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Exploring Post-COVID-19 Branding Strategies of African Destinations

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Abstract. The lifting of COVID-19 restrictions has led to the opening of many tourism destinations, with many destination marketing organizations (DMOs) adopting different strategies to attract tourists. This study explores the post-COVID-19 branding strategies of four award-winning African destinations (South Africa, Kenya, Morocco, and Mauritius) and how they utilize social media to communicate their destination brand identities. We curated the tweets of the National Tourism Boards of the examined destinations from their official Twitter accounts and analyzed them using Atlas.ti. We found that each of the destinations uniquely identifies and communicates its destination's competitive advantages. We provide insights and implications.

Keywords: Social media · Destination brand identity · Destination branding · Tourism · Twitter · Culture · Marketing

1 Introduction

The impact of COVID-19 has been felt all over the world in the past few years. As a result of the travel ban, airport closures, and airline groundings around the world, tourism almost came to a halt with attendant economic consequences. Though Africa was not badly affected by COVID-19 (in comparative terms with the number of deaths in other regions) the economic damage to the region was nonetheless huge [1]. With the lifting of restrictions and the resurgence of touristic activities, policymakers and academia are preoccupied with the best strategies to restart tourism activities [2–3]. Some studies have suggested the use of virtual reality [6–7] for tourism recovery. However, not many destinations possess the resources to adopt such technology as a post-COVID-19 reset strategy. [4] analyzed the YouTube ads of National Tourism Boards and suggest that destination branding strategies fall into two layers: during-lockdown and post-lockdown strategies. They extrapolate during-lockdown strategies to include such themes as spreading hope and inspiration, the brotherhood of man, and longing and nostalgia. They further contend that post-lockdown strategies include themes such as the welcome back, Covid-19-safe destinations, and restorative experience.

Though experts [e.g., 5] acknowledge the critical role of destination branding in a post-crisis' nation and communication in a post-covid-19 recovery [8], literature is however unclear on how destinations should communicate their destination brand identities and what role social media plays in the branding strategy in post-pandemic in an African context. The purpose of this study is two-fold: a) to explore the destination brand identity of selected destinations in Africa and, b) to examine how these brand identities are communicated as post-COVID-19 reset strategies. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: section two looks at the review of related literature. Section three treats the methodology while sections four and five explore the data analyses and discussion sections respectively.

2   Review of Related Literature

Academic literature links destination image to destination brand identity and destination branding [5, 9]. Destination image is defined as "an individual's mental representation of knowledge (beliefs), feelings, and global impression about a destination" [10, p. 870]. Destination image is further decomposed into three components: the cognitive, affective, and conative image [12]. The cognitive image represents the tourist's belief about the destination, the affective image refers to the tourist's feelings about the destination while the conative image refers to the tourist's behavior toward the destination [5, 12]. Thus, a tourist's choice of destination is influenced by the interplay of these elements. Destination brand identity represents the marketer's desired image through efforts developed to influence the perceptions, impressions, and feelings of the tourist towards the destination [5], and mostly occurs through branding activities. Historically, branding's role seeks to identify the goods and services of one seller and differentiate them from those of other competitors [13], and like traditional brands, destinations also have unique identities which are distinct from others [9]. Thus, destination branding relates to marketing activities that create an image of a destination to differentiate it from other destinations and consistently convey a memorable travel experience that reinforces an emotional connection to the destination [16–17]. From a social media point of view, destination branding undergoes a mediatization process through which the imperceptible and intangible cultural elements are productized and consumed by tourists with overall effects on their experiences [18].

