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## Article

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EuroEconomica

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*Reference:* Ezeuduji, Ikechukwu Onyekwere/Mhlongo, Pamela S. (2019). Tourists' loyalty towards a tourism destination : the case of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. In: EuroEconomica 38 (2), S. 272 - 281.

This Version is available at:  
<http://hdl.handle.net/11159/4146>

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## **Tourists' Loyalty towards a Tourism Destination: The Case of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa**

**Ikechukwu Onyekwere Ezeudujii<sup>1</sup>, Pamela S. Mhlongo<sup>2</sup>**

**Abstract:** This study explores tourists' loyalty to the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, as a tourism destination. A structured questionnaire survey of 411 domestic and international tourists in this destination provided data for analysis. Results from descriptive, bivariate and multivariate data analyses indicate that tourists were highly satisfied with their visit, and many of them especially those on return visit, indicate loyalty to KwaZulu-Natal destination. Domestic tourists are more loyal to the destination than international tourists; therefore, efforts should be made by Tourism KwaZulu-Natal - the Destination Management Organisation to try to enhance international tourists' loyalty to the destination.

**Keywords:** brand loyalty; destination loyalty; tourism destination; KwaZulu-Natal; sub-Saharan Africa

**JEL Classification:** M31; O55; R11; Z32

### **1. Introduction**

KwaZulu-Natal is one of the nine provinces of South Africa and the tourism statistics culled from the recent State of the Province Address show that tourism has a significant contribution in the KwaZulu-Natal local economy, and continues to grow from a R9bn contribution to the Provincial Gross Domestic Product in 2014 to more than R10bn by 2018 (Tourism KwaZulu-Natal, 2019). In South Africa, the province of KwaZulu-Natal, is quite popular for its heritage and cultural experiences. The dominant local community members are Zulu and they pride themselves in their heritage, most especially the isiZulu language, the Zulu culture and the prevalence of the spirit of 'Ubuntu'. *Ubuntu* is a very old African word that can be translated to mean 'humanity to others' (Ezeudujii & Nkosi, 2017). Most tourists that visit the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa are mainly attracted or pulled by the warm weather, nature, culture and beach experience, offered in both its coastal and inland regions. Tourism in KwaZulu-Natal thrives on tourist volumes and the quality of the tourists' experience.

When tourists travel to a destination or decide on which destination they want to visit, there are many factors that influence their decision making process such as the destination brand awareness, destination brand image, destination brand quality, and destination competitive factors. Tourists are likely to

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become loyal to destinations that perform well regarding these aforesaid dimensions. This research study will therefore focus on the tourists' loyalty towards KwaZulu-Natal as a destination.

Destination brand loyalty can be regarded as an attitudinal construct and it can be clearly argued that tourists' loyalty towards a destination is affected by the experience they get from that destination which in turn is affected by different factors (Aaker & Erich, 2000). Destination loyalty has been getting more attention for its greater significance in destination marketing and management research for a long time as competition and loyal visitors' importance grow faster (Han & Back, 2008; Hsu & Cai, 2009).

Destination brand loyalty has been well explored in the academic arena. Nevertheless, there is dearth of literature on tourists' brand loyalty to sub-Saharan African regions, such as KwaZulu-Natal. This study is therefore significant as the findings will support the marketing efforts by the local Destination Management / Marketing Organisation (Tourism KwaZulu-Natal) to attract and retain valuable tourists and in turn increase tourists' spending in the local economy. The destination managers will have more understanding on how tourists perceive KwaZulu-Natal as a tourism destination, and then make direct marketing efforts to strengthen their positive perceptions and improve their offerings regarding negative perceptions, as the case may be. This paper will also contribute to literature that will support the destination marketing strategies of similar sub-Saharan African or international destinations.

