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Study of Brand Positioning to Promote Tourism Destinations: Implications for Kidepo Valley National Park

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ABSTRACT

It's surprising to learn that Kidepo Valley National Park (KVNP), which is widely regarded as Africa's best park with stunning scenery, receives the lowest number of visitors. Despite its potential as a major tourist attraction, it is still relatively unknown to many people. A descriptive approach is used to explain how the AIDAR model can be applied to promote tourism destinations. However, further practical research is needed to realize the benefits of effective brand positioning in the tourism industry. This study contributes to understanding the implication of brand positioning for tourism destinations to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

Keywords: Brand positioning, AIDAR model, destination, descriptive

1. Introduction

Successful destination promotion necessitates setting an environment that allows the public to value what the destination has to give to visitors. That environment creates the overall brand image of the destination. As the tourism industry slowly recovers from the Covid 19 pandemic, it is estimated that there will be increased capacity of international tourism especially to the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe which are seen as emerging markets. One approach to address the likely increase in visitor numbers is to have destinations clearly define their brand identity. Therefore, creating a brand image that resonates with the major stakeholders to allow the destination to stand out becomes key.

According to (Eckert and Zagere,2021), wide research and consultation are needed to identify the major external and internal factors that affect the destination and consumers' perception of it and the general view of the community. This will enable building a branding that is in line with stakeholders' interests.

Kotler and Keller (2006, p. 310), define brand positioning as "the act of designing the company's offering and image to occupy a distinctive place in the mind of the target market". This therefore implies that; to achieve effective destination brand positioning, the destination should have unique features that are appealing to potential visitors. Positioning creates a reason why customers should prefer the brand over others. Kotler

emphasizes that the outcome of positioning is the successful creation of a customer-focused value proposition, which persuades the target market to buy the product. Effective destination branding that is sustainable will ensure competitiveness, dynamism, innovativeness, and agility to the changing industry drifts resulting in increased progress in the tourism industry.

Africa as a continent has a very rich culture, history, and traditions with massive natural resources from exceptional wildlife and magnificent landscapes to its inspiring natural wonders. Despite having such resources, the continent has not yet fully harnessed its tourism potential due to factors such as insecurity, poor and inadequate infrastructure, and inadequate marketing and promotion of tourism (Bishar and Robertine, 2023). This has made many countries in Africa struggle to compete with other continents such as Europe, America, and Asia in the tourism industry. Yet it has been projected that the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe are newly emerging tourism markets whose growth will depend on many factors related to progress, conflict resolution, and cultural developments and that by 2030 these emerging destinations will see more rapid growth than the more developed ones (Fyall et al, 2019).

2. Destination Background

Kidepo Valley National Park (KVNP), which is found in Kaabong district in the Karamoja region in Northeastern Uganda, has 1442 square kilometers, with rugged savannah, Mount Morungole and divided by the Kidepo and Narus rivers; is among the untouched and least disturbed of Africa's wildernesses, and is considered Africa's best parks with the most good-looking landscape https://www.eastafricantrails.com/kidepo-valley-national-park/. It is the most remote national park in Uganda and is one of the best virgin places every wildlife viewer can ever visit. The few who have visited the park through the wild frontier region of Karamoja acknowledge that it is also the most wonderful, as it ranks among Africa's finest wildernesses. (https://ugandawildlife.org/tours/kidepo-valley/. The park hosts 470 bird species and manages a wider diversity of animals with 80 mammal species; 28 of which cannot be found in any other park in Uganda. These include; Cheetah, Caracal, Aardwolf, Stripped Hyena, Bat-eared Fox, and Hunting dogs which are carnivore species unique to this region and protected within KVNP https://www.eastafricantrails.com/kidepo-valley-national-park/. The park stands as a true description of tourism in Uganda but is still unknown to many (https://www.kideponationalpark.com). This therefore creates an opportunity for the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) to brand Kidepo as a high-value destination that offers exceptional wildlife among other things. The richness of Kidepo in terms of flora and fauna creates an opportunity to position it as a 'Nature Positive' destination.