Interestingly, social media presents a great tool for managers to communicate the destination's attributes in an effective and targeted manner [18]. Experts have highlighted that the increasing reliance on social media for destination branding is attributed to its unique feature as a co-creation platform, thus elevating the tourist to a critical stakeholder who can also assume the role of a marketer via their destination content-sharing activities [11, 15]. However, during COVID-19, most user-generated messages were prevalent with fake news which fuelled hysteria and wrong purchase decisions [19]. [14] analyzed specific variables such as social media use during COVID-19, fear, perceived risk, attitude, customer brand engagement, brand co-creation, and revisit intention. The study found that fear of COVID-19 and perceived risk positively influence attitude and revisit intention. Similarly, social media has a positive influence on customer brand engagement and brand co-creation. Considering the uncertainty of the period, DMOs adapted

their marketing strategies to present hope and assurance to tourists [4], which were very critical at the time, especially considering the consequent immense human and material losses.

Following the lifting of restrictions, the need to revive tourism has placed significant challenges on destination managers regarding the best strategies to woo travellers [21]. [4] identify the shift of marketing strategy of DMOs' from hope and assurance to emphasis on safety and restorative experience. [20]'s analyses of post-COVID-19 branding strategies of four Italian tourism cities identify both changes and stability in brand attributes and brand values when compared with pre-pandemic strategies. Specifically, destination brand attributes represented by tangible heritage remained stable while intangible heritage such as culture, traditions, and local expertise increased in communication. There was also less emphasis on cityscape and gastronomy while the emphasis on nature increased. There was a greater emphasis on brand values as represented in an increased emphasis on excitement, ruggedness, and competence.

Africa is known for its natural wildlife and robust art culture, which greatly contribute to the world's tourism. There is a need to investigate various dimensions through which tourism in Africa can be sustained in recent times and even in times of dreadful pandemics. As part of the tourism reset strategies, many DMOs in Africa are utilizing social media as a channel to communicate their destination branding activities with varying results. In this regard, the study focuses on how selected national tourism organizations of some top African tourist destinations use their social media handles to promote tourism in their country through posts related to arts and culture.

3 Methods

Using qualitative inquiry, this study explored, through critical examination, to establish the pensiveness of destination image branding within the space of African tourism. The researchers purposefully [22–23] selected and examined the official Twitter handles of four African countries listed in 2021 among the best tourist places to visit by US Travel News and the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO). The countries selected include *Kenya, Morocco, Mauritius, and South Africa.* All four countries constituting the sample have been listed as nominees for the World Travel Awards (WTA) for the World's Leading Destinations (WLD) from 2010 to 2021 [24] (Table 1). We accessed the tweets of the national tourism boards of the four countries using their official Twitter handle as follows – South Africa (@SATravelTrade) (662 tweets), Kenya (@magicalkenya) (401 tweets), Morocco (@Visit_Morocco_) (206 tweets), and Mauritius (@SeeMauritius) (102 tweets), from January to August 2022, with only 80 tweets deemed relevant for our use.

4 Data Analyses and Results

First, we employed content analysis to gain insights into the destinations' communication trends [20] and to understand the key themes within the tweets. We tabulated the tweets into three columns (column 1 – serial number, column 2 – the tweet, and column 3 - key themes in the tweet which are also the identified codes for the tweet). Second, we utilized

Table 1. The frequency of African countries nominated for the world's leading destinations

S/N	Country	Number of nominations	Year(s)
1	South Africa	12	2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021
2	Morocco	9	2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020
3	Kenya	5	2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021
4	Mauritius	4	2010, 2011, 2012, 2020

Atlas.ti for more rigorous data analyses. Atlas.ti is a popular qualitative data software very useful in analyzing Twitter data [25]. Users can connect their Twitter handle to Atlas.ti, however, this process was problematic for us because we could not access the direct Twitter handle of the focal DMOs. We manually extracted the data, copied them into a Microsoft Word document and coded them as described above after which we uploaded to Atlas.ti. After generating the codes, we built the code groups which were later assembled in the Code Group Manager. Utilizing the feature of Network and Code Group, we extracted word cloud to gain insight into the dominant themes in the tweets (see Fig. 1). The network feature enhances the linking and visualization of connected themes. Moreover, the codes which were built in the first step above were used to synthesize the branding strategies of the focal DMOs as described below.

