Original Article

Effect of Tourists' Perceptions on Destination Loyalty, an Indicator of Destination Competitiveness in the Lake Victoria Region Tourism Circuit, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

To enhance competitiveness, destination managers need to understand the link between tourists' perceptions and destination loyalty. This study sought to evaluate the effect of tourists' perceptions on destination loyalty, an indicator of destination competitiveness. The study employed a cross-sectional survey design using a self-administered questionnaire to collect quantitative data from 299 tourists in 26 classified hotels. Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 3.2.7 was used in data analysis and hypotheses testing. The majority of the hypotheses tested are accepted at $P < .001$, with exogenous variables adequately predicting their corresponding endogenous variables. Destination awareness [DA] ($\beta = .49$), destination image [DI] ($\beta = .32$), and destination perceived value [DPV] ($\beta = .19$), significantly predict Destination loyalty in Lake Victoria region tourism circuit [DCL] ($R2 = .76$) while destination perceived quality [DPQ] ($\beta = .10$, P=.0.08) does not. The findings of this study provide insights for destination managers in the Lake Victoria region tourism circuit, Kenya, on monitoring and enhancing the destination's competitiveness.

INTRODUCTION

To enhance destination competitiveness, destination managers ought to understand how the destination is perceived by current and intending visitors. Positive perceptions about a destination are postulated to enhance loyalty to the destination. This study evaluated the effect of tourists' perceptions about Lake Victoria region tourism circuit on their loyalty towards the destination with a view to establishing the destination's competitiveness level as determined by the interplay between perceptions and loyalty.

LITERATURE

Tourists' Perceptions about Destinations

Majorly, consumer perception studies have been based on the constructs of; awareness, perceived image, perceived value and perceived quality (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993). However, with time, aspects of consumer behaviour such as loyalty have been evaluated alongside awareness, perceived image and perceived quality to form what is known as brand equity (Cobb-Walgren, Ruble, & Donthu, 1995). Based on the work of Keller (1993), there have been numerous attempts to develop conceptual and theoretical frameworks of consumer-specific brand equity models both in the tourism and hospitality sectors (Boo *et al*., 2009; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Lee & Back, 2008; Pike *et al*., 2010; Kim & Kim, 2004). Similarly, several studies have attempted to test the applicability of consumer-based brand equity models using the four constructs. Specifically, the study by Konecnik and Gartner (2007) has been cited as the best example of the destination brand model. This study investigated the relationships among the four brand dimensions and their interplay with the cognitive, affective and conative images of the destination. Further, the study by Boo et al. (2009) encourages the use of consumer-specific brand equity by considering the role of perceived image and perceived value in the brand equity model. Similarly, Pike et al. (2010) encourage the use of consumer-centred brand theory by investigating the linkages between loyalty, image, quality and awareness. The succeeding section focuses on destination awareness (salience), perceived destination image, perceived destination quality, and perceived destination value.

Destination Awareness

Aaker (1996) describes brand awareness as "the strength of a brand's presence in the consumer's mind and the capacity of the potential buyer to associate the brand with a particular product line". Creating awareness is considered the initial step in attaining brand equity and enhancing the value of a particular brand (Gartner & Konecnik Ruzzier, 2011). In the context of tourism, awareness is seen as the basic and largest source of destination choice decisions by travellers (Um & Crompton, 1990). Awareness has also been noted to influence the feelings people have towards a particular destination.

The studies by Boo et al. (2009), Konecnik and Gartner (2007), Lee and Back (2008), and Pike *et al*. (2010) identify awareness as one of the critical dimensions of destination branding theory. In particular, Konecnik and Gartner (2007) place awareness as the most important variable in evaluating destination brand value, while measured alongside image, quality and loyalty. Similarly, Boo *et al*. (2009) emphasise the important role of awareness in the assessment of destination brand value from the perspective of tourists.

Tourism scholars have proposed different levels of assessing awareness, including "brand recall" and "brand recognition" (Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2005; Yoo & Donthu, 2001, 2002). The current study conceptualises destination awareness as; "knowledge about the destination", "ability to recall the destination and its attributes", and "the ease of recognising the destination amongst other destinations". Literature further indicates that some scholars considered brand salience to be more important than awareness. For example, Keller (2003) identifies brand salience as the foundation pillar of the consumer-based brand equity hierarchy. According to Keller (2003), higher brand value is attained after a brand is remembered for the reasons intended and not just achieving general awareness. This study does not focus on salience but considers awareness as conceptualised to include aspects of salience, such as "the ease of recognising the destination amongst other destinations". This, therefore, helps the researcher capture the ability of respondents to recall the destination and its attributes in the pool of other destinations offering similar attributes. As seen from the literature review (Howard, 1963; Howard & Sheth, 1969; Pike, 2006; Thompson & Cooper, 1979; Woodside & Sherrell, 1977), from a pool of existing destinations, consumers will constantly consider two plus or minus four destinations at one time in their decision set. Therefore, this study proposes that the constant presence of a destination in a tourist's mind and decision set all the time while faced with a travel decision is the basic source of competitive edge for the destination.