## **2. Related Works**

According to Lee, Lawrence and Cunningham (2001), customer loyalty is a tendency of customers, based on previous experiences and their expectations for the future, to be customers of the existing suppliers again. In other words, it is a display of the attitudes of customers towards product categories, brands, stores and services (Uncles, Dowling, & Hammond, 2003). With respect to tourism, the overall destination loyalty is influenced by the perceptions that tourists have about a particular destination image as well as the overall satisfaction that tourists received during their stay at a destination (Rajesh, 2013). Hence, the tourists' perception of a destination and tourists' satisfaction, can lead to destination loyalty.

It can be said that brand loyalty is built overtime through a collection of positive experiences that require consistent effort and attention to detail, hence loyal customers are usually repeat tourists who visit a destination without considering other options available to them. Tourists who are loyal to a destination frequently recommend the brand to others, buy more, and buy more regularly (Manternach, 2010). Shestakov (2012) similarly states that brand attachment involves assessments of the bond or attitude. The author posits that a relevant indicator of commitment is the extent to which the individual remains loyal to the brand. This can come through emotional attachment to a place, event or product. Loyalty may therefore indicate the level of emotional attachment that customers have to a brand. The strength of emotional attachment to an object may also be associated with an investment in the object, that is, the willingness to forego immediate self-interest to promote relationship (Thomson, MacInnis & Park, 2005).

Tourists tend to project their own personality on the brands that they are using and thus creating an emotional bond with them. The bond that tourists create affects their visiting behaviour enabling a brand to establish loyalty features and thus resulting in the tourists' repeat visit to a destination. Brand

attachment also possesses marketing value as it assists tourists to choose a brand from a set of available brands in a certain market since it is based on emotional bond between the tourists' self and the tourists' perceived representations of a brand's personality (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer & Nyffenegger, 2011).

### **3. Research Problem Statement**

Brand image will have an impact on the destination selection process for tourists: the post-selection assessment of the destination and whether they will prefer the destination in the future (Chi & Qu, 2008). The effect of brand loyalty on the selection of a destination though has been studied by various authors (such as Ezeuduji & Nkosi, 2017; Ezeuduji, Lete, Correia & Taylor, 2014; Artuğer, Cetinsöz & Kiliç, 2013; Shestakov, 2012; Anastassova, 2011), but this has not been specifically done in this study area, and not enough studies have linked destination loyalty to tourists' profile. This study therefore explores the relationships between KwaZulu-Natal tourists' profile and destination loyalty. Brand loyalty is an important factor as when tourists are loyal to a brand or destination it means that they will return to that destination and that they will also recommend this destination to friends and family. Hence destination managers should pay attention to the factors or tourists experiences that make tourists loyal to the destination brand.

### **4. Research Method and Design**

This research explores tourists' loyalty to a tourism destination. Hence, a quantitative research method, using a structured questionnaire survey was employed to collect data from tourists (respondents). The questionnaire variables reflect literature reviewed and authors' personal knowledge of the destination. Several authors support the use of questionnaire to collect quantified data from respondents (such as Veal, 2011; Ezeuduji, 2013; Tummons & Duckworth, 2013). Quantified data are mostly used to make management decisions for mass phenomena such as tourism. Domestic and international tourists visiting major tourist attractions in KwaZulu-Natal, between December 2017 and July 2018, were targeted (King Shaka International Airport, Richards Bay Airport, Durban and Richards Bay beaches, Hluhluwe Game Reserve, and uShaka Marine World). This study period cuts across both peak and off-peak seasons. A non-probability sampling type known as purposive sampling was used to recruit respondents to the questionnaire. Veal (2011) states that when using non-probability sampling methods, the absolute size of the sample is more important than the sample size relative to the research population. He went further to posit that the criteria to determine sample size should entail the required level of precision in results, the proposed details in analysis, and the available budget. A total of 430 tourists were surveyed, but 411 questionnaires received were usable for data analysis. We used IBM's SPSS Statistics, version 25 (IBM Corporation, 2017) for data analyses. We employed descriptive analyses (frequencies, mean and standard deviation), bivariate analyses (Spearman's Correlation and Mann-Whitney U tests), and multivariate analysis (Reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha) to enable us address the research objectives. All bivariate analyses were done at a 95% confidence interval, and reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient as a benchmark employed a cut-off point of 0.7 to explain internal consistency or reliability of variables used to explain brand loyalty dimension (Bühl & Zöfel, 2005; George & Mallery, 2003; Hair, Black, Babin & Tatham, 2005; Iwu, Ezeuduji, Iwu, Ikebuaku & Tengeh,

2018). These brand loyalty variables are ordinal in nature, presented in the questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale. From the reliability test results, brand loyalty variables show internal consistency.