Fig. 1. Word cloud of the key themes

4.1 Arts, Culture, and Wellbeing

Culture occupies a central place in the destination brand identity of the focal DMOs (Fig. 1). Culture embraces a whole variety of different aspects of the life of the people

such as food, dance, art, language, and marriage, but the different DMOs marketed their culture differently. For instance, Moroccan National Tourism Office emphasized the uniqueness of the Moroccan culture such as its designs, architecture, and food (see Fig. 2). Strategically, Moroccan tourism consciously promotes the religious culture within the region in a subtle manner. We consider such tweets to be strategic because they not only target religious fashionists but also reach out to admirers of the aesthetic artistry in architecture, history, and dances. They also capitalize on their unique ancient artistry and historical landscapes as a brawny marketing approach. Tweeting about the beautiful religious architecture, the colorful murals, reliefs, friezes, and mosaics on the religious temples attracts tourists from around the world.
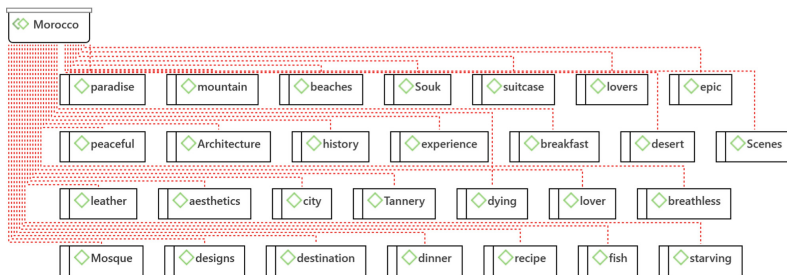
Fig. 2. Network of key themes of tweets of Moroccan National Tourism Office

Like other African countries, Kenya also possesses a unique cultural diversity. This has been well articulated through the social media handle. Some of the tweets show the traditional culture, while others show how the traditional culture, sports, and adventure in the wild are all part of the modern Kenyan culture. Strategically, the achievements of some local villages towards sustenance and promotion of domestic tourism were highlighted.

From Mauritius, we found the tweets about food to be more associated with therapy than a mark of culture. Analysis of the aura surrounding tweets containing food is suggestive of healthy living in a therapeutic destination. Mauritius also severally used love to encompass themes relating to erotic feelings, food, and the pleasurable encounter with natural space within the peaceful island. The therapy of love has been tweeted severally through the account, making Mauritius a destination where lovers rebuild and fortify their union. Similarly, there have been some direct tweets on getting a fussing connection for spiritual and psychological healing (see Fig. 3).

4.2 Wildlife and Adventure

The Kenyan tourism board has a keen interest in sustaining wildlife and the natural reserves as they continue to market Kenya as a preferred destination for wild experiences. Generally, wildlife is the major destination image of Kenya, and its marketing has seen increasing tourist arrival. Critically exploring the posts, we found that adventure with nature was very common (Fig. 4). Most of the tweets give the sensation of direct contact between adventurers and marine life. Whereas many other similar tweets aimed
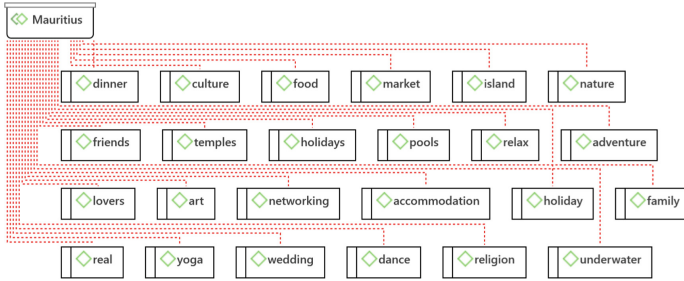
Fig. 3. Network of key themes of tweets of Mauritius National Tourism Office

