Assessing the relationship between brand message and guests' choice in the Sarova hotel chain in Nairobi

Mwalimu Zipporah[1][*], Stephen Macharia[1], Judy Kibe[2]

[1] Karatina University, School of Business, Kenya
[2] Moi University, School of Tourism Management, Kenya

Abstract: Hotels and restaurants in Kenya aim to distinguish their brand image and differentiate their product or service from competitors by implementing particular brand approaches. The effectiveness of hotel branding among the Sarova hotels in Kenya is key to competiveness of the hotel business according to the previous findings which announced that the Sarova Hotel had vibrant clientele from both local and international markets. Effective branding has persisted during the years and still attracts visitors. The objective of the study was to assess the relationship between brand message and guests' choice in the Sarova hotel chain in Nairobi. The target population were the guests residing at the Sarova group of hotels in Nairobi for one week on leisure vacation. Out of 380 guests living in the hotels, the sample size was 191 guests. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. Findings reveal that a successful brand messaging strategy for the Sarova hotel chain in Nairobi perceives the design of a coherent communication strategy in the process of destination brand management as one of critical forces of its competitiveness.

Keywords: tourism, brand, guest, hotel management
JEL classification: L83

Procena odnosa između poruke brenda i izbora gostiju u hotelima lanca Sarova u Najrobiju

Sažetak: Hoteli i restorani u Keniji se trude da pozicioniraju svoj brend i diferenciraju svoj proizvod ili uslugu u odnosu na konkurenciju primenom određenih pristupa brendu. Prema prethodnim saznanjima efikasnost brendiranja hotela među hotelima Sarova u Keniji je ključna za konkurentnost hotelijerstva, posebno ako uzmemo u obzir da dobijeni rezultati ukazuju na činjenicu da je hotel Sarova imao dinamičnu klijentelu sa lokalnog i međunarodnog tržišta. Efektivno brendiranje je uporno tokom godina i još uvek privlači posetioce. Cilj studije je da se proceni odnos između poruke brenda i izbora gostiju u hotelima lanca Sarova u Najrobiju. Ciljna populacija su bili gosti koji su boravili u grupi hotela Sarova u Najrobiju u trajanju od jedne nedelje i bili uključeni u boravišni turizam. Od 380 hotelskih gostiju, konačna veličina uzorka je bila 191 gost. Za analizu podataka korišćeni su opisni i statistički podaci. Rezultati otkrivaju da uspešna strategija prenosa vrednosti brenda za hotele u lancu Sarova u Najrobiju podrazumeva dizajn koherentne strategije komunikacije u okviru procesa upravljanja brendom destinacije kao jednim od kritičnih aspekata njegove konkurentnosti.

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* zipmwalimu@gmail.com

Ključne reči: turizam, brand, hotelski gosti, hotelski menadžment
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1. Introduction

Dallabona (2014) points out that brand identity refers to the perceptible fundamentals of a brand, such as color, design, and logo that classify and differentiate the brand in customers' attentions. Product identity is different from the product image. A brand on many occasions has all of these features functioning simultaneously in a manner that exclusively recognizes business and distinguishes it from its rivals.

Branding that characterizes the hotel industry in Kenya is carried out by international franchisors (IHG and Hilton hotels). Locally owned hotel groups like Sarova hotels struggle to incorporate local cultures in their brands. However, adoption of these cultures enhances their competitive advantage, and therefore there is a gap because of embracing international levels and forgetting the local culture. The fact is that Nairobi has recorded steady growth in the number of meetings, conferences, and incentive industry. According to Musembi (2014), there is a compelling need for branding local hospitality establishment. To achieve and sustain the development there is an urgent need for research on the effects of hotel branding on the guests' choice of the hotel.

The efficacy of hotel branding among the Sarova hotels in Kenya cannot be underscored. Empirical literature illustrates that the Sarova hotels have had vibrant guest's clientele from both the local and international markets (Kilonzo, 2012). Past ability to attract guests and influence their choices due to effective branding has continued to wane over the years. According to Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS, 2016), bed occupancy in 2015 decreased by 6.4% from 6,281.6 in 2014 to 5,878.6 in 2015. This decline was attributed to the lack of proper branding of hotels in Kenya (Njiru, 2016). Besides that, international visitor arrivals also declined by 12.6% from 1,350.4 in 2014 to 1,180.5 in 2015, and the author viewed this to be due to negative branding in Nairobi.