Perceived Destination Image

Destination image implies the "overall mental picture (imagery) of a destination" held by a tourist at a given time (Crompton, 1979; Phelps, 1986; Gartner & Hunt, 1987). Destination image, therefore, is a constituent of someone's beliefs, ideas, and mental representations about the attributes of the destination. The attitude of tourists towards a destination has been noted to be influenced by the cognitive, affective and conative aspects of destination image (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1974). Moreover, Stern and Krakover (1993) point out that destination image has a direct effect on consumer preferences. Further, studies by Goodall (1988), Lin et al. (2007) and Prayag (2009) suggest that matching the destination image with tourists' perceptions promotes the likelihood of destination choice and that a favourable destination image helps shape consumer preferences. Thus, evaluating the perceived destination image across time is critical for the successful management of destinations (Gartner & Hunt, 1987; Kotler, Haider & Rein, 1993; San Martin & Rodriguez, 2008).

Literature review shows that image is a composite of several dimensions, including behavioural, affective and cognitive dimensions (Pike & Ryan, 2004; White, 2004). Previous research on image has been focused on either all the dimensions of image (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Birgit, 2001; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Court & Lupton, 1997; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Lin *et al.*, 2007) or just one of the dimensions of image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Bigne *et al.*, 2001). Notably, the perceived destination image has been identified as a critical element of the tourist destination choice process (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Bigne et al., 2001; Birgit, 2001; Castro, Armario, & Ruiz, 2007; Chen & Tsai, 2007). Literature review further identifies a positive correlation between favourable destination image and destination choice (Alhemoud & Armstrong, 1996; Birgit, 2001; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). The study by Bigne et al. (2001) suggests that destination image has a potential positive influence on destination experiences, tourist satisfaction and future behaviour. Moreover, the perceived attractiveness of a destination has been noted to increase place attachment and loyalty to the destination (Hou, Lin, & Morais, 2005).

In comparison to the other constructs forming destination brand equity, and in the context of tourism destination branding, destination image has received the greatest attention (Gartner & Konecnik

Ruzzier, 2011; Gnoth, 2002; Qu et al., 2011). However, it is important to note that dedicating a lot of attention to destination image may obscure the actual intention of evaluating image (Cai, 2002; Boo et al., 2009; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Similar to destination awareness, destination image plays a critical role in the formation of the destination brand model (Cai, 2002; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Lee & Back, 2008). However, there is no universally accepted measurement scale for destination image. On one hand, several scholars propose the assessment of the cognitive-affective nature of destination image, where the concept integrates both the individuals' cognitive evaluations alongside the affective evaluations of the tourist destination (Kim & Richardson, 2003; Pike & Ryan, 2004). As pointed out by Baloglu and McCleary (1999), there is an immense need to understand the process of image formation. Critical factors influencing image formation include; psychological variables, social variables, source of the image information, and previous experience at the destination (Baloglu, 2001; Hui & Wan, 2003; Rittichainuwat, Qu, & Brown, 2001). Research on image confirms the existence of three interrelated dimensions of image namely, cognitive, affective and conative appraisal dimensions (Walmsley & Young, 1998). Cognitive appraisal refers to the knowledge and beliefs of the tourist about the destination, while affective dimension implies the tourists' association and feelings towards the destination (Walmsley & Young, 1998). The conative dimension of image implies the ultimate action or behaviour of the tourist towards the destination. Therefore, conative image reflects the final action taken after image formation during the cognitive and affective stages, thus critical for loyalty decisions (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Gartner, 1993; Holbrook, 1978; Lin *et al*., 2007). Hence, together, the three image components play a critical role in shaping tourists' positive perceptions. Therefore, to some extent, tourist destination image plays an important role in determining destination competitiveness insofar as the destination's

competitive position relies upon an image that is appealing to tourists. Destination managers should therefore strive to create an image that appeals to potential tourists to enhance visitation levels.

Destination image is also seen to influence the level of awareness of the destination (Gartner, 2009), further enhancing competitiveness (Pike, 2007) and choice (Cai, 2002) by the potential of the destination. Image also influences the level of satisfaction according to Wang and Hsu (2010). Therefore, it may be concluded that destination image will affect destination competitiveness (Pike, 2007), as it influences tourists' choices as well as their satisfaction (Wang & Hsu, 2010). The current study conceptualises image as the general mental evaluation of the overall destination imagery by an individual tourist, as suggested in the studies by Boo *et al*. (2009) and Chitty et al. (2007).

Over the years, there has been an immense desire by scholars (Gartner & Hunt, 1987; Pike, 2002, 2007) to understand the relationship between tourist behaviour and destination image. Research confirms that indeed destination image influences the behaviour of tourists towards the destination (Chon, 1990, 1991; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). Destination image also plays a critical role in tourists' decision-making process, their evaluation of satisfaction levels as well as their future relationship with the destination (Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2001; Beerli & Martin, 2004). Literature also confirms that destination image greatly influences the expectations of tourists before travelling to the destination as well as their experience at the destination (Phelps, 1986; Font, 1997). Therefore, destination managers should match the projected destination image with the actual offerings at the destination, as this influences tourists' satisfaction levels (Oppermann, 1999; Morgan & Pritchard, 1998).

