Original Article

Tourists' Perceptions about the Lake Victoria Region Tourist Circuit, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Understanding tourists' perceptions is vital for enhancing destination competitiveness. This study explored tourists' perceptions of the Lake Victoria Region Tourist Circuit using an exploratory sequential mixed-method design, collecting data from 8 business development managers and 299 tourists (sampled via multi-stage methods from 26 hotels). Qualitative data underwent framework analysis, while quantitative data was analysed using descriptive factor analysis in SPSS 21. The study identified four key perception factors: perceived destination awareness (critical component: destination's name and reputation), perceived destination image (critical component: memorable characteristics), perceived destination quality (critical component: reliable tourism infrastructure), and perceived destination value (critical component: generally satisfying experience).

INTRODUCTION

The overall attractiveness of a destination serves as a key indicator in evaluating its competitiveness, often assessed through tourists' perceptions of various attributes and indicators (Chon, Weaver, & Kim, 1991; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Hu & Ritchie, 1993; Kim, 1998). However, existing literature largely overlooks the influence of tourist push and

pull motivation factors in shaping these perceptions. This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating the role of these motivational factors in the formation of perceptions towards destination attributes.

Tourists' Perceptions about Destinations

Consumer perception studies have traditionally focused on awareness, perceived image, perceived value, and perceived quality (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993). Over time, loyalty has been integrated alongside these constructs to form the concept of brand equity (Cobb-Walgren, Ruble, & Donthu, 1995). Building on Keller's (1993) work, numerous attempts have been made to develop consumer-specific brand equity models within the tourism and hospitality sectors (Boo et al., 2009; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Lee & Back, 2008; Pike et al., 2010). Studies have also tested the applicability of these models using the four core constructs. Konecnik and Gartner's (2007) work stands out as a prominent destination brand model, examining the relationships between the four brand dimensions and their interaction with the cognitive, affective, and conative images of a destination. Similarly, Boo et al. (2009) advocate for the use of consumer-specific brand equity by considering the role of perceived image and perceived value. Pike et al. (2010) further encourage a consumer-centred approach by investigating the linkages between loyalty, image, quality, and awareness. The following sections delve into destination awareness (salience), perceived destination image, perceived destination quality, and perceived destination value.

Destination Awareness

Aaker (1996) defines brand awareness as the strength of a brand's presence in the consumer's mind and their ability to associate it with a specific product line. Creating awareness is a foundational step in building brand equity and enhancing brand value (Gartner & Konecnik Ruzzier, 2011). In tourism, awareness is a primary driver of destination choice (Um & Crompton, 1990) and influences feelings towards a destination (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989).

Boo et al. (2009), Konecnik and Gartner (2007), Lee and Back (2008), and Pike et al. (2010) all identify awareness as a crucial dimension of destination branding theory. Konecnik and Gartner (2007) consider awareness the most important variable in evaluating destination brand value, alongside image, quality, and loyalty. Boo et al. (2009) also emphasise its importance from the tourist's perspective.

Tourism scholars have proposed different levels of assessing awareness, including "brand recall" and "brand recognition" (Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2005). This study conceptualises destination awareness as knowledge about the destination, the ability to recall its attributes, and the ease of recognising it among other destinations. While some scholars prioritise brand salience (Keller, 2003), this study incorporates aspects of salience within its definition of awareness, such as the ease of recognition. This allows for capturing the respondents' ability to recall the destination and its attributes within a pool of similar destinations. Drawing from literature (Pike, 2006; Thompson & Cooper, 1979; Woodside & Sherrell, 1977), consumers typically consider a limited set of destinations (two plus or minus four) when making travel decisions. Therefore, this study proposes that the consistent presence of a destination in a tourist's mind and decision set provides a fundamental competitive advantage.

Perceived Destination Image

Destination image refers to the overall mental picture or imagery a tourist holds of a destination at a given time (Crompton, 1979; Phelps, 1986; Gartner & Hunt, 1987). It encompasses an individual's beliefs, ideas, and mental representations about the destination's attributes. Tourist attitudes towards a destination are influenced by the cognitive, affective, and conative aspects of destination image (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1974). Stern and Krakover (1993) highlight the direct impact of destination image on consumer preferences. Furthermore, studies suggest that aligning the destination image with tourists'

perceptions increases the likelihood of destination choice, and a favourable image shapes consumer preferences (Goodall, 1988; Lin et al., 2007; Prayag, 2009). Consequently, evaluating perceived destination image over time is crucial for effective destination management (Gallarza, Gil, & Calderon, 2002; San Martin & Rodriguez, 2008).

Literature indicates that image is a composite of behavioural, affective, and cognitive dimensions (Pike & Ryan, 2004; White, 2004). Previous research has explored either all dimensions of image (Beerli & Mattin, 2004; Birgit, 2001; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Lin et al., 2007) or just one (Balloglu & McCleary, 1999; Bigne et al., 2001). Perceived destination image is a critical element in the tourist destination choice process (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Bigne et al., 2001; Birgit, 2001; Castro, Armario, & Ruiz, 2007; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Gallarza et al., 2002), with a positive correlation observed between a favourable image and destination choice (Birgit, 2001; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). Bigne et al. (2001) suggest that destination image can positively influence destination experiences, tourist satisfaction, and future behaviour. Moreover, a destination's perceived attractiveness can enhance place attachment and loyalty (Hou, Lin, & Morais, 2005).