Globally and regionally, the theme of brand royalty has been investigated broadly. Studies are mainly dedicated to the scrutiny of significant marketing notions serving as loyalty antecedents like the quality of service, brand trust, discerned value, and consumer satisfaction. Previous studies have underscored the significance of branding, with many stressing the branding as a differentiation strategy, enhancing property value and creating customer loyalty. However, these existing literatures by Kamica (2015) fail to address the influence of significant aspects like brand identity and design, brand positioning, and brand message. More so, they fall short of assessing these influences on customer choices in the current external environment prone to legislations, cut-throat competition active organizational cultures and stringent policies from regulatory frameworks (Njoroge, 2015).

Indeed, in Kenya, few studies (Koskey, 2013; Musembi, 2014) seem to have been done on guest satisfaction as opposed to its influence on guest choice, and hence there is a need for this study to show the effect of hotel branding on the guests' choice of the hotel. Contextually, literature in many parts of the world indicates the growing adverse impacts of non-branding in hotels and Sarova hotels in Nairobi are not spared (Zeugner & Žabkar, 2015). There is a strong need to fill this gap in this area of academic knowledge which answers the research question: "what are the effects of hotel branding on the guests' choice of the hotel in the Sarova hotel chain in the Nairobi County".

The general objective of the study was to assess the relationship between the brand message and the guests' choice in Sarova hotel chain in Nairobi. The following objectives guided this study, assessing the relationship between communication platform and guest choice,

determining the extent to which communication strategy affects the guests' choice and examining the influence of an upfront strategy on the guests' choice in Sarova hotel chain in Nairobi.
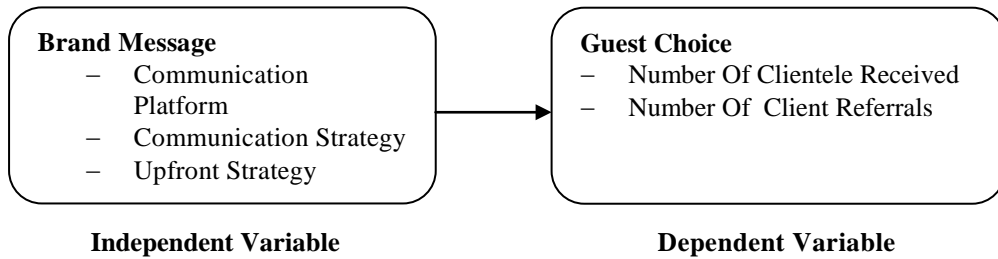
2. Background

Social judgment theory is concerned with a changed attitude that assumes the immensity of persuasion that is created by a particular message and depends on how the position of the signal varies from that of the person's. In social judgment theory, persuasion is substantial when the situation is neither objectionable nor acceptable. This learning approach was first introduced by the U.S. psychologist Carl I. Hovland between 1912 to 1961, suggesting that a change in attitude can be related to a message learning process. It implies that an approach is altered, but only if the message stimulating this change is crystal clear. In the hotel industry, brand message, as a communication platform, articulated through communication strategy, upfront strategy, new front strategy perfectly resonates with hotel clientele guests.

To explain brand communication persuasiveness, scholars usually conceptualize the attitude toward the brand, attitude toward the advertising, and buying intention as the three critical dimensions of communication for a brand (Pizam, 2010).This advocacy, attributable to the intuitive theory that people have a preference for the bright side of things rather than the dark one, does not receive adequate empirical support. Numerous researchers in disparity assert that a negatively framed message prompts additional cognitive elaboration so that negative framing can be more productive. The persuasive purpose of negative framing becomes very noticeable solely in the context in which the target consumers are under the influence of high processing incentive. Negative framing in comparison to positive framing is highly effective regardless of the level of processing opportunity.

Among advertising planners, message framing is prevalent; however, to resolve the methods it accurately serves as a brand communication strategy is a very daunting undertaking. Concerning creating brand communication persuasiveness, several studies have proved that negatively framed and positively framed messages are not automatically remarkably distinct from one another in many conditions. Kuenzel and Halliday (2010), in their research study, founded on a holistically designed theoretical base combined with extremely thorough experiments, propose that the persuasive purpose of negative against positive framing to a great extent depends on the message to be communicated, under which conditions and to whom. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to identify first the customer traits that moderate the response to message framing and then enter them into the process scrutinizing the persuasiveness that message framing produces. Communication Platform provides a substantial editorial depth and breadth as well as creativity, then helps effectively manage and distribute your messages to the venues where your target market spends time. Communication Strategy is the systematic planning and realization of information flow, communication, media development, and image care in the long-term horizon. It conveys the deliberate message(s) through the most suitable media to the designated audience.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Source: Prepared by the authors