Perceived Destination Quality

Previous research has recognised the critical role of perceived quality in determining brand equity. For

example, perceived quality has been seen to influence buying decisions, inclinations, intent to purchase, consumers' willingness to pay higher prices for a product, as well as their likelihood to recommend a product to others (del Rio, Vazquez, & Iglesias, 2001; Low & Lamb, 2000). Keller (2003) describes 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". The concept of perceived quality has drawn a considerable level of research interest for tourism scholars over the years (Boo et al., 2009; Gartner & Konecnik Ruzzier, 2011; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Pike et al., 2010). The current study conceptualises perceived destination quality as the tourists' perceptions of the quality of the destination attributes and the entire destination as a whole. For instance, previous research (Buhalis, 2000) establishes that the quality of a destination's infrastructure influences the performance of the destination as well as loyalty towards the destination. Based on these arguments, therefore, the current study proposes that the perceived destination quality will positively influence destination loyalty.

Perceived Destination Value

Perceived value implies the benefits that consumers believe they will receive after consuming the product or service relative to the cost they paid for the product or service (McDougall & Levesque, 2000). In describing perceived value, Zithaml and Bitner (2000) add that perceived value implies the general evaluation of the benefit that a service or a product offers the consumer, subject to the consumer's perceptions of the product or service and the cost of obtaining it. In spite of drawing immense research interest among scholars, there lacks a universally agreed-upon definition of what perceived value is (McDougall & Levesque, 2000; Zeithaml, 1988; Woodruff, 1997). For instance, Cravens et al. (1988) argue that value perception is equivalent to the difference between the quality and

price of a commodity. Similarly, Zeithaml (1988) considers value as the general feeling of consumers about the efficacy of a product as determined by their perceptions of the price they pay and what they are offered. Several other scholars (Bradley & Sparks, 2012; Gallarza & Saura, 2006; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001; Woodruff, 1997) have expressed interest in the conceptualisation of perceived value as the trade-off between the cost of something and what is actually received. Following this line of argument, the current study conceptualises destination perceived value as the evaluation by the tourist of the destination offerings, subject to the costs paid to be at the destination, including the cost of travel, time, as well as the opportunity cost.

Literature review also shows that some scholars (Gallarza & Saura, 2006; Sweeney, Soutar, & Johnson, 1999) have conceptualised perceived value as the "value for money", even though that doesn't reflect the overall meaning of the concept. Perceived value has been associated with the perceived quality or performance, perceived cost, as well as future purchase intentions. Therefore, perceived value has been suggested to be the most suitable measure of consumers' service quality perceptions (Bolton & Drew, 1991). Therefore, it is recommended that all aspects of perceived value should be evaluated alongside value for money (Gallarza & Saura, 2006; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Sheth, Newman, and Gross (1991) identify and recommend four dimensions of perceived value, namely; (1) emotional, (2) social, (3) quality/performance, and (4) price/value for money.

According to literature on tourism services, perceived quality and monetary price are two major antecedents of perceived value (Chen & Chen, 2010). Other scholars (Baker et al., 2002; Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000; Parasuraman & Grewal, 2000) have also identified perceived quality as a perfect predictor of perceived value. Specifically, Cronin et al. (2000) point out that perceived quality positively influences perceived value. In addition, perceived price has been seen to negatively influence

perceived value (Sweeney, Soutar, & Johnson, 1999; Zeithaml, 1988). In their study of quality-value-satisfaction-loyalty chain, Bradley and Sparks (2012) discovered that perceived value is influenced by several factors, including the consumption experience, previous knowledge, consumer characteristics and characteristics of the product.

Notably too is the fact that most previous studies have given more emphasis on the role of cognitive factors as predictors of perceived value. In this regard, Dumand and Mattila (2005) have pointed out the little interest in investigating the role of affective factors on value perceptions. However, the study by Petrick (2003) confirms that affective factors, including quality of service, emotional attachments, monetary price, behavioural price and reputation, have a significant influence on perceived value. Moreover, Lee, Lee, and Choi (2011) emphasise the role of emotional attachment and functional value to festival visitors. In addition, the study by Dumand and Mattila (2005) also highlights the important role of affective factors such as experience enjoyment in the perceived value among cruise ship holiday makers. The findings of studies by Mechinda *et al*. (2009), Boo et al. (2009) and Chitty et al. (2007) identified the existence of a positive relationship between perceived value and destination loyalty. The current study therefore proposes that the perceived destination value will positively influence loyalty towards the destination, thus influencing the overall competitiveness level of the destination.

Destination Loyalty

Literature shows that loyalty has been conceptualised either as attitudinal loyalty or behavioural loyalty (Jones & Taylor, 2007; Li & Petrick, 2008). Attitudinal loyalty implies the willingness of the consumer to make repeat purchases of the same product or service and identify with the particular product or service in the future (Atilgan *et al*., 2005; Russell-Bennett, McColl-Kennedy, & Coote, 2007). Thus, attitudinal loyalty implies the attitude of the consumer or traveller towards a destination as measured by their willingness to visit the destination in future and their willingness to communicate the benefits of visiting the destination to others. On the contrary, behavioural loyalty implies the willingness of the consumer to make re-purchase decisions in future as measured by their repeat buying behaviour (Pappu *et al*., 2005). Thus, behavioural loyalty refers to the frequency of repeat purchase or the relative volume of the same brand purchase.