at drawing visitors to choose Kenya as a destination for a nature experience, there were other tweets intended to call for the protection of wildlife.
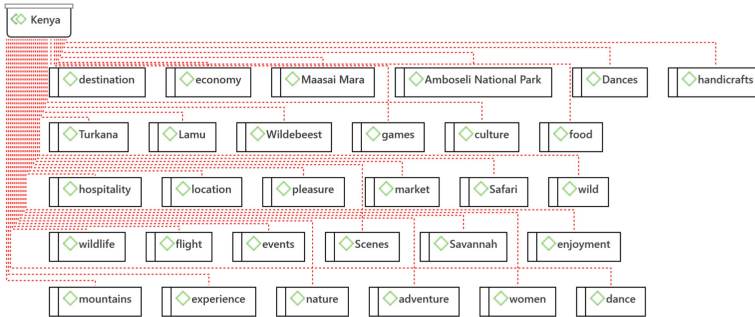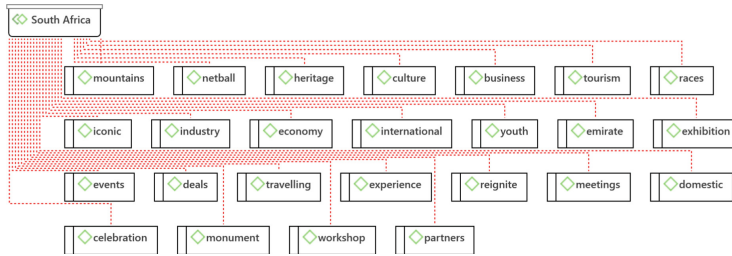

Fig. 4. Network of key themes of tweets of Kenya National Tourism Office

4.3 Business Promotion and Hospitality

A critical observation of the South African Twitter handle reveals most content relating to the travel trade. It creates the impression that the social media handle is serving as the exact reflection of its name—@SATravelTrade. The handle reveals a series of tweets advertising training programs, tourism businesses, and women in tourism. As a deliberate practice to promote the SAT, the tourism industry has been the pivotal focus of the tourism ministry. The warm invitation extended to tourists to visit SA is not only for leisure but to engage in a series of business and marketing events ranging from sports to agriculture and arts and culture. South Africa also has a deliberate attempt to promote the business aspects of the country, visitors, and especially the United States. Through social media, hospitality promotion has been aggressive in the SAT destination image branding. Such hospitality includes hotel accommodations, natural parks, wildlife, and warm receptions (Fig. 5). This strategy tends to draw the visitors closer to the hospitality firms where their accommodation and comfort will be assured upon visiting.

Our analysis of Moroccan tourism social media compared to that of South Africa shows that both countries have unique messages for their destination branding. Whereas

Fig. 5. Network of key themes of tweets of South Africa National Tourism Office

the former focuses on branding itself as a business hub for tourists, the latter prides itself on being a destination of comfort, peace, and leisure for tourists to feel at home. At a glance, the official Twitter account of the Moroccan tourism ministry portrays leisure and the feeling of domicile. Regardless of the type of tweet, be it art (architecture or souvenirs) or culture (local food or religion), hospitality appears to be a common theme that runs through all the tweets. Captivating tweets with well-organized videos of serene places with breathtaking views are frequent on the Moroccan tourism account. In most cases, a single post with an accompanying short video advertises interesting places for relaxation, including beaches and parks.