It is common in social sciences that the population distributions of ordinal dimensions are found not to be normally distributed (Kolmogorov-Smirnov's and Shapiro-Wilk's tests of normality yielded p-values of less than 0.001), this research hence conducted non-parametric tests (Spearman's Correlation and Mann-Whitney U). The use of Spearman's correlation tests for comparing ordinal variables were supported by Veal (2011).

We employed Mann-Whitney U tests to compare means of responses from two independent groups with the aim of validating if they are different from each other. Responses to brand loyalty statements were compared with some respondents' profile. We conducted Mann-Whitney U tests based on the following scientific criteria: that the dependent variables (brand loyalty statements) have ordinal scale; the independent variables (respondents' profile) have only two groups; and normality of distribution and homogeneity of variance did not prove true in a trial t-test (George & Mallery, 2003; Veal, 2011). The results from these analyses are discussed in the following section.

## 5. Results and Discussion

The results in Table 1 show that more female than male tourists responded to the study. More than 72% of the sample respondents are relatively young (not more than 40 years of age). Domestic tourists are significantly more in number than international tourists, and the purposes of travel are mostly for holiday, visiting friends and relatives, and business (seminar, event, conference). Most of the tourists did not stay for more than 10 days in the destination. The good news for the destination managers are that about 79% of tourists are on return visit, and their level of satisfaction is very high (more than 77% are either mostly or totally satisfied). These results show that the destination KwaZulu-Natal is more known as a leisure destination, and product and service offerings are perceived favourably by the tourists.

**Table 1. Profile of the Respondents (N = 411)**

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Female	54.5
	Male	45.5
Age group	Less than 20	11.7
	21-30	37.2
	31-40	23.4
	41-50	15.3
	51-60	8.8
	More than 60	3.6
Origin	South African	65.0
	Non South African	35.0



Continent of origin	Africa	70.1
	Australia/ Oceania	4.9
	Asia	3.4
	Europe	14.4
	North America	3.2
	South America	4.1
Type of tourist	Domestic tourists	65.5
	International tourists	34.5
Source of Information about KwaZulu-Natal	Internet	25.6
	Word of Mouth	31.7
	Media (travel magazines and books, T.V)	32.4
	Travel Agency/ Tour Operator	6.8
	Other	3.4
Group travel	Yes	51.1
	No	48.9
Length of stay in KwaZulu-Natal	1-5	49.5
	6-10	31.5
	11-15	8.3
	16 days or longer	10.7
Purpose of visit to KwaZulu-Natal	Business (seminar, event, attending a conference)	13.6
	Business (import and export)	8.0
	Holiday	51.1
	Visiting friends and family	18.0
	Medical	2.9
	Academic exchange	4.4
	Other	1.9
Have you visited any KwaZulu-Natal destination before?	Yes	78.8
	No	21.2
Level of satisfaction	Totally satisfied	40.1
	Mostly satisfied	37.2
	Moderately satisfied	16.3
	Mostly dissatisfied	4.9
	Totally dissatisfied	1.5

This study's results concur with those of Ezeuduji, November and Haupt (2016) who state that the attitude that tourists have towards a destination are considered to be an important determinant when they decide to return to the destination. The fact that most of the respondents were returning tourists shows that they have a positive attitude towards KwaZulu-Natal and also shows the level of loyalty they have towards the province as their preferred destination of choice. Kirpalani (2014) also affirms that brand loyalty is a form of repeated purchases by tourists who have a positive attitude towards the destination brand. Therefore, it can be concluded that tourists who are satisfied with a destination are more likely to return to a destination, become loyal and recommend a destination to other people such as their friends and family members (Ezeuduji, November & Haupt, 2016; Iglesias, Singh & Batista-Foguet, 2011; Keller, Parameswaran & Jacob, 2011; Kotier & Keller, 2009).