Unlike in the general marketing discipline, where loyalty has been extensively researched, research on destination loyalty among tourism scholars is limited (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Pike, 2010; Oppermann, 1999). Literature shows that destination branding studies have also incorporated both attitudinal and behavioural dimensions of loyalty in destination branding frameworks (Boo *et al*., 2009; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Pike, 2010; Qu *et al*., 2011). Literature further shows that destination loyalty influences tourists' behaviour during the destination choice process (Chon, 1992; Um & Crompton, 1990). Some scholars have measured destination loyalty using other indicators such as "intention to visit the destination" and "the likelihood of tourists to recommend the destination to others" (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Chen & Gursoy, 2001).

However, as pointed out in some studies (Chen & Gursoy, 2001; Huddleston et al., 2004; Oliver, 1999; Peter & Olson, 1999), repeat purchase behaviour alone is not adequate for accounting for the same product repeat-purchase decisions by consumers across time. For example, several other studies (Bigne et al., 2001; Lee, 2006; Lee, Graefe, & Burns, 2007; Lee, Yoon, & Lee, 2007; Yoon & Uysal, 2005) have proven that tourist's satisfaction with destination products and services is a better predictor of their future relationship and behaviour towards the destination. The current study hypothesises loyalty as the indicator of future

behaviour, which translates to destination competitiveness.

Several studies have confirmed that destination loyalty is the final and core factor in predicting the future travel demand by enhancing competitiveness of a particular destination as compared to destinations with similar attributes (Chen & Gursoy, 2001; Oppermann, 2000; Petrick & Backman, 2002; Petrick, Morais, & Norman, 2001; Petrick, Tonner, & Quinn, 2006; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). The implication of these studies is the ultimate need for destinations to attain and maintain loyalty from their existing clients to remain successful and competitive. The current study operationalises loyalty as the likelihood to revisit the destination by the current tourists as well as their willingness to recommend the destination to other willing travellers (Huddleston *et al*., 2004; Oppermann, 2000; Petrick, Morais, & Norman, 2001). Therefore, destination loyalty is vital for achieving repeat visitation and positive word of mouth among visitors (Gartner & Hunt, 1987; Li & Petrick, 2008). As noted by Reichheld, Markey, and Hopton (2000), it is more desirable and cheaper to retain existing customers, even though attracting new ones is recommended.

Literature review further indicates that in the short term, repeat customers spend more and are less price-conscious, translating to increased profits and growth for the business (Reichheld et al., 2000). The study by Jones and Taylor (2007) further indicates that loyal customers are more likely to pass positive word-of-mouth messages about the business compared to first-time clients. Positive word-of-mouth messages, repeat purchase decisions as well as willingness to recommend the destination to others could be considered as indicators of destination loyalty which translates to destination competitiveness (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Bigne et al., 2001; Cai, Wu, & Bai, 2004; Lee, Yoon, & Lee, 2007; Um, Chon, & Ro, 2006; Yoon & Uysal, 2005).

Nevertheless, despite these immense pluses, few studies attempt to investigate the role of a traveller's perception on destination loyalty, particularly in the Lake Victoria Region Tourism Circuit, Kenya. Hence, the current study employs both the behavioural and attitudinal dimensions of loyalty as the dependent variables since they are measures of initial destination choice and future travel preference or intent to visit. This view is supported by Riley et al. (2001).

Tourists' Perceptions and Destination Loyalty

A number of studies have found a positive relationship between tourists' perceptions and destination loyalty (Russell-Bennett et al., 2007; Boo et al., 2009; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Pike, 2010; Qu et al., 2011). However, no study has been conducted in the Lake Victoria region tourism circuit to investigate the role that tourists' perceptions play in their loyalty towards the destination.

Destination Awareness and Destination Loyalty

Several authors support the view that strong brand loyalty is an indicator of customers' high brand awareness (e.g., Boo et al., 2009; Kim & Kim, 2004; Nguyen, Barrett, & Miller, 2011; Pike et al., 2010). However, most of these studies have been limited to establishing the link between brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality and destination loyalty, with brand image being the mediating variable. For example, Baloglu (2001) found a positive relationship between brand awareness and brand image, with image being the mediating variable between loyalty and awareness. As such, the direct link between destination awareness and destination loyalty has not been adequately investigated in the context of the study area. To address this gap, this study investigates the effect of destination awareness on destination loyalty.