Compared to other constructs of destination brand equity, destination image has received the most scholarly attention in tourism destination branding (Gartner & Konecnik Ruzzier, 2011; Gnoth, 2002; Qu et al., 2011). However, excessive focus on image might obscure the actual intention of its evaluation (Cai, 2002; Boo et al., 2009; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Similar to awareness, destination image plays a vital role in forming the destination brand model (Cai, 2002; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Lee & Back, 2008), although a universally accepted measurement scale is lacking. Some scholars propose assessing the cognitive-affective nature of destination image, integrating both cognitive and affective evaluations (Kim & Richardson, 2003; Pike & Ryan, 2004). Baloglu and McCleary (1999) and Gallarza, Gil, and Caldero´n (2002) emphasise the need to understand image formation processes,

influenced by psychological, social, and informational variables, as well as prior experience (Baloglu, 2001; Hui & Wan, 2003; Rittichainuwat, Qu, & Brown, 2001). However, the role of push and pull motivation factors in destination image formation has not been adequately explored theoretically or empirically. Therefore, investigating the influence of these factors on perceived destination image and loyalty is necessary (Balloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Balloglu & McCleary, 1999; Driscoll, Lawson, & Nieven, 1994; Gartner, 1993; Goodrich, 1978; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Tasci, Gartner, & Tamer Cavusgil, 2007). Image research confirms the existence of interrelated cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions (Walmsley & Young, 1998). Cognitive appraisal involves knowledge and beliefs, while the affective dimension relates to feelings towards the destination. The conative dimension reflects the tourist's ultimate action or behaviour, crucial for loyalty decisions (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Gartner, 1993; Holbrook, 1978; Lin et al., 2007). Together, these components shape positive perceptions of tourists. Thus, destination image significantly influences destination competitiveness by appealing to tourists. Destination managers should strive to create an appealing image to enhance visitation.

Destination image also influences destination awareness (Gartner, 2009), further enhancing competitiveness (Pike, 2007) and choice (Cai, 2002), and impacts satisfaction (Wang & Hsu, 2010). Therefore, destination image affects competitiveness by influencing tourist choices and satisfaction (Pike, 2007; Wang & Hsu, 2010). This study conceptualises image as the general mental evaluation of the overall destination imagery by an individual tourist (Boo et al., 2009; Chitty et al., 2007).

Over the years, scholars have sought to understand the relationship between tourist behaviour and destination image (Gartner & Hunt, 1987; Gallarza, Gil, & Calderon, 2002; Pike, 2002, 2007). Research confirms that destination image influences tourist behaviour (Chon, 1990, 1991; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991) and plays a critical role

in decision-making, satisfaction evaluation, and future relationships with the destination (Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2001; Beerli & Martin, 2004). It also influences pre-trip expectations and actual experiences (Phelps, 1986; Font, 1997). Therefore, destination managers should align the projected image with actual offerings to enhance tourist satisfaction (Oppermann, 1999; Morgan & Pritchard, 1998).

Perceived Destination Quality

Previous research highlights the crucial role of perceived quality in determining brand equity. It influences buying decisions, purchase intentions, willingness to pay premium prices, and recommendations (del Rio, Vazquez, & Iglesias, 2001; Low & Lamb, 2000). Keller (2003) defines perceived quality as "the perception of the overall quality or superiority of a product or service compared to relevant alternatives and concerning its intended purpose." This concept has garnered significant research interest among tourism scholars (Boo et al., 2009; Gartner & Konecnik Ruzzier, 2011; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Pike et al., 2010). This study conceptualises perceived destination quality as tourists' perceptions of the quality of the destination attributes and the entire destination.

Perceived Destination Value

Perceived value refers to the benefits consumers believe they will receive relative to the cost (McDougall & Levesque, 2000). Zithaml and Bitner (2000) add that it involves a general evaluation of the benefit a service or product offers based on consumer perceptions of the product/service and its cost. Despite significant scholarly interest, a universally agreed-upon definition of perceived value remains elusive (McDougall & Levesque, 2000; Zeithaml, 1988; Woodruff, 1997). Some scholars equate value perception with the difference between quality and price (Cravens et al., 1988), while others see it as the overall feeling about a product's efficacy based on perceived price and offerings (Zeithaml, 1988). Many conceptualise it as the trade-off between cost and received benefits (Bradley & Sparks, 2012; Gallarza & Saura, 2006;

Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Following this line of thought, this study defines perceived destination value as the tourist's evaluation of destination offerings relative to the costs incurred, including travel expenses, time, and opportunity cost.

Literature also shows that some scholars narrowly define perceived value as "value for money" (Gallarza & Saura, 2006), which doesn't fully capture the concept. Perceived value is linked to perceived quality/performance, perceived cost, and future purchase intentions, making it a suitable measure of service, quality and perceptions (Bolton & Drew, 1991). Therefore, evaluating all aspects of perceived value alongside value for money is recommended (Gallarza & Saura, 2006; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Sheth, Newman, and Gross (1991) identify four dimensions of perceived value: emotional, social, quality/performance, and price/value for money.

According to tourism services literature, perceived quality and monetary price are major antecedents of perceived value (Chen & Chen, 2010). Other scholars also identify perceived quality as a strong predictor of perceived value (Baker et al., 2002; Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000; Parasuraman & Grewal, 2000). Specifically, perceived quality positively influences perceived value, while perceived price negatively influences it (Zeithaml, 1988). In their study of the quality-value-satisfaction-loyalty chain, Bradley and Sparks (2012) found that perceived value is influenced by consumption experience, prior knowledge, consumer characteristics, and product characteristics.

Notably, most prior studies have emphasised cognitive factors as predictors of perceived value, with limited attention given to affective factors (Dumand & Mattila, 2005). However, Petrick's (2003) study confirms that affective factors like service quality, emotional attachments, monetary price, behavioural price, and reputation significantly influence perceived value. Moreover, Lee, Lee, and Choi (2011) highlight the role of emotional attachment and functional value for

festival visitors. Dumand and Mattila (2005) also underscore the importance of affective factors such as experience enjoyment in the perceived value of cruise ship holidays, encouraging future research beyond affective factors. Consequently, this study posits tourist motivation (both push and pull) as a potential antecedent of tourists' perceived destination value and, subsequently, a predictor of destination loyalty. This view aligns with Heskett, Sasser, and Schlesinger (1997), who identify a positive link between loyalty, satisfaction, and value perceptions. Specifically, in tourism, Mechinda et al. (2009) found that attitudinal loyalty towards a destination in Thailand was primarily determined by the perceived value of visiting it. These findings are supported by Boo et al. (2009) and Chitty et al. (2007), who also identified a positive relationship between perceived value and destination loyalty. Therefore, this study proposes that perceived destination value will positively influence loyalty towards the destination, thereby impacting the overall competitiveness of the destination.