3. Materials and methods

The study adopted correlational and descriptive designs, and the approach design enabled the establishment of the relationships between branding and guest choices. The model gave a comprehensive acquisition of knowledge and insight into the study of population and the variables under study. The study used both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. Qualitative methods attributed to providing an in-depth understanding of concerns are not at all times possible, while quantitative methods give the strength of relationships among variables. This study was carried out in Nairobi, Kenya. It involved Sarova Stanley and Sarova Panafric chain of hotels operating in the Nairobi County. The target population were guests residing at the Sarova group of hotels in Nairobi for one week on leisure vacation. Statistics from KNBS (2016), indicate that Sarova Stanley and Sarova Panafric hotels have a total population of 380 guests residing in the hotels, out of which a sample size of 191 guests are on leisure vacation for one week, either staying in the hotel in the off-peak or peak season. Accordingly, in the study that took place in the off-peak season (March to June 2017), 191 guests were targeted. The researcher used a self-administered questionnaire as it is cost-effective as well as convenient for this study because the target respondents occupy independent rooms to guarantee privacy. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used by the researcher to analyze quantitative data from the questionnaires with the assistance of the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS). Frequencies, percentages and mean, which are descriptive statistics, were used to describe the variables. Multiple regression model best suited this study since it explained the connection between dependent and independent variables, which the study aimed to establish. Accordingly, to determine the effect of branding, the dependent variable, the guest choice was analyzed against three independent variables of branding; namely the communication platform, communication strategy, and upfront strategy.

4. Results and discussion

143 out of 191 respondents completed and returned the questionnaires creating a response rate of 75%. The response rate was representative and it was adequate to make conclusions:

Table 1: Response rate analysis

		Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Responded	143	75	75
	Declined	48	25	100.0
	Total	191	100.0	

Source: Prepared by the authors

The respondents were asked to rate according to their opinions on various aspects of the brand message, which included communication platform, communication strategy, upfront strategy, and new front strategy. Their responses are described and presented in various tables below. According to the findings of the study, as indicated in Table 2 below, 30% of the respondents strongly disagreed that the communication platform is visible and elaborate, followed by those who agreed at 25%, and 13.3% were not sure respectively. The study findings were supported by Pizam (2010), who noted that brand communication strategy aimed towards the advertising, branding, and buying motive as the critical measurements of communication for a brand in disparity, a negatively framed message.

Table 2: Communication Platform is visible and elaborate

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	24	16.7	16.7	16.7
	Agree	36	25.0	25.0	41.7
	Not Sure	19	13.3	13.3	55.0
	Disagree	21	15.0	15.0	70.0
	Strongly disagree	43	30.0	30.0	100.0
	Total	143	100.0	100.0	

Source: Prepared by the authors

From the findings in table 3 below, 50% of respondents strongly agree that communication strategy is convincing; only 10% strongly disagreed. These results depict that Sarova hotels in Nairobi attract their clientele mostly through this strategy. The study findings conform to those of Kuenzel and Halliday (2010), that even though message framing is conventional amongst advertising organizers, deciding appropriate methods for it to function correctly as a brand communication strategy may turn out to be a very daunting undertaking. About producing brand communication persuasiveness, several studies have demonstrated that both negatively framed and positively framed messages are not automatically considerably diverse from one another under most conditions.

Table 3: Communication Strategy is convincing

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	72	50.0	50.0	50.0
	Agree	24	16.7	16.7	66.7
	Not Sure	12	8.3	8.3	75.0
	Disagree	21	15.0	15.0	90.0
	Strongly disagree	14	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	143	100.0	100.0	

Source: Prepared by the authors

The study sought to find out whether the upfront strategy favors guests. The results shown in table 4 indicate that the majority of the respondents indicated that upfront strategy supports guests' accounts for the guests' choice in Sarova hotels, whereas 23.3% of the respondents also agreed, but 11.7% of the respondents indicated otherwise. The findings concurred with those of Krystallis and Chrysochou (2013) that the more upfront strategy is used, the more well-informed customers learn about a specific product class, hence there are higher chances of reduced interest.