As earlier discussed, the overall destination loyalty is influenced by the perceptions that tourists have about a particular destination image as well as the overall satisfaction that tourists received during their stay at a destination (Rajesh, 2013). Hence, the tourists' perception of a destination and tourists'

satisfaction, can lead to destination loyalty. Results in Table 2 show that tourists mostly enjoyed all the main tourist activities in KwaZulu-Natal, hence they are satisfied (Table 1). Ezeuduji and Nkosi (2017) concur that the province of KwaZulu-Natal is well liked for its heritage and cultural experiences. They further state that its rich heritage (cultural and natural) is a key anchor to its tourism industry.

**Table 2. Tourists' Level of Activities Enjoyment (N = 411, % Frequency)**

Activities	Highly enjoyable	Mostly enjoyable	Moderately enjoyable	Mostly unenjoyable	Not enjoyable
Nature and outdoors	45.3	30.0	10.6	3.7	1.5
Food and wine	38.1	39.8	14.0	5.4	2.7
Beaches	40.2	42.4	11.5	4.2	1.7
History & Culture	39.1	38.9	15.8	3.0	3.2
Shopping	40.9	33.6	16.4	5.4	3.7

Tourists were asked to indicate their level of agreement with seven (7) brand loyalty statements (Table 3). Their responses were compared with their profile. It should be pointed out here that the top three (3) loyalty statements that the respondents mostly agreed to are: 'I would recommend KwaZulu-Natal to my friends and family'; 'I would consider visiting KwaZulu-Natal in the future'; and 'I am in love with KwaZulu-Natal'. These results indicate high destination loyalty from the responding tourists. This is also good news for the KwaZulu-Natal destination managers. It is evident from the results, emanating from Mann-Whitney U test, in Table 3 that group travellers agree more than individual travellers that the destination 'evokes love' and 'has a special place in their hearts'. Similarly, domestic tourists (South Africans) agree more than international tourists that the destination 'evokes love' and 'has a special place in their hearts'. Not so surprisingly, repeat visitors are indeed more loyal to KwaZulu-Natal destination as they agreed more than first-time visitors that the destination 'has a special place in their hearts'; they 'felt at home', 'felt connected', 'are in love' with the destination, and they will 'recommend KwaZulu-Natal to their friends and family'.

**Table 3. Reliability Test and Comparing Tourists' Profile with Tourists' Brand Loyalty Perceptions**

Statements	Mean score <sup>a</sup>	Standard deviation	Compared with tourists' profile <sup>b</sup>
KwaZulu-Natal would be my preferred choice when choosing a destination to visit	1.87	.909	N.S
I would consider visiting KwaZulu-Natal in the future	1.78	.763	N.S
I would recommend KwaZulu-Natal to my friends and family	1.75	.773	*Those who visited before agree more
I feel at home in KwaZulu-Natal	1.95	.907	**Those who visited before agree more
I feel connected to this destination, KwaZulu-Natal	1.93	.867	**Those who visited before agree more

KwaZulu-Natal has 'a special place in my heart'	1.89	.915	**Those who visited before agree more *South Africans agree more *Domestic tourists agree more **Those who travelled in a group agree more
I am in love with KwaZulu-Natal	1.83	.954	**Those who visited before agree more **South Africans agree more **Domestic tourists agree more *Those who travelled in a group agree more
<b>Reliability Statistics (Perceptions of brand loyalty), Cronbach's Alpha =.917, N of Items = 7, Valid cases = 408 (99.3%), Excluded cases = 3 (0.7%), Total = 411</b>			

<sup>a</sup>Questionnaire were itemised along a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1, strongly agree; 2, Agree; 3, Neutral; 4, Disagree; 5, Strongly disagree.