METHODOLOGY

Area of Study

The study focused on the Lake Victoria Region tourism circuit in Western Kenya, a region encompassing thirteen counties with a population exceeding 10 million and diverse cultures. Situated between latitudes 1°16'N and 1°54'S and longitudes 33°55' and 35°51'E, the region experiences a mild climate with temperatures ranging from 19 to 25°C and rainfall patterns of long rains (March-June) and short rains (September-November), averaging 700-2000mm annually. The circuit boasts diverse attractions, including lakes, mountains, forests, parks, beaches, and cultural sites, presenting significant tourism development potential that remains underexploited and requires enhanced branding and marketing for both domestic and international tourists.

Research Approach

This study employed a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 1998). The rationale was that integrating both approaches would yield richer insights than either method alone.

Research Design

An exploratory sequential mixed-method design was utilised, involving two phases: qualitative followed by quantitative data collection and analysis. This design allows for expanding the research scope and offsetting the weaknesses of individual approaches (Blake 1989; Greene et al., 1989; Rossman & Wilson, 1991). It also offers pragmatic advantages for investigating complex research questions (Driscoll et al., 2007) and provides a more complete analysis through methodological complementarity (Morse, 2003). This design has been applied in tourism to assess environmental impacts (Mackay et al., 2004) and to enhance public engagement in environmental issues (Schmidt, 2005). The study was conducted in two phases: exploratory (qualitative) and explanatory (quantitative).

Population of the Study

The study population comprised two groups: Business Development Managers in classified hotels and lodges (n=26) and tourists visiting these establishments and attractions in the Lake Victoria Region tourism circuit between August and October 2018 (estimated n=1317, based on Kenya Gazette, 2015).

Sample Size and Sampling Procedures in the Qualitative Strand

Business Development Managers (n=8) were purposively sampled for semi-structured interviews. This targeted approach was efficient for qualitative research, ensuring that expert insights were captured (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003). While sample size varies (Carlsen & Glenton, 2011; Mason, 2010; Patton, 2015), information power

guided sufficiency (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). Practicality suggests below 50 interviews (Bryman, 2012; Ritchie et al., 2003). Thus, of the 26 invited business development managers, 8 participated in the study.

Sample Size and Sampling Procedures in the Quantitative Strand

To generate representative sample sizes from the population of tourists, Creative Research Systems (2003) formula was used alongside multistage and convenience sampling to select 299 tourists.

Data Collection

Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured face-to-face interviews. A standard set of questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994) ensured comprehensive coverage of research interests (Creswell, 2009). Interviews, lasting 20-45 minutes, were conducted by the researcher, and notes were taken alongside audio-recorded sessions. Post-interview, summaries were reviewed with interviewees for accuracy. Transcripts, generated using HyperTRANSCRIBE, were shared with participants within two days for verification while ensuring all ethical principles are adhered to at all stages (Brenner, 2006; Lincoln et al., 2011; Creswell, 2018), enhancing data validity. Quantitative data was collected using self-administered questionnaires.

Data Analysis

Qualitative interview data was analysed using framework analysis (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). This method is suitable for cross-sectional descriptive data, ensuring transparency in researchers' interpretations (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) and providing a systematic process from descriptive to explanatory accounts (Bryman, 2008; Ritchie et al., 2013). The analysis followed Ritchie and Spencer's (1994) five steps: familiarisation, thematic framework identification, indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS version 21, employing descriptive statistics (frequencies and means) to describe data distribution.

Tourists' Perception Measures

Table 1: Tourists' Perception Measures

Perception Measure	Measured Items
Destination awareness	1. The destination has a good name and reputation. 2. The destination is well-positioned in the media. 3. I have heard about tourism activities, meetings and holidays held in this destination before 4. I have seen a lot of advertising promoting tourism in the Lake Victoria Region circuit. 5. The destination is very famous. 6. The characteristics of this destination come into mind very quickly. 7. Whenever I think of a tourism holiday in Kenya, this destination comes into mind immediately. 8. The online presence of the destination is high.
Destination image	9. The characteristics of this destination come to my mind quickly when I am thinking about a holiday destination in Kenya. 10. The destination is safe for everybody in the family. 11. The image of the destination fits my personality. 12. Visiting this destination reflects who I am 13. The destination is not crowded. 14. The destination gives an opportunity to have a good time as a family. 15. The destination has a good name and reputation as tourist destination. 16. My colleagues would think highly of me if I visited this destination for tourism purposes.

Perception Measure	Measured Items
Destination quality	17. The destination has many interesting places.
	18. In the destination there is a variety of things to see/do
	19. Tourism infrastructure in the destination is reliable.
	20. The quality of infrastructure in the destination is high.
	21. The destination is better compared to similar destinations in Kenya.
	22. Finding information about this destination is easy.
	23. There are high levels of personal safety in the destination.
	24. Accommodation in this destination is of high quality.
	25. The level of cleanliness in the destination is high.
	26. The performance of tourism employees in this destination is superior compared to other destinations.
Destination value	27. In general, the experience provided here is satisfying.
	28. Visiting this destination provides an opportunity to have fun compared to similar destinations.
	29. The destination provides opportunities to be part of environmental protection.
	30. The destination provides more benefits than other similar destinations in Kenya.
	31. The destination provides opportunities for the feeling of belongingness.
	32. The destination provides opportunities to meet other people.
	33. The destination provides an opportunity to stay in a green hotel.
	34. Being at a tourism meeting or holiday in this destination will help me develop personally.
	35. The price for accommodation and services is competitive as compared to other destinations for me.
	36. The destination provides opportunities to be close to nature.
	37. The price of accommodation is affordable.
	38. Considering the expenses related to visiting this destination, the benefits received are much more significant.
	39. The destination provides opportunities to enjoy authentic culture.
	40. The destination provides opportunities to experience other cultures.