Perceived Image and Destination Loyalty

Studies by Boo et al. (2009), Gartner and Konecnik Ruzzier (2011), and Konecnik and Gartner (2007)

emphasise the critical role of image in brand value formation, hence, this study considers perceived image as a key construct in tourists' perception evaluation. Other studies have indicated that destination image positively affects future behaviour of tourists (Court & Lupton, 1997; Rittichainuwat, Qu, & Brown, 2001). However, most of these empirical studies have exclusively analysed the cognitive component of destination image through the structured technique or multi-attribute approach (e.g. Chon, 1991; Court & Lupton, 1997; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Gartner & Shen, 1992). Few others have included both cognitive and affective attributes in the measurement of destination image (Baloglu, 2001; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Kim & Richardson, 2003). However, in line with this new approach, there lacks a empirical evidence linking the destination's image and its future behaviour about Lake Victoria region tourism circuit as a destination.

Perceived Quality and Destination Loyalty

Previous research has considered elements of perceived quality, such as the perceived quality of a destination's infrastructure, as impacting destination performance (Buhalis, 2000). Perceived quality has been found to positively relate to brand loyalty (Jayanti & Ghosh, 1996). Other studies have also shown that quality is an antecedent of both satisfaction (Caruana, Money, & Berthon, 2000; Baker & Crompton, 2000) and perceived value (Baker et al., 2002; Petrick, 2002). Further, perceived quality is a good predictor of repurchase intentions (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Getty & Thompson, 1994). According to Ruyter, Wetzels, and Bloemer (1998), "quality has an impact on customer preference and the willingness to recommend the service to other consumers" and "leads to a more favourable disposition towards the service provider and the commitment to re-patronage increases."

Notably, the extensive research seems to discuss the relationship between quality and perceived value (Baker et al., 2002; Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000; Grewal, Monroe, & Krishnan, 1998; Parasuraman & Grewal, 2000; Zeithaml, 1988), with quality being an antecedent of perceived value. A gap, therefore, exists in the role that perceived quality plays in future behaviour. This study, therefore, seeks to establish if there exists a direct relationship between the perceived quality of a destination and loyalty towards the destination, rather than being embedded in perceived value.

Perceived Value and Destination Loyalty

Several studies have investigated the relationships between antecedents and outcomes of perceived value (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Bradley & Sparks, 2012; Chen & Chen, 2010; Chen & Tsai, 2008; Gallarza & Saura, 2006; Hutchinson, Lai, & Wang, 2009; Petrick & Backman, 2001; Williams & Soutar, 2009). These studies confirm that value is an important antecedent to satisfaction and customer intention or loyalty (Baker et al., 2002; Bradley & Sparks, 2012; Lee, Yoon, & Lee, 2007; Williams & Soutar, 2009; Chen & Chen, 2010). Therefore, firms and destinations should acknowledge the significant role of perceived value in order to be competitive in the marketplace (Pechlaner, Smeral, & Matzler, 2002; Petrick, 2003). In the current study context, no study has been conducted to establish the effect of perceived value and destination loyalty. The study, therefore, postulates that the perceived value of a destination is an antecedent of the destination's loyalty.

Study Hypotheses

Given the literature review above;

The following hypotheses were tested:

H_1: Perceived destination awareness significantly affects tourists' destination loyalty in the Lake Victoria Region Tourism Circuit, Kenya.

H_2: Perceived destination image significantly affects tourists' destination loyalty in the Lake Victoria Region Tourism Circuit, Kenya.

H₃: Perceived destination quality significantly affects tourists' destination loyalty in the Lake Victoria Region Tourism Circuit, Kenya.

H₄: Perceived destination value significantly affects tourists' destination loyalty in the Lake Victoria Region Tourism Circuit, Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

Study Area

The study area was the Lake Victoria Region tourism circuit in Kenya, encompassing Bungoma, Busia, Homa-Bay, Kakamega, Kisii, Kisumu, Migori, Nyamira, Siaya, Kericho, Trans-Nzoia, Bomet, and Vihiga counties. This region, home to over 10 million people with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, lies between latitudes 1°16'N and 1°54'S and longitudes 33°55' and 35°51'E. The climate is generally mild (19-25°C year-round) with a modified equatorial rainfall pattern of long rains (March-June) and short rains (September-November), averaging 700mm to 2000mm annually. Lake Victoria Region offers diverse tourism attractions, including freshwater resources, mountains, indigenous forests, caves, national parks, beaches, waterfalls, hot springs, islands, and cultural shrines. Despite this potential, the region's natural and cultural capital is underexploited, hindering tourism development. Limited understanding of the interplay between the regions' attributes, visitor perceptions and destination loyalty has contributed to poor competitiveness of the destination, compared to other destinations in the country.

Research Approach

The study followed a quantitative research approach, acknowledging its limitations, to investigate the effect of tourist perceptions on destination loyalty in the Lake Victoria Region tourism circuit, Kenya.

Population and Sample

The study population comprised tourists visiting hotels and attractions in the circuit between August and October 2018. To generate representative sample sizes from the population of tourists, Creative Research Systems (2003) formula was used. Using the formula, the sample size was determined as follows:

$$SS = \frac{Z^2 \times (p) \times (1-p)}{C^2}$$

Where:

SS = Sample Size

Z = Z-value (e.g., 1.96 for a 95 per cent confidence level)

P = Percentage of population picking a choice, expressed as a decimal (.5 used for sample size needed)

C = Confidence interval, expressed as decimal (e.g., .04 = +/- 4 percentage points)

$$SS = \frac{1.96^2 \times (0.5) \times (1-0.5)}{0.04^2}$$

$$SS = 600$$

The required sample size for an infinite population is thus 600.