Successful branding and promotional strategies have been developed to promote tourism in the Karamoja region for example "Discover Karamoja", Uganda's best-kept secret tells the story of how the region' unique amalgamation of people, activities, and landscape cannot be found in any other part of the world. This campaign which is aimed at developing and marketing the region as an attractive tourist destination is in partnership with the Government of Uganda and the private sector tourism industry. However, no specific branding strategies have been developed to promote Kidepo Valley National Park which is amongst the best wildlife destinations in Africa.

The motivation for writing this paper is formed by several factors which are intertwined leading to the trend in the tourism industry which include: the increasing number of retired persons who have the desire and energy

to travel; rise in unrestricted time i.e. shorter work weeks and more vacations; the growing movement of the international tourism market; the changes in consumer preferences and expectations of global tourists; the increasing international competition of global tourists; the growing importance of tourism in stimulating the growth of nations' welfare and the increasing tactical importance of macro-marketing whereby many nations worldwide are encouraging the growth of tourism in their economies (Ushakov et al, 2018).

The purpose of this study is to establish the contribution of brand positioning to destination promotion. The specific objectives of this study are: 1) To examine tourism destination branding as a contemporary method in promoting tourism products. 2) To provide recommendations on how to increase KVNP's marketing activities through brand formation and promotion.

3. Literature Review

Globally, the predisposition to focus on the requirements of the consumer is important and the magnitude of applying marketing tools is growing. Firms have to gain a competitive market position through the identification and formation of brands. Given the potential of the tourism industry to contribute to all of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development (Zhou, 2020), marketing now becomes a platform that combines many of the managerial scientific disciplines and management functions in activities of business enterprises (Nezamova and Olentsova 2021).

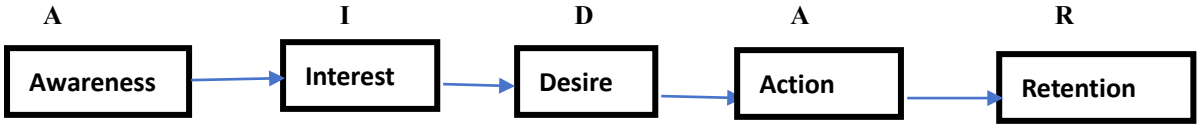
The increase in the number of people moving across different countries annually has made tourism progressively a key source of growth and development for most economies (Zhou, 2020). However, the development of tourism in Africa is being hindered by many factors which include; political instability, infrastructure underdevelopment, lack of access to tourism destinations, absence of direct flights, few suitable promotional marketing strategies, inability of governments to react to market changes or market signals and investment budgets among other factors (Zhou, 2020). All these problems are synonyms to Uganda's tourism sector. Because the image of these countries is composed of negative elements, it therefore becomes unlikely for them to attract many tourists, foreign investors, and trade partners (Anholt, 2007).

Despite the many aforementioned problems affecting the tourism industry in Africa, the volume and value of international tourism continue to grow tremendously. Much of the growth is attributed to tourism now migrating from an elite activity to one for the masses (Fyall et al, 2019). As Zhou, (2020) pointed out that; despite Africa being portrayed as a continent associated with poverty, war, disease, anguish, hunger, and harassment by foreign mainstream media, the number of international tourists to the region continues to grow. Nevertheless, for Africa to gain from the tourism industry, the region has to synchronize its tourism offerings to marketplace forces (Zhou, 2020) and address the forces for change with changed robustness and professionalism (Fyall et al, 2019). This therefore implies that there is a need for expertise in the field of branding to effectively position Africa's tourism resources; Uganda inclusive.