Respondents indicated their level of agreement on the influence of push motivations on their perceptions and how their perceptions influenced destination choice using a 7-point scale (1 - Strongly Disagree to 7 - Strongly Agree).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study sought *to discover the perceptions of tourists about the Lake Victoria Region tourism circuit, Kenya, as a tourist destination*. To address the objective, tourists' perceptions were explored both qualitatively and quantitatively.

In the qualitative phase, Business Development Managers that were interviewed were asked the following questions; (1) *"How do you think the previous, current and potential tourists perceive the Lake Victoria Region Tourism Circuit as a Tourist Destination?"* (2) *"What would you say are the attributes of the destination that inform/ informed the perception of the tourists' about the destination?"* The respondents gave various views and opinions regarding tourists' perceptions about the destination. The various attributes that informed tourists' perceptions about the destination were classified into four themes, namely, destination awareness, destination image, destination quality and destination value, as shown in Table 2.

Interview Findings

Table 2 reveals four key themes: perceived destination image, awareness, value, and quality, all critical for destination loyalty. Findings suggest that

advertising via the internet, print, radio, and television can enhance destination awareness and popularity. Offering diverse tourist activities and attractions caters to various tourist types, likely improving the destination's image. Reliable transport, cleanliness, standard accommodation, and safety measures enhance perceived destination quality. Lastly, providing value for money and time, alongside satisfying visitor experiences, positively impacts perceived destination value.

Table 2: Tourist Perception Themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Examples of transcript summaries	Examples of Text excerpts relating to the theme
Destination Awareness	Presence of the destination in the media	• The destination is well-marketed locally and internationally (P2, P4) • There are online and print advertisements of the tourism products offered in the destination (P3, P4)	*"….Unlike other destinations in the country, it is unfortunate that the Lake Victoria Region Tourism Circuit has not been sold out there as offering same or even better experiences compared to other destinations like Maasai Mara, or even Kenya's Coast…both the national tourism bodies such as KTB and even local tourism authorities here have failed to do this noble task…however, we are optimistic that the situation will improve…"* (Interview: Participant 2)
	Popularity of the destination	• The destination is well known locally and internationally (P1, P4)	*"..Most of the international tourists visiting this destination assert to have heard about it while already in the country. They, however, visit the destination again because of the good experiences here…"* (Interview Participant 4)
Destination Image	Experience offered at the destination	• There are variety of activities to engage in while at the destination (P1, P5) • Tourism resources in the destination provide an opportunity to every type of tourist (P1, P3)	*"…the greatest advantage with this destination is the variety of scenery, activities and experiences it offers to the tourists. If you want to be at the beachfront, or a waterfall or hike in the mountain, or just cycle, or be in a posh hotel, this destination will offer you just that. It doesn't matter if you are travelling alone or with a family. There is a variety to choose from…"* (Interview: Participant 1)
	Range of attractions	• The destination offers a variety of attractions (P1) • The destination has a good reputation (P4)	*"…We are lucky that this region has had no incidences of insecurity. Tourists feel much safer here…."* (Interview: Participant 1)
Destination Quality	Quality of tourism infrastructure	• The quality of accommodation facilities in the destination is good (P2, P3) • Transport in the destination is reliable (P1, P8) • Cleanliness of the destination (P4)	*"….the kind and standard of hotels and accommodation facilities in this destination is no different from the rest of the, (Pause), say popular destinations in Kenya. In fact, with the coming up of new hotels in the region in the last few years, there has been an increased level of competition, meaning improved service levels besides the increased bed capacity. We are also grateful that both the national and regional governments have in the recent years improved the standard of roads here greatly improving access to the attractions…."* (Interview: Participant 4)
	Personal Safety	• The destination guarantees personal safety and security(P1)	*"…there are no local or international security threats reported in this region so far…."* (Interview Participant 1)
Destination Value	Customer satisfaction	• Experience provided in the destination is satisfying (P1) • Value for money and time spent at the destination(P1, P5)	*"…If you want to have the experience of being in the wild, or in the city, we have products suitable for you. Attractions here from the rare wild animal species, the freshwater lake, the traditional dances and foods, shopping opportunities, will definitely give you value for your time and money…."* (Interview: Participant 1)

The various narratives by interview participants illustrate a common thread pointing to the respondents' implicit and explicit reference to the great potential of the destination to offer equal if not greater experience to the past, current and future tourists compared to other destinations in Kenya. Specifically, the respondents asserted that the destinations' natural, cultural and man-made resources were adequate to make up a memorable tourism experience, just like any other destination in the country. These narratives are an indication that the respondents believed that the tourists perceived the destination as competitive with any other destination in Kenya. The results therefore support the argument by Nyamweno (2016) that the circuit is a repository of massive resources that could be utilised for more forms of sustainable tourism. For instance, one of the respondents asserted that:

> "....it is important that all the tourism stakeholders in Kenya realise that this region offers similar opportunities for tourism to the rest of the well-known destinations in the Country……tourists visiting this destination leave here happier and more satisfied because the destination is not overcrowded...." (Interview: Participant 3)

Yet another respondent expressed the following sentiments:

> "....why would a tourist visit a tired destination, say for example a public Beach in North Coast, while they can visit a cleaner, less crowded Beach in Mbita? .... the hotels here are of the same standard, the prices are relatively lower, the roads are good now, the region has an international Airport in Kisumu.....and the experience is even better.... This is any tourist's destination of choice any time." (Interview: Participant 1)

Similarly, in the quantitative phase, tourists' perceptions were explored under four main categories, namely, destination awareness, destination image, destination perceived quality and destination perceived value. The succeeding section presents both qualitative and quantitative results in each of the four themes aforementioned.