Since the population of tourists by use of hotel rooms was estimated at 461, and assuming that each room is occupied by a different tourist only once throughout the data collection period, the new sample size for the study was calculated as shown below.

$$New\ SS = \frac{SS}{(1 + (SS-1)/pop))}$$

Where pop = finite population

$$New\ SS = \frac{600}{(1 + ((600-1)/461))}$$

$$New\ SS = 260.943396$$

$$New\ SS = 261\ Tourists$$

To obtain the actual sample size, multi-stage sampling was used. Stratified sampling and proportionate sampling were used to obtain samples whereby hotels were first stratified into geographic strata, i.e. hotels located in each of the identified counties. Stratification helped in splitting the heterogeneous population into fairly homogeneous groups so that samples could be drawn from the group with precision. Using a minimum sample size of 261, the respondents were drawn proportionately from the strata using the formula as shown below. Proportional sampling provides the researcher with a way to achieve greater representativeness in the sample of the population.

$$\begin{aligned}&Actual\ Sample\ Size\\&= \frac{Population\ Strata}{Estimated\ Study\ Population}\\&\times Minimum\ Sample\ Size\ for\ the\ Study\end{aligned}$$

Where:

Population strata = 243 tourists in Uasin Gishu county hotels, 53 tourists in Kisii county hotels, 198 tourists in Kisumu county hotels, 16 in Kakamega county hotels, and 17 tourists from Elgeyo-Markwet county hotels.

Where, Estimated study population = 461; and Study sample size = 261 Simple random sampling was used to select the actual hotels from which the respondents were obtained.

Finally, convenience sampling was considered to select actual respondents for the study from the selected hotels (i.e. 299 tourists). At least 10 respondents were picked from each selected hotel, 10 being the lowest number of rooms in all the hotels sampled. Similarly, Convenience

Data Collection

Self-administered questionnaires were used for data collection. The questionnaire covered tourist perceptions and destination loyalty. A seven-point Likert scale was used for responses, providing nuanced data and suitability for linear statistical analysis.

Variable Measurement

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 to mind very quickly. 7. Whenever I think of a tourism holiday in Kenya, this destination comes to 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 a tourist destination.

Perception Measure	Measured Items
Destination quality	16. My colleagues would think highly of me if I visited this destination for tourism purposes.
	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.

To measure perceptions, respondents were required to evaluate their level of agreement on the extent to which their perceptions influenced destination loyalty on a scale of 1-Strongly Disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Somewhat Disagree, 4-Neither Agree nor Disagree, 5-Somewhat Agree, 6- Agree, and 7-Strongly Agree.

Table 2: Tourists' Destination Loyalty Measures

Destination Loyalty Measure	Measured Item
Attitudinal measures	1. I intend to visit this destination in the future.
	2. This destination would be my preferred choice for a vacation.
Behavioural measures	3. I would advise other people to visit this destination.
	4. I will tell other people about the benefits of visiting this destination.

To measure tourists' destination loyalty, respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1 – 7 (1-Strongly Disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Somewhat Disagree, 4-Neither Agree nor Disagree, 5-Somewhat Agree, 6- Agree, and 7-Strongly Agree), their extent of agreement with four items regarding their future relation with the destination.

Data Analysis

PLS-SEM was conducted in SmartPLS software version 3.2.7. Latent variables were created for tourist perceptions and destination loyalty. Measurement models were assessed for internal consistency, convergent validity, discriminant validity and collinearity. The results are as provided below.

Measurement Models Assessment

The measurement models' assessment results for internal consistency and convergent validity are presented in Table 3, while the results of discriminant validity are presented in Table 4. Table 5 presents results for collinearity assessment.

Internal Consistency

Cronbach's alpha (α), composite reliability coefficients (Pc) and rho_A coefficient as defined in Dijkstra and Henseler (2015) were used to assess the model's internal consistency. Values above .70

indicate higher levels of internal consistency (Chin, 2010; Hair et al., 2014; Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015). The results in Table 3 indicate that the measures were robust in terms of their internal consistency reliability as indexed by the composite reliability (Pc). Table 3 shows that the composite reliabilities (Pc), for instance, ranged from .83 (Destination loyalty) to .94 (Destination perceived value). This is an indication of internal consistency and that all constructs are within accepted limits and hence reliable.

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity was assessed using the outer loadings > .70 and the Fornell and Larcker criterion, average variance extracted (AVE) > .50. Table 3 shows that all the outer loadings were above .70. This implies that all the constructs explained more than 50% of their indicator's variance. Consistent with the guidelines of Fornell and Larcker, the average variance extracted (AVE) for each measure exceeded .50. The table indicates that AVEs for this study ranged from .54 (Destination loyalty [DCL]) to .63 (Destination perceived value [DPV]), implying that, on average, each construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators.