Brands have now become important routes for nations' image enhancement and have the power to accelerate and result in changes in public perception of countries (Anholt, 2007). Consumers are now more concerned about the origin of brands and continue to search for something with a little more integrity. Most people perceive that brands coming from countries such as America, Germany, Italy, or Japan add more credibility and appeal to products than brands coming from developing countries. With such thoughts in consumers'

minds charging a premium price for a brand in such a country that does not have a loyal consumer base seems absurd. This therefore implies that the management of destinations from such countries has to reposition the image of their destinations to appeal to consumers at a global standard.

Figure 1. The AIDAR Model



This paper analyses the application of the AIDAR model in building brand awareness and promoting tourism destinations. The original AIDA model was developed by American businessman and advertising advocate Elias St. Elmo Lewis in 1898. It is a useful tool for analyzing marketing strategies and campaigns. It is designed to help businesses increase their sales by focusing on the customers' journey towards purchase and providing a memorable experience at each stage. The AIDA model has four elements which stand for: Awareness/Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action. This tool has been used by many companies around the world to establish strong relationships with their target audience. It has helped in building brand awareness, increasing customer engagement, driving up sales, and maximizing customer loyalty. According to Bishar and Robertine, (2023), the AIDA model is considered to be an effective tool in evaluating advertising impact and also the promotion and branding of products because it permits control over every individual psychological change stage that occurs right from the original exposure with the advertisement to the last purchase decision. It has now been modified to include the fifth element of Retention which makes it to become AIDAR.

3.1. Discussion and Application of the AIDAR Model

3.1.1. Awareness/Attention

The objective of the first stage is to grasp the attention of the target audience. In this stage, different sources such as advertisements, testimonials, reviews, and recommendations from friends and family are used to provide information about a product to the potential target market. To ensure that the message is unique, marketers need to create attention-getting, highly creative content that is inspiring and stands out from the competition (Bishar and Robertine, 2023). This can be achieved by using an interesting headline, creating eye-catching visuals, or developing an engaging story to capture the viewer's attention.

A study by Bagaihing and Conterius (2020) on tourist perception of the AIDA model's implementation in the media of promotion in tourism attractions, found that tourists' perception of the element of attention was higher about information from word-of-mouth communication and getting information from Facebook. Getting information obtained from government websites scored the least. This is because government websites are not well managed as far as promoting a destination is concerned. This finding was also in agreement with the study of Saeed and Shafique (2019) on Customer-based brand equity and destination visit behavior in the tourism industry, which found that the use of social media is seen to change tourists' perception and also rebuild the image of a destination. This therefore implies that personal recommendations and social media channels are key in attracting consumers towards a product.

3.1.2. Interest

The second step is to create customers' interest in the product. This can be achieved using various methods such as explaining the unique features of the product and the benefits that the product gives. Emotional connections can be created with the consumers by using storytelling techniques about the brand to make them more interested in the brand. This also agrees with the study of Bagaihing and Conterius (2020) who found out that tourists' perception of interest in promotion media for tourism is significant concerning verbal communication compared to the use of images to create interest. This explains that tourists who visit a destination get to know it through word-of-mouth communication which can only be conveyed verbally without using a picture of the existing attraction. Organizations can also use web-based entertainment like Google Analytics or Facebook Analytics to generate interest (Purbaningsih et al, 2022). At this point, the consumers can visit the site and use articles about the product they wish to purchase.

3.1.3. Desire

At this step, the goal of the marketer is to make the target market feel the need for the product and to make them believe that it will be beneficial to them. At this point, the use of persuasive language and pointing out the unique features of the product is key in helping to create a strong desire for the product. Purbaningsih et al, (2022) noted that desire can be achieved by making a catchy phrase that can make a yearning interest to purchase the product. This implies that using interesting sentences in promotional media can induce consumers' desire for the product. Catchy phrases such as 'KVNP the Nature Positive destination' will arouse the desire of tourists who desire eco-tourism.