Tourists' Perceived Destination Awareness

A majority of the interview respondents felt that the Lake Victoria Region Tourism Circuit was not adequately marketed by the relevant authorities to both domestic and international tourists compared to other destinations in the country. They, however, expressed their optimism that with the infrastructure development and the prevailing political stability, the region was to experience a growth in both inbound and outbound tourist numbers. Specifically, one of the respondents asserted that:

> "....even though this region is not well represented in the national media by both the government and the tour operators ....and even by travel agents as offering great tourist experiences……. I am hopeful that with time, the destination will be very well known based on the experiences tourists enjoy on the ground..." (Interview: Participant 7)

Another respondent articulated these sentiments:

> ".... Given the rate at which investors are bringing new hotels, some of which are international brands, this region will be very well known countrywide and even in the East African Region...certainly, the destination will be very famous.... tourists will come from all over the world...." (Interview: Participant 4)

The interview narratives point to the need to present the destination to the tourist market, as expressed by one of the respondents:

> ".... even though the region has all these resources, there is a need for the relevant authorities to ensure the destination is well known and sold out to the international and domestic tourists.... without this, the region will not exploit its tourism potential..." (Interview: Participant 6)

To further explore tourists' destination awareness, in the quantitative phase, respondents were first required to rate on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree) their views on eight destination awareness items drawn from the qualitative study findings and literature. The means of these eight items were ranked, and the results are as depicted in Table 3.

Table 3: Mean Ranking of Tourists' Perception of Destination Awareness

Measures of destination awareness	Min	Max	Mean	SD
The destination has a good name and reputation	1.00	7.00	5.15	1.30
The destination is well-positioned in the media	1.00	7.00	5.14	1.24
I have heard about tourism activities, meetings and holidays held in this destination before	1.00	7.00	5.13	1.19
I have seen a lot of advertising promoting tourism in the Lake Victoria Region circuit	1.00	7.00	5.10	1.20
The destination is very famous	1.00	7.00	5.04	1.28
The characteristics of this destination come into mind very quickly	1.00	7.00	5.00	1.24
Whenever I think of a tourism holiday in Kenya, this destination comes into mind immediately	1.00	7.00	4.95	1.32
The online presence of the destination is high	1.00	7.00	4.95	1.37
Valid N (listwise)	282			

Note: Min – Minimum, Max – Maximum, SD – Standard deviation
Scale: 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Somewhat disagree, 4-Neither agree nor disagree, 5-Somewhat agree, 6- Agree, and 7-Strongly agree

Table 3 shows that the highest ranked item relates to the destination's good name and reputation ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.30$), followed by the respondents having heard about the destination's tourism activities before ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.24$). The least ranked item relates to the destination's online presence being high ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.37$). The results generally indicate that the respondents somewhat expressed their agreement with the majority of the items (6), as described in their perceptions about the destination awareness. However, the respondents were never so sure about two of the items that included their immediate thought of the destination and the destination's online presence. This implies that, although tourists were aware of the destination, they would choose another destination where they enjoyed memorable experiences. The destination managers should therefore ensure that experiences provided at the destination are easily recalled by tourists during and after their visit, as suggested by previous research findings (H. Chen & Rahman, 2018; Coudounaris & Sthapit, 2017; Williams, Yuan, & Williams, 2019; Zare, 2019; Zatori, Smith, & Puczko, 2018; Zhang, Wu, & Buhalis, 2018). In addition, investing in online advertisements may also promote destination loyalty as suggested by the findings and the suggestions of Xia, Zhang, & Zhang (2018).

Respondents were further required to rate on a scale of 1 – Not at all to 7 – Very often, the extent to which 38 destination attributes are constantly present in their decision set. The means of these items were ranked, and the results are as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Mean Ranking of Tourists' Perception of Destination Awareness Attributes Concerning Decision

Measures of destination awareness attributes present in decision	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Political stability in the area	2.00	7.00	5.98	1.17
Overall destination image	1.00	7.00	5.88	1.14
Safety and security at the destination	2.00	7.00	5.80	1.15
Value for money	1.00	7.00	5.79	1.21
Hotel prices	1.00	7.00	5.76	1.21
Geographical location of the destination	1.00	7.00	5.65	1.20
Cleanliness of the destination	1.00	7.00	5.61	1.16
Quality of hotel services in the area	1.00	7.00	5.57	1.10
Cost of transport to the destination	1.00	7.00	5.56	1.18
Climate of the region	1.00	7.00	5.53	1.18
Gastronomy is offered in the area	1.00	7.00	5.50	1.26
Accessibility of the destination	1.00	7.00	5.45	1.15
Entertainment at the destination	1.00	7.00	5.44	1.13
Available tourist attractors and signalling	1.00	7.00	5.38	1.24
Local transportation quality	1.00	7.00	5.37	1.17
Festivals and events in the area	1.00	7.00	5.33	1.12
Attractions of cultural heritage	1.00	7.00	5.29	1.12
The hospitality of the local people	1.00	7.00	5.24	1.36
Unspoiled nature in the destination	1.00	7.00	5.21	1.24
Available information linked to the tourism product offered at the destination	1.00	7.00	5.21	1.14
Sport-recreation activities available	1.00	7.00	5.20	1.16
Shopping opportunities available	1.00	7.00	5.12	1.43
Online booking facilities are available	1.00	7.00	5.08	1.39
Destination reputation related to tourism	1.00	7.00	5.05	1.20
Availability of conference and business meeting facilities	1.00	7.00	5.05	1.27
The available interpretation and education services at the destination	1.00	7.00	4.95	1.29
Availability of up-to-date audio-visual equipment	1.00	7.00	4.93	1.31
Development and innovations of the business tourism product	1.00	7.00	4.92	1.20
The potential for incentive trips	1.00	7.00	4.91	1.59
The use of ICT by tourism firms in the region	1.00	7.00	4.89	1.28
Presence of foreign/international companies	1.00	7.00	4.84	1.55
Human specialists for conference and business events	1.00	7.00	4.78	1.38
Emphasis on community empowerment by the destination managers	1.00	7.00	4.69	1.37
Education profile of employees in tourism	1.00	7.00	4.68	1.67
Tourists' satisfaction management programs at the destination	1.00	7.00	4.60	1.57
Availability of tourism promotion materials in a foreign language	1.00	7.00	4.57	1.65
Knowledge of foreign languages among tourism employees	1.00	7.00	4.53	1.79
Tourism impact management and monitoring by the destination managers	1.00	7.00	4.47	1.70
Valid N (listwise)	282			