Reliability and Convergent Validity

Table 3: Reliability and Convergent Validity Results

Constructs and measured variables	Load	α	rho_A	*Pc*	AVE
Destination Awareness		0.91	0.91	0.91	0.60
The destination has a good name and reputation	0.73				
I have seen a lot of advertising promoting tourism in the Lake Victoria Region circuit	0.75				
Whenever I think of a tourism holiday in Kenya, this destination comes to mind immediately	0.80				
The destination is well-positioned in the media	0.71				
The online presence of the destination is high	0.85				
The characteristics of this destination come to mind very quickly	0.82				
The destination is very famous	0.74				
Destination Loyalty		0.83	0.83	0.83	0.54
I would advise other people to visit this destination	0.68				
I intend to visit this destination in the future	0.72				

Constructs and measured variables	Load	α	rho_A	*Pc*	AVE
I will tell other people about the benefits of visiting this destination	0.78				
This destination would be my preferred choice for a vacation	0.76				
Destination Image		0.87	0.87	0.87	0.57
My colleagues would think highly of me if I visited this destination for tourism purposes	0.76				
Visiting this destination reflects who I am	0.72				
The destination has many interesting places	0.78				
The destination is not crowded	0.78				
In the destination, there is a variety of things to see/do	0.74				
Destination Perceived Quality		0.90	0.91	0.90	0.61
The destination is better compared to similar destinations in Kenya	0.82				
The level of cleanliness in the destination is high	0.74				
The quality of infrastructure in the destination is high	0.83				
Tourism infrastructure in the destination is reliable	0.79				
There are high levels of personal safety in the destination	0.77				
Accommodation in this destination is of high quality	0.74				
Destination Perceived Value		0.94	0.94	0.94	0.63
The price of accommodation is affordable	0.77				
The destination provides opportunities to enjoy authentic culture	0.82				
The destination provides opportunities for the feeling of belongingness	0.78				
The destination provides more benefits than other similar destinations in Kenya	0.79				
The price for accommodation and services is competitive as compared to other destinations for me	0.73				
The destination provides opportunities to experience other cultures	0.87				
Visiting this destination provides an opportunity to have fun compared to similar destinations	0.77				
The destination provides an opportunity to stay in a green hotel	0.79				
The destination provides opportunities to be close to nature	0.83				

Note: Load – Loadings, α - Cronbach's alpha, *Pc* - Composite Reliability, AVE - Average Variance Extracted, **rho_A -** coefficient Dijkstra-Henseler.

Discriminant Validity

This study employed the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) in assessing discriminant validity. Specifically, this study used the conservative heterotrait-monotrait ratio of HTMT.85. Table 4 provides the HTMT results with values ranging between .32 in respect to HTMT (Destination perceived quality [DPQ], Destination image [DI]) and .69 in respect to HTMT (Destination loyalty [DCL], Destination awareness [DA]).

Comparing these results with the threshold values as defined in HTMT.85 (Henseler et al., 2014) does not give rise to a discriminant validity concern.

Table 4: Discriminant Validity (Heterotrait-monotrait Ratio [HTMT.85] Criterion) Results

	DA	DCL	DI	DPQ	DPV
DA					
DCL	0.69				
DI	0.48	0.66			
DPQ	0.43	0.43	0.32		
DPV	0.49	0.64	0.61	0.42	

Note: DA - Destination Awareness, DCL - Destination Loyalty, DI - Destination Image, DPQ - Destination Perceived Quality, DPV - Destination Perceived Value,

Structural Models

Collinearity Assessment

Multicollinearity issue in the study was assessed using the variance inflation factor (VIF) in SmartPLS 3.2.7, where a VIF value ≥ 5 indicated a potential collinearity problem (Hair et al., 2011; Hair et al., 2013; Hair et al., 2014; Petter, Straub & Rai, 2007). Table 5 shows the result of collinearity assessment among the study constructs as indexed by the variance inflation factor (VIF) values. All the VIFs were < 5, suggesting that multicollinearity was not an issue.

The highest VIF value (2.69) is registered between Destination awareness (DA) and Destination loyalty (DCL), while the lowest VIF value of 1.43 is recorded between Destination perceived quality (DPQ) and Destination loyalty.

Table 5: Direct Hypotheses Testing and Variance Accounted for (VIF) Results

Paths	β	Mean	SD	T Statistic	P Value	VIF	Sig. Level	Conclusion
Destination Awareness -> Destination Loyalty	0.49	0.49	0.09	5.59	0.00	2.69	***	H_1 accepted
Destination Image -> Destination Loyalty	0.32	0.31	0.08	3.92	0.00	2.05	***	H_2 accepted
Destination Perceived Quality -> Destination Loyalty	0.10	0.12	0.06	1.74	0.08	1.43	NS	H_3 rejected
Destination Perceived Value -> Destination Loyalty	0.19	0.19	0.09	2.22	0.03	2.54	**	H_4 accepted

Note: β – beta coefficient, SD – Standard Deviation; Sig. – Significance level; NS – Not significant
** $p \leq .05$. *** $p \leq .01$. **** $p \leq .001$.