3.1.4. Action

The goal at this step is to make the target market act and make the purchase. A clear call to action can be used through phrases such as 'Visit Kidepo today', 'Act now', and 'Limited time offer'. At this level, organizations can give price discounts, and vouchers to induce consumers into action. The focus of marketers should be on how the consumer will finalize the entire cognitive process with an actual procurement which involves concrete action of buying the product. Bagaihing and Conterius (2020) found that tourists' perception of action in the promotion media for tourism is significant taking a visiting action compared to other factors that involved describing the destination and revisiting the destination among others. This implies that consumers in tourism will be more satisfied when they physically go to the tourist attraction than just telling a story about it virtually. As Gnanapala (2017) noted, "Observing wildlife is one of the major travel motives of tourists and plays an important role in their destination selection process. Tourists like to view non-captured animals." KVNP which is majorly a wildlife destination, there is a need to tap into the market for pure tourism by influencing consumers to visit the destination.

3.1.5. Retention

The last step is to create opportunities for long-term mutually beneficial relationships for the customers. Destination managers need to build on the connections that exist with the people who visit the destinations, provide opportunities for feedback, and provide follow-up support, and reviews. Tourism organizations can utilize social media platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to promote the

destination services for instance the route via images, videos, and suggested itineraries, and also communicate and share visitor experiences. A study by (Saeed and Shafique 2019) noted that social media has an extensive range of consumers, more so in the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Events (MICE) industry which can be used to attract and retain tourists and also boost the hospitality business.

4. Methodology

The information required to prepare this paper came from various website resources and journal articles mainly from ResearchGate, Springer, Revistaespasios, Emerald, and Solmainternational among others, that highlighted the issue of "Brand Positioning" and "Destination promotion". The information collected was used to describe the underlying concepts and generate ideas and insights that are useful for developing destination promotion strategies. It is a descriptive paper in nature and the author's arguments are based on the literature obtained from other studies.

5. Findings

The reviewed literature revealed that; the rapid growth of the tourism sector requires governments to put in place new promotional methods and approaches which include branding of tourism destinations (Ushakov et al, 2018). A study by Medel, (2020) on advertising in tourism, noted that consumer behavior in tourism is changing, and measuring the effectiveness of advertising for the tourism industry cannot just be limited to tangible results, like the number of visitors or money spent on a destination. Alternatively, intangible elements such as brand awareness, destination awareness, and recognition should be emphasized. This, therefore implies that with the increasing global travel, destinations have to reposition their brand identity, especially in the present technological revolution to attract visitors. The progressive expansion of the internet has made customers have more choice and access to more information which makes them more likely to make purchase decisions based on assurance of knowledge instead of need alone.

Tourism destination branding requires the brand to first be accepted internally, then, throughout the nation by all the stakeholders, and then promoted internationally. Many tools can be used to promote the brand ranging from websites, advertising campaigns, trade missions, and embassies abroad. Branding and Communication experts can be used to advise in the process of rolling out, managing, and promoting the brand (www.aalep.eu/why-nation-branding-important-tourism). Destination managers are required to identify the destination's strong and competitive assets that are appealing to potential visitors, create an engaging story from the assets that make the destination look unique, and then develop effective marketing communication to promote the destination.

6. Conclusion

Destination marketing and promotion are among the key activities in effectively managing a destination. It involves reaching out to the intended market, and maintaining mutual relationships with them while encouraging regional and international diffusion. For a tourism region to be sustainable, it needs to create a competitive advantage in this growing and highly competitive tourism market. The AIDAR model as a marketing strategy is seen to be very suitable for promoting tourism destinations in this era which is increasingly digitalized in all sectors and where brands have based their entire marketing strategy on this

model. The AIDAR model enables managers to build passionate, engaging, and empowering brand stories that resonate among the locals and visitors as well. It helps in evaluating the competitive level of the brand and considering its superiority and uniqueness. There is a need to maintain and enhance the existing products and where opportunities or gaps are identified, investment in new products, infrastructure, and, amenities should be undertaken to strengthen the destination's demand and competitiveness. However, managerial expertise in destination branding and communication is required to sustainably promote the destination. This study recommends practical application of the model which can also be used to promote other tourism destinations in Uganda.

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