Note: Min – Minimum, Max – Maximum, SD – Standard deviation
Scale: 1-Not at all, 2-Very rarely, 3-Rarely, 4-Neutral, 5-Occassionaly, 6-Often, 7-Very often

Table 4 shows that the political stability of the destination ranked high ($M = 5.98$, $SD = 1.17$) in deciding whether to visit the destination, followed by destination image ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 1.14$), then destination safety and security ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 1.15$). The least ranked item relates to tourism impact management and monitoring ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.70$). Generally, the majority of the items occasionally featured in their mind whenever deciding to visit the destination, with respondents not being quite sure about a number of destination awareness attributes. The findings generally suggest that personal safety and security are critical considerations that tourists make while choosing

where to visit. This supports the arguments of Li et al. (2018), Prayag et al. (2017) and Rajesh (2017) that personal safety and security at the destination influence the perception of tourists about the overall destination image, thereby affecting destination loyalty.

Tourists' Perceived Destination Image

Common threads from the interview narratives related to the destination resources and attributes, as building up the general image of the destination. These include: natural resources, great scenery, host communities' hospitality, quality of services provided in the destination, the prices for hotel services, ease of access to the destination and attractions, political stability and the cleanliness of the destination.

Responses from the interview pointed to the availability of similar attractions in the Lake Victoria Region Tourism Circuit to other, more popular destinations in Kenya. For instance, one of the respondents noted that;

"...our destination is just like any other destination in Kenya….we have National Game Reserves here, we have a fresh water Lake, we have National Parks that host the Big 5, and our people are equally hospitable to all tourists…." (Interview: Participant 7)

Another respondent pointed out that:

"...looking at other destinations in Kenya, a tourist who is interested in clean air, tranquillity, spending more time alone while enjoying a similar experience should consider this destination first." (Interview: Participant 2)

It was clear from the interview responses that the destination's image was perceived as a composite of its natural, man-made and cultural resources, similar to other destinations in Kenya.

To further explore destination perceived image, in the quantitative phase, respondents were required to rate on a scale of 1 to 7 their level of agreement as to their perception regarding 10 items describing the destination image. These items were drawn from the findings of the qualitative study and literature review. The means of their responses were ranked as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Mean Ranking of Tourists' Perception of Destination Image

Measures of destination image	Min	Max	Mean	SD
The characteristics of this destination come to my mind quickly when I am thinking about a holiday destination in Kenya	1.00	7.00	5.35	1.11
The destination is safe for everybody in the family	1.00	7.00	5.32	1.11
The image of the destination fits my personality	1.00	7.00	5.22	1.16
Visiting this destination reflects who I am	2.00	7.00	5.22	1.12
The destination is not crowded	2.00	7.00	5.21	1.20
The destination gives an opportunity to have a good time as a family	1.00	7.00	5.20	1.19
The destination has a good name and reputation as a tourist destination	1.00	7.00	5.20	1.19
My colleagues would think highly of me if I visited this destination for tourism purposes	1.00	7.00	5.17	1.25
The destination has many interesting places	1.00	7.00	5.15	1.20
In the destination, there is a variety of things to see/do	1.00	7.00	5.12	1.22
Valid N (listwise)	282			

Note: Min – Minimum, Max – Maximum, SD – Standard deviation
Scale: 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Somewhat disagree, 4-Neither agree nor disagree, 5-Somewhat agree, 6-Agree, and 7-Strongly agree

Table 5 indicates that the respondents somewhat agreed that all 10 items described their perception of the destination image. The highest ranked item relates to characteristics of the destination coming to the tourists' minds whenever they thought of a holiday destination in Kenya (*M = 5.35, SD = 1.11*).

The least ranked item relates to the variety of destination activities (*M = 5.12, SD = 1.22*). The results suggest that the characteristics of the destination, including the attributes such as the Scenery, Mountains, Valleys, Lakes, Rivers, Caves, Cultural heritage, etc., influence the perception of tourists about the overall destination image. The results are consistent with the findings of Önder & Marchiori (2017) found that weather, shopping and natural views influenced the perceived image by prospective tourists in selected cities in the United States. The study findings are also similar to those by Hallmann, Zehrer, & Müller (2015) found that the overall destination image of Winter Sports destinations in Germany and Austria comprises important sports characteristics such as the structural and architectural designs of the sport facilities.

To further explore destination image, respondents were also required to rate on a scale of 1 - 7 the extent to which they would associate 38 attributes with the overall destination image. The mean results were ranked as depicted in Table 6.