Table 4: Upfront strategy favors guests

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Strongly agree	72	50.0	50.0	50.0
	Agree	33	23.3	23.3	73.3
	Not Sure	7	5.0	5.0	78.3
Valid	Disagree	14	10.0	10.0	88.3
	Strongly disagree	17	11.7	11.7	100.0
	Total	143	100.0	100.0	

Source: Prepared by the authors

Adjusted R squared is the coefficient of determination, which points out the difference in the dependent variable due to variations in the independent variable. Findings in Table 5 clearly show that the value of adjusted R squared was 0.849, meaning that there was a variation of 84.9 percent of guest choices due to alterations in upfront strategy, communication strategy, and communication platform and identity design at 95 percent confidence interval. This shows that 84.9 percent of changes in guest choices accounted for variations in the upfront strategy, communication strategy, and communication platform. These findings concur with those of Musembi (2014), who postulated that guest choice was strongly associated with variables such as brand message, brand positioning, and identity design.

Table 5: Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.922[a]	0.849	0.846	0.321

Source: Prepared by the authors

From the ANOVA statistics above, a significance level (p-value) was .000, showing that sample data used was perfect for developing conclusions about the population parameters as this significance value was fewer than 0.05, indicating that the model was significant as it was less than 5%.

Table 6: ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	80.854	3	26.951	261.087	0.000[b]
Residual	14.349	139	0.103		
Total	95.203	142			

Source: Prepared by the authors

From Table 7, as revealed by study findings, holding guest choice constant at 95% confidence level given that p-value is 000.0, which is less than 0.05, the guest choice would stand at 0.578 with the standard error of 0.177 .The study established that a unit increment in the Communication Platform would contribute to an increase in guest choice by a factor of 0.90. A unit increment in Communication Strategy would contribute to a rise in guest choice by a factor of 0.891, while a unit increase in Upfront Strategy would lead to an increase in guest choice by a factor of 0.86. These findings, therefore, indicate that the correlation is significant at a 5% confidence level, given that the p-value is less than 0.05. Hence, this conclusion is in agreement with the findings of Kilonzo (2012), who indicated in his study that brand positioning has a significant effect on hotel customers concerning their choice. The established regression equation that explained this relationship was Y (guest choice) = +

0.578 +0.90X1 (Communication Platform) + 0.891X$_2$ (Communication Strategy) + 0.86X$_3$ (Upfront Strategy) + (standard error).

Table 7: Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	0.578	0.177		3.261	0.000
Communication Platform	0.090	0.068	0.114	1.327	0.001
Communication Strategy	0.891	0.078	0.714	11.357	0.001
Upfront Strategy	0.086	0.059	0.126	1.458	0.000
a. Dependent Variable: Guest Choice					

Source: Prepared by the authors

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The purpose of the study was to assess the effects of hotel branding on the guests' choice of the Sarova hotels in the Nairobi County. Precise objectives included an assessment of the relationship between identity design and guests' choice, a determination of the extent to which brand positioning affects the guests' choice, and to find out the influence of brand message on guests' choice in the Sarova hotel chain in Nairobi. A case study of the Sarova hotels in the Nairobi County was carried out using a questionnaire completed by the guests of the Sarova hotels in Nairobi.

The study analysed the extent to which communication strategy affects guests' choice in the Sarova hotel chain in Nairobi. The study finding indicates that Communication Strategy has the most significant influence on the guests' choice of the Sarova hotels in the Nairobi County ($\beta2=0.891$, $p=0.001<0.05$). The study finding answered the study question, "what is the effect of the Communication Strategy on the guests' choice of the Sarova hotels in the Nairobi County?" The study established that the Communication Strategy that the Sarova hotels use to describe firms are critical. They shape the way people think about the Sarova hotels, and they provide concrete reasons to prefer the Sarova hotels to other hotels. The results of empirical research established that branding improves guests' choice.

The study hightlights that the core brand message shapes an organization's whole subsequent brand marketing messages. A firm's tagline or ad watchword should closely match the words in its core brand message, or they take a different form. What is essential is that all Sarova chain hotel brand messages should describe aspects of the brand that are relevant to its clients. It should be a short statement that declares why the brand matters, what it stands for, and how the Sarova hotels stand out from their competitors. As contemporary travelers want hotels to provide them with personalized experiences, the Sarova hotels should increase their visibility not only in Kenya but worldwide.

The following areas for further research are suggested: to find out the effects of other modes of advertising to promote the choice of the Sarova hotels or other hotels in Nairobi; to identify other factors that affect guests' choice in other towns in Kenya; and to look into the challenges that inhibit the growth of hotels in Nairobi.

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