
KZN destination is developed for tourism	1.91	.903	*Male respondents agree more *Repeat visitors agree more
KZN local population is friendly	1.89	.845	N.S
KZN is an easily accessible destination	1.88	.831	N.S
KZN destination is interesting	1.74	.812	N.S
<i>Reliability Statistics (Perceptions of brand image: accessibility), Cronbach's Alpha = .830, N of Items = 4, Valid cases = 410 (99.8%), Excluded cases = 1 (0.2%), Total = 411</i>			

^aQuestionnaire were itemised along a 5-point Likert-type scale: 1, Strongly agree; 2, Agree; 3, Neutral; 4, Disagree; 5, Strongly disagree. ^bMann-Whitney U test significance: N.S., no significant results - *, p < 0.05; **, p < 0.01.

According to Sobaih et al. (2025), tourist loyalty is linked to the destination brand name. This can positively influence travellers' attitudes, which can improve their travel motivation and satisfaction. This tourist's perspective or attitude about a destination can also be regarded as a crucial consideration when determining whether to return to that destination. Kwarteng-Amaniampong, Potgieter, and Tait (2025) argue that brand image is influenced by how an individual or a group of persons perceives a given brand. In this study, respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with seven brand loyalty assertions (see Table 3). The responses were then matched to their profile. The top three loyalty statements that most respondents agreed on were: "I would recommend KwaZulu-Natal to my friends and family"; "I would consider visiting KwaZulu-Natal in the future"; and "I am in love with KwaZulu-Natal". These findings suggest that responding tourists have a high level of destination loyalty. This is an encouraging development for KwaZulu-Natal tourism destination managers. According to the findings, as shown in Table 3, tourists travelling in groups agree more than individuals that the destination inspires love and maintains a special place in their hearts.

Table 3: Comparison between tourists' profile and tourists' brand loyalty perceptions

Statements	Mean Score ^a	Standard Deviation	Compared With Tourists' Profile ^b
I feel at home in KZN	1.95	.907	**Repeat visitors agree more
I feel connected to this destination, KZN	1.93	.867	**Repeat visitors agree more
KZN has a special place in my heart	1.89	.915	** Repeat visitors agree more *South Africans agree more *Domestic tourists agree more **Group travellers agree more
KZN would be my preferred choice when choosing a destination to visit	1.87	.909	N.S
I am in love with KwaZulu-Natal	1.83	.954	**Repeat visitors agree more **South Africans agree more **Domestic tourists agree more *Group travellers agree more
I would consider visiting KZN in the future	1.78	.763	N.S
I would recommend KZN to my friends and family	1.75	.773	*Repeat visitors agree more
Reliability Statistics (Perceptions of brand loyalty), Cronbach's Alpha =.917, N of Items = 7, Valid cases = 408 (99.3%), Excluded cases = 3 (0.7%), Total = 411			

^aQuestionnaires were itemised along a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1, Strongly agree; 2, Agree; 3, Neutral; 4, Disagree; 5, Strongly disagree. ^bMann-Whitney U test significance: N.S., no significant results - *, p < 0.05; **, p < 0.01.

Similarly, South African (domestic) visitors agreed more than foreign (international) tourists that the KwaZulu-Natal tourism destination invokes love and does have a special place in their hearts. Not surprisingly, those who have previously visited (repeat visitors) are more devoted to the KwaZulu-Natal tourism destination, agreeing more than first-time visitors that the destination has a particular place in their hearts, makes them feel at home, and they feel connected. They enjoy the destination and would recommend KwaZulu-Natal to friends and family. The next section concludes the study and makes recommendations to KwaZulu-Natal tourism destination managers based on the findings.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study revealed that tourists have a strong, favourable symbolic image of KwaZulu-Natal's destination brand, notably its unique natural and cultural features. Tourists' positive opinions of the destination are substantially associated with their loyalty and chance of returning. The data reveal that the majority of respondents were repeat visitors, demonstrating contentment, commitment, and loyalty to KwaZulu-Natal's main tourism offers, notably its rich cultural and natural heritage, and beach experiences. Loyal tourists were mostly domestic and group travellers, and group interactions reinforced good attitudes and emotions. The survey also found that domestic tourists are more loyal to the KwaZulu-Natal brand than international visitors. This loyalty is frequently

linked to repeated visits as the ease of returning reinforces domestic customers' long-term commitment, which supports South Africa's rising domestic tourism industry and revenue retention.

Nonetheless, destination administrators are encouraged to improve the destination's image and appeal to foreign markets by increasing the variety, quality, and authenticity of offerings. The findings have practical implications for destination managers who are seeking to improve their marketing strategies and boost KwaZulu-Natal's cultural and natural attractions, as well as develop secondary offers to attract MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions), 3S (Sun, Sea, and Sand), and VFR (Visiting Friends and Relatives) visitors. Further comparative research throughout Sub-Saharan Africa is recommended to better understand regional tourism positioning in the global perspective.

Ethics Declaration

Ethical clearance for this paper was obtained from the University of Zululand Research Ethics Committee (Reference: UZREC 171110-030 PGM 2017/455). All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with institutional ethical standard.

AI Declaration

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) was used in conceptualising, drafting, analysing data and writing this paper.

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