Table 6: Mean Ranking of Tourists' Perception of Destination Attributes Associated with Overall Image

Measures of destination attributes associated with the overall destination image	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Political stability	1.00	7.00	5.99	1.15
Hotel prices	1.00	7.00	5.85	1.21
Overall destination image	2.00	7.00	5.80	1.12
Safety and security at the destination	1.00	7.00	5.79	1.19
Value for money	1.00	7.00	5.77	1.17
Cleanliness of the destination	1.00	7.00	5.61	1.16
Geographical location of the destination	1.00	7.00	5.61	1.26
Cost of transport	1.00	7.00	5.61	1.16
Climate of the region	1.00	7.00	5.54	1.19
Accessibility of the destination	1.00	7.00	5.43	1.14
Gastronomy is offered in the area	1.00	7.00	5.39	1.33
Entertainment at the destination	1.00	7.00	5.34	1.26
The hospitality of the local people	1.00	7.00	5.32	1.31
Quality of hotel services	1.00	7.00	5.29	1.19
Available tourist attractors and signalling	1.00	7.00	5.29	1.30
Online booking facilities are available	1.00	7.00	5.29	1.33
Available information linked to the tourism product offered at the destination	1.00	7.00	5.25	1.14
Local transportation quality	1.00	7.00	5.25	1.15
Festivals and events in the area	1.00	7.00	5.25	1.16
The use of ICT by tourism firms in the region	1.00	7.00	5.21	1.19
Attractions of cultural heritage	1.00	7.00	5.21	1.15
Destination reputation related to tourism	1.00	7.00	5.20	1.16
The available interpretation and education services at the destination	1.00	7.00	5.11	1.24
Development and innovations of the business tourism product	1.00	7.00	5.06	1.17
Sport-recreation activities available	1.00	7.00	5.06	1.20
Human specialists for conference and business events	1.00	7.00	5.02	1.27

Measures of destination attributes associated with the overall destination image	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Availability of conference and business meeting facilities	1.00	7.00	4.98	1.28
Shopping opportunities	1.00	7.00	4.95	1.44
Presence of foreign/international companies	1.00	7.00	4.95	1.34
Emphasis on community empowerment by the destination managers	1.00	7.00	4.92	1.32
Tourism impact management and monitoring by the destination managers	1.00	7.00	4.90	1.28
Education profile of employees in tourism	1.00	7.00	4.90	1.43
Unspoiled nature	1.00	7.00	4.89	1.36
The potential for incentive trips	1.00	7.00	4.80	1.47
Tourists' satisfaction management programs at the destination	1.00	7.00	4.80	1.32
Availability of tourism promotion materials in a foreign language	1.00	7.00	4.70	1.46
Availability of up-to-date audio-visual equipment	1.00	7.00	4.68	1.68
Knowledge of foreign languages among tourism employees	1.00	7.00	4.65	1.51
Valid N (listwise)	282			

Note: Min – Minimum, Max – Maximum, SD – Standard deviation
Scale: 1-Not at all, 2-To a small extent, 3-To some extent, 4-Neutral, 5-To a Moderate extent, 6-Great extent, 7-Very Great extent

Table 6 shows that the highest ranked destination attribute is political stability ($M = 5.99, SD = 1.15$) and the least ranked attribute is employees' knowledge of foreign language ($M = 4.65, SD = 1.51$). The results generally indicate that the respondents, to a moderate extent, associate the majority of destination attributes (26) with the overall destination image, with them being not so sure about the remaining 12 attributes. The results are consistent with the statistics provided by KNBS (2019), showing a considerable improvement in the tourism industry in 2018. According to the data from Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), KNBS (2019) tourism earnings increased by 31.3 per cent to KSh 157.4 billion in 2018. Further, the number of international arrivals increased by 14.0 per cent to 2,027.7 thousand in the same year, while Hotel Bed-night occupancy increased by 20.1 per cent to 8,617.9 thousand, of which 52.1 per cent were occupied by residents, indicating the growing importance of domestic tourism (KNBS, 2019). The growth in the hospitality and tourism industry in Kenya during this period could be attributed to the return of political calm following the contested presidential election results in 2017 and the revision of the negative travel advisories issued by the major

tourist source markets. Therefore, political stability formed the greatest part of the destination's Image not only in the Lake Victoria Region Tourism Circuit but in the entire country as seen in Table 6.

Tourists' Perceived Destination Quality

Interview response threads pointed towards the quality of the resources and experiences provided at the destination. For instance, respondents felt that the facilities, hotels, food and drinks, roads, transport services, hotel services, accommodation facilities and the general experiences provided at the destination were of equal standard to what is provided at other destinations in Kenya. One of the respondents pointed out that;

> *"...a tourist coming in from Europe to Kenya has the opportunity to enjoy the same standard of hotels in Kisumu, Eldoret, Kisii, Homa Bay (Pause) just like at Kenya's Coast.... the hotels here provide elaborate menus...our staff are well trained just like those in other hotels outside this destination..."* (Interview: Participant 8)

Similar sentiments were expressed by another respondent:

"...even to international tourists our transport system in the destination is very reliable…. hotels in the region can organise airport transfers seamlessly….and for tourists interested in excursions, the region offers great opportunities….you stay in the city and enjoy the village experience or you chose to stay in the village and enjoy the city experience…we have all that an intending tourist would desire to experience…" (Interview: Participant 6)

Further investigation of destination perceived quality was carried out quantitatively. Respondents were required to rate on a scale of 1-7 their level of agreement on the suitability of 8 statements drawn from the findings of the qualitative study and literature review, in describing the quality offered at the destination. The means of their responses were ranked as presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Mean Ranking of Tourists' Perception of Destination Quality

Measures of perceived quality	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Tourism infrastructure in the destination is reliable	1.00	7.00	5.48	1.19
The quality of infrastructure in the destination is high	1.00	7.00	5.43	1.22
The destination is better compared to similar destinations in Kenya	1.00	7.00	5.42	1.21
Finding information about this destination is easy	1.00	7.00	5.39	1.18
There are high levels of personal safety in the destination	1.00	7.00	5.35	1.11
Accommodation in this destination is of high quality	1.00	7.00	5.35	1.22
The level of cleanliness in the destination is high	1.00	7.00	5.34	1.21
The performance of tourism employees in this destination is superior compared to other destinations	1.00	7.00	5.34	1.15
Valid N (listwise)	282			

Note: Min – Minimum, Max – Maximum, SD – Standard deviation
Scale: 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Somewhat disagree, 4-Neither agree nor disagree, 5-Somewhat agree, 6- Agree, and 7-Strongly agree

Table 7 shows that the highest ranked statement relates to the reliability of tourism infrastructure in the destination (*M = 5.48, SD = 1.19*) and the least ranked relates to the performance of tourism employees in the destination as compared to other destinations (*M = 5.34, SD = 1.15*). The results generally indicated that the respondents somewhat agreed that the eight items describe the quality offered at the destination. This is in line with the arguments of Stanciu & Hapenciuc (2010) that tourists' dissatisfactions, generally, relate to insufficient specialisation of tourism employees, to the disproportion between quality and price and the precarious conditions or general infrastructure state (access roads, utilities, internet etc.), situation that shows direct repercussions upon the quality of commercialised tourism services packages. The findings also support Wu, Li, & Li (2018), who emphasise that physical environment quality is the primary dimension of experiential quality perceived by theme park visitors. Further, the findings are in line with the arguments of Žabkar, Brenčič, & Dmitrović (2010) that destination attributes affect the perceived quality of tourist offerings, which positively relates to satisfaction as well as visitors' behavioural intentions.