5 Discussion

This study aimed to explore the destination brand identity of selected destinations in Africa and examine how these brand identities are communicated as post-COVID-19 reset strategies. Following the criteria for the selection of best destinations in Africa by the US Travel News and the UNWTO, we choose four African countries comprising South Africa, Kenya, Morocco, and Mauritius, and analyzed the official Twitter accounts of their National Tourism Board using Atlas.ti. The consistency grounded in a deliberate strategy to rebuild the tourism sector transcends through the social media handles of all the top four leading destination countries in Africa studied. Each uniquely explores destination marketing strategies contextually using the local tourism sites available as a backbone. For instance, South Africa consciously explores business opportunities in all dimensions of its tourism, making its approach to destination branding targeted to business travelers. South Africa brands its destination as a hub for international events like games, conferences, and workshops. Against the backdrop of the consistent and unabated negatively stereotyped destination image of Africa by international media organizations [26], South Africa's brand identity and branding strategies as an attractive destination for business travelers have been yielding efforts in repeat tourism [27]. While Kenya markets other aspects of its destination, however, our study found that the focal point of its destination branding strategies revolves around wildlife tourism, and several studies have echoed the need to improve facilities [28] and capacity [29] to cater for the burgeoning wildlife tourist arrivals. We also found that Mauritius Archipelago positions it as an attractive destination for romantic and wedding tourism, thus confirming [30], while Morocco through its branding strategies valorizes its position as the leading gastronomy and religious tourism destination in Africa [31].

5.1 Implications

Theoretically, our study offers several implications for theory. First, the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions and the attendant restart of tourism activities have seen an uptick in the marketing activities of destinations to attract tourists. While there are several anecdotal literatures on the different post-COVID-19 destination branding strategies, our study is one of the first scientifically based studies examining four internationally recognized tourism destinations in Africa and their post-COVID-19 reset and branding strategies. Second, past studies have explored individual destinations in Africa [28, 30–31], our study through a cross-national comparison evidences the comparative advantage of the chosen destinations and highlight the branding strategies to amplify their attractiveness. Furthermore, our study highlights the universality of social media especially Twitter as a strategic branding tool. The use of Twitter for destination branding by the studied destinations is in sync with similar strategies adopted by popular destinations in advanced countries [9]. Moreover, while there is a scarcity of studies exploring post-COVID-19 branding strategies of destinations, the few available studies utilized YouTube [4] and Instagram [20], thus, our study is among the first to utilize Twitter in exploring post-COVID-19 branding strategies. Finally, while there is a plethora of articles employing quantitative methodologies in analyzing the tweets of destinations, such studies most of the time negate important contexts which could enhance understanding, our use of a qualitative tool provides an enhanced richness and context to the phenomenon under consideration.

From a managerial perspective, DMOs in Africa should realize that the negative destination image of Africa as orchestrated through sensationalized international media coverage is a huge image deficit for the continent. Thus, there should be consistency in emphasizing the uniqueness of their destination brand identities. They can step up the marketing campaign by using national and international social media influencers to promote their destinations. Admittedly, some of the focal DMOs utilized social media influencers, but they were more sporadic than strategic.

Additionally, other African DMOs should utilize the power of Twitter to market and emphasize their destinations' competitive advantage. For instance, the official Twitter handles of Nigeria Tourism Development Corporation @tournigeriang and the Ghana Tourism Authority @ghanatourismGTA can learn from the leading destinations in Africa on the destination brand identity they portray through their tweets. Nigeria for instance should focus on and emphasize the rich arts and culture as its destination brand identity, whereas Ghana focuses on heritage tourism by maximizing its destination brand as the hub of slavery heritage destination [32]. Consistency in the tweets in this regard will create unique destination images which will be much more appealing to tourists rather than just tweeting about tourist sites. Finally, there a is need for curriculum developers and National Tourism Boards in Africa to work together and develop subjects that highlight the competitive advantages of their countries. African child deserves to know the unique destination brand identities of their home countries and thus can be brand ambassadors particularly when they travel abroad.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

As a limitation, a comparison study of the social media handles of other world's leading destination countries in Europe alongside those of Africa could have provided insight into why African tourism organizations are likely to fall short of winning the ultimate trophy of the world's leading destination. Again, the views of international tourists about what informs their destination choices could help in establishing whether the social media posts by the leading destination countries in Africa meet their satisfaction as tourists.

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