<sup>b</sup>Mann-Whitney U test significance: N.S, no significant results - \*,  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*,  $p < 0.01$ .

Finally, these brand loyalty statements were correlated with tourists' level of visit satisfaction and activity enjoyment. The results in Table 4 validate that there is a strong correlation among these. When tourists enjoy the activities in a destination, they will be satisfied. This in turn will lead to tourists' loyalty towards the destination. Similarly, some studies revealed that there is a significant relationship between brand image and brand loyalty (Huang & Cai, 2015; Andreani, Taniaji & Puspitasari 2012). If tourists favour or have positive perceptions about a brand and become attached to it, they are also more likely to become loyal to the brand and become repeat visitors. According to Donio, Massari and Passiante (2006), satisfaction and commitment are indicators of brand loyalty, and customer satisfaction is measured as congruence between expected and perceived values, and is a matter of value perception. This means that tourists that are committed and satisfied with a brand are more likely to be loyal to that destination brand.

**Table 4. Correlation between Level of Activity Enjoyment, Visit Satisfaction, and Tourists' Brand Loyalty Perceptions**

<b>Brand Loyalty</b>						
<b>Statements</b>	<b>Correlation with visit level of satisfaction and activities' enjoyment</b>					
	visit satisfaction	Nature & outdoors	Food & wine	Beaches	History & culture	Shopping
KwaZulu-Natal would be my preferred choice when choosing a destination to visit	**	**	**	**	**	**
I would consider visiting KwaZulu-Natal in the future	**	**	**	**	**	**
I would recommend KwaZulu-Natal to my friends and family	**	**	**	**	**	**
I feel at home in KwaZulu-Natal	**	**	**	**	**	**
I feel connected to this destination, KwaZulu-Natal	**	**	**	**	**	**



KwaZulu-Natal has 'a special place in my heart'	**	**	**	**	**	**
I am in love with KwaZulu-Natal	**	**	**	**	**	**

Notes: Spearman's Rank correlation test significance: \*\*,  $p < 0.01$ .

This research obtained similar results to that conducted by Ezeuduji, November and Haupt (2016) on tourist profile and destination brand perception in Cape Town, South Africa. They found that tourists who are loyal to Cape Town as a tourist destination are mostly repeat visitors, satisfied tourists and who would recommend the destination to other people. Kirpalani (2014) states that tourists with positive attitude towards the brand are usually loyal to it and this could be shown in a form of repeat purchases. Kirpalani (2014) adds that brand loyalty consists of two components: commitment attributed to a strong attitude or liking for the brand and repeat purchase behaviour.

## 6. Conclusions

The attitude a tourist has towards a destination is considered to be an important determinant when he or she is deciding whether to return to that destination. If tourists favour a destination brand they become attached to it, and they also become loyal to it. Most of the respondents in this study are returning tourists, thus showing that they have a positive attitude towards the destination. KwaZulu-Natal's rich cultural and natural heritage remains a key anchor to its tourism industry, and tourists are satisfied, committed and loyal to its brand. Much of these loyal tourists are domestic and group travelers. These pay repeat visits to this destination, KwaZulu-Natal. It seems therefore that tourists with these socio-demographic characteristics are more attached to this destination's main offerings, those of culture and heritage, and beach experience. Group travelers are more prone to discuss their experiences among themselves, engendering positive attitude and emotions. Domestic tourism is on a steady growth in South Africa, and this discourages economic leakage, causing the income earned in the nation to stay within the nation. The result that shows that domestic tourists are more loyal to KwaZulu-Natal brand than international visitors can simply be explained with the previous discussion in this paper that tourists tend to project their own personality on the brands that they are using and thus creating an emotional bond with them. Efforts should however be made by KwaZulu-Natal destination managers to continue to work on the destination image to be more appealing to international visitors. This can be done through improvements in diversity, quality and authenticity of products and services offerings.

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