The respondents were also required to rate on a scale of 1-7 their general perception of the quality offered at the destination in a continuum of 1 - Very poor, 2 - Poor, 3 - Fair, 4 – Neutral, 5 - Good, 6 - Very good, and 7 – Excellent. Descriptive analysis of this generally shows that the respondents perceived the quality of the Lake Victoria Region Tourism Circuit as a tourist destination to be good (*M = 5.42, SD = 0.70*).

Tourists' Perceived Destination Value

In relation to perceived destination value, common threads in the interview narratives related to the general experience provided at the destination. Interview respondents felt that the experience at the destination represented the best value for both time and money spent at the destination. For instance, one of the respondents gave the following sentiments:

"...tourists in pursuit of spending time with family or alone, in the city or away from the city are more likely to get the best value for their time and money here…" (Interview: Participant 3)

Another respondent also said:

".... going by the variety of the attractions, the un-spoilt nature of the environment here and the opportunity to experience different cultures in this destination, gives any intending tourist the best value for their time and money…" (Interview: Participant 1)

To further investigate perceived destination value in the quantitative phase, respondents were required to rate on a scale of 1-7 their level of agreement on the suitability of each of the 14 statements in describing the value offered at the destination. The statements were drawn from the findings of the qualitative study and literature review. The means of their responses were ranked as shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Mean Ranking of Tourists' Perception of Destination Value

Measures of perceived destination value	Min	Max	Mean	SD
In general, the experience provided here is satisfying	2.00	7.00	5.45	1.06
Visiting this destination provides an opportunity to have fun compared to similar destinations	1.00	7.00	5.40	1.17
The destination provides opportunities to be part of environmental protection	1.00	7.00	5.39	1.12
The destination provides more benefits than other similar destinations in Kenya	1.00	7.00	5.36	1.22
The destination provides opportunities for a feeling of belongingness	1.00	7.00	5.35	1.18
The destination provides opportunities to meet other people	1.00	7.00	5.35	1.27
The destination provides an opportunity to stay in a green hotel	1.00	7.00	5.34	1.16
Being at a tourism meeting or holiday in this destination will help me develop personally	1.00	7.00	5.33	1.30
The price for accommodation and services is competitive as compared to other destinations for me	1.00	7.00	5.32	1.19
The destination provides opportunities to be close to nature	1.00	7.00	5.32	1.23
The price of accommodation is affordable	1.00	7.00	5.26	1.18
Considering the expenses related to visiting this destination, the benefits received are much more significant	1.00	7.00	5.24	1.20
The destination provides opportunities to enjoy authentic culture	1.00	7.00	5.22	1.19
The destination provides opportunities to experience other cultures	1.00	7.00	5.15	1.25
Valid N (listwise)	282			

Note: Min – Minimum, Max – Maximum, SD – Standard deviation
Scale: 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Somewhat disagree, 4-Neither agree nor disagree, 5-Somewhat agree, 6- Agree, and 7-Strongly agree

The results in Table 8 show that the highest ranked item relates to a generally satisfying experience in the destination (*M = 5.45, SD = 1.06*) and the least ranked item relates to experiencing other cultures (*M*

= *5.15, SD = 1.25*). Overall, the respondents somewhat agreed that all 14 items describe their perceived value of the destination. The findings support those of Sangpikul (2018), who found that tourists experience factors (beach attractions and the friendliness of the local people) affect tourist loyalty in an island destination.

When asked to rate the performance of the Lake Victoria Region Tourism circuit in providing them with the expected value, (a continuum of 1 - Very poor, 2 - Poor, 3 - Fair, 4 - Neutral, 5 - Good, 6 - Very good, and 7 – Excellent), the respondents indicated that the performance was good (*M = 5.35, SD = 0.70*).

CONCLUSIONS

The study sought to explore the perceptions of tourists about the Lake Victoria Region Tourism Circuit, Kenya, as a tourist destination. Given the data from the qualitative phase and literature review, four key perception factors were identified, namely; the perceived destination awareness, the perceived destination image, the perceived destination quality, and the perceived destination value. Regarding perceived destination awareness, the study findings suggest that 'the destination's name and reputation' was a critical consideration, while 'the characteristics of the destination that were easy to remember' was the most critical component of the perceived destination image. On the other hand, the study suggests that 'the reliability of tourism-related infrastructure' was the most critical consideration concerning perceived destination image, while 'generally satisfying experience' was the most critical consideration concerning perceived destination value.

Destination managers, while striving to gain a favourable perceived destination image, should enhance the provision of destination core resources, destination support resources, and destination amplifying and qualifying resources while meeting the green consumption desires of the travellers. Further, destination managers should align destination management practices with the satisfaction of green consumption desires of the tourists so as to gain favourable destination awareness. In addition, to attain favourable perceived destination quality, destination managers should enhance the provision of destination core resources, destination support resources and destination management practices, while at the same time satisfying the green consumption desires of the tourists. Similarly, to realise favourable perceived destination value, destination managers should enhance the provision of destination support resources, destination core resources, and destination qualifying and amplifying resources while addressing the psychological and socio-cultural needs of the tourists.

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