Structural Model Path Coefficients and Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

Table 6 shows that the R^2 value for the endogenous constructs is above the 25% accepted level set as the threshold in this study.

Table 6: Determinant of Coefficients (R^2) Results for the Endogenous Constructs

	R Square	R Square Adjusted	Cut Off	Description
Destination Awareness	0.85	0.84	>.25	Substantial
Destination Loyalty	0.76	0.76	>.25	Substantial
Destination Image	0.55	0.54	>.25	Moderate
Destination Perceived Quality	0.34	0.33	>.25	Moderate
Destination Perceived Value	0.64	0.64	>.25	Substantial

Note N/A – Not applicable

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study sought to investigate the extent to which the tourists' perceptions affect destination loyalty. To address the objective, both the coefficient of determinants, R-squared values and effect size measures (f^2) were used. The study considered four tourist perception constructs as mentioned in previous sections, namely, destination awareness, destination image, destination perceived quality and destination value.

The results (Table 5) indicate that tourists' perception about destination awareness significantly affected tourists' destination loyalty ($\beta = .49$, $t = 5.59$, $p = .00$), as did destination image ($\beta = .32$, $t = 3.92$, $p = .00$) and destination perceived value ($\beta = .19$, $t = 2.22$, $p = .03$). However, destination perceived quality had no significant effect on tourists' destination loyalty ($\beta = .10$, $t = 1.74$, $p = .08$). Destination awareness (DA), destination image (DI), destination perceived quality (DPQ) and destination perceived value (DPV) accounted for 76% variance ($R^2 = .76$) explained in tourists' destination loyalty (see Table 6). Table 7, however, shows that the exogenous constructs destination perceived quality (DPQ), and destination perceived value (DPV), for explaining the endogenous latent variable destination loyalty (DCL), have small effect size ($f^2 = .06$). On the other hand, exogenous constructs destination awareness (DA) and destination image (DI), for explaining the endogenous construct destination loyalty (DCL), have large effect size ($f^2 = .76$) and ($f^2 = .39$) respectively. This implies that of the 76% of variance destination loyalty (DCL), destination awareness (DA) explains for the largest variance, followed by destination image in comparison to destination perceived quality (DPQ) and destination perceived value (DPV). The findings support previous research (Chi, Huang, & Nguyen, 2020; H. K. Kim & Lee, 2018; Mechinda, Serirat, Popaijit, Lertwannawit, & Anuwichanont, 2010; San Martín, Herrero, & García de los Salmones, 2018; Tsaur, Yen, & Yan, 2016; Ye, 2012) who identify destination awareness and destination image as two of the key elements of destination branding that play an important role in the traveller's destination choice decision. Destination awareness is the strength of the destination's overall image or brand, constantly present in a traveller's mind. This implies that the characteristics of the destination constantly present in the traveller's mind and those easy to recall for example; political stability, geographical location, overall destination image, safety and security, climate, gastronomy, accessibility, local transport quality, attractions of cultural heritage, the hospitality of the local people etc., will largely predict destination loyalty. Therefore, to enhance destination loyalty, destination managers should ensure online presence and advertisement of the destination attributes as proposed by Xia et al. (2018). The findings of this study, however, contradict sentiments drawn from the studies of Baker et al. (2000), Baker and Crompton (2000), Buhalis (2000), Caruana et al. (2000), Jayanti and Ghosh (1996), Petrick (2002), Ruyter et al. (1998), all who have found that quality leads re-visit decisions and recommendations. The outcome of this study would be explained by the fact that the Lake Victoria region tourism circuit is largely

unexploited, with the touristic quality of the destination's attractions and amenities remaining original. Given this outcome, it would be important that future studies consider the development stage and age of the destination while evaluating the effect of perceptions on destination loyalty.

Table 7: Relative Impact of Exogenous Construct on Endogenous Construct (f^2 effect size)

Exogenous Constructs on Endogenous Constructs	f^2	Effect
Destination awareness (DA) → Destination loyalty (DCL)	0.76	Large
Destination image (DI) → Destination loyalty (DCL)	0.39	Large
Destination perceived quality (DPQ) → Destination loyalty (DCL)	0.06	Small
Destination perceived value (DPV) → Destination loyalty (DCL)	0.06	Small

CONCLUSIONS

The study highlights important information on the influence of tourists' perceptions on destination loyalty in the Lake Victoria region tourism circuit, Kenya. Findings suggest that the perceived destination awareness, the perceived destination image and the perceived destination value significantly influence destination loyalty. However, for this destination, perceived quality does not seem to influence destination loyalty. This could be explained by the untapped nature of the destination's resources, which perhaps have retained their original touristic quality as compared to those in overexploited destinations. The findings point to the need to consider destination age and stage of development while establishing the effect of perceptions on destination loyalty. Further, study findings suggest that perceived destination awareness (DA), perceived destination image (DI), and perceived destination value (DPV) significantly predict tourists' destination loyalty (DCL). Therefore, to optimise destination loyalty in the Lake Victoria region tourism circuit, destination managers should endeavour to gain a favourable destination image, awareness and perceived value by persistently meeting the needs of travellers who influence their perceptions about the destination's image, awareness and value.

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