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Research Article

FESTIVITIES AND THE TOURISM DESTINATION ATTRACTIVENESS OF AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study set out to investigate the level of influence that Festivals and events have on tourism destination attractiveness of Akwa Ibom State. Primary data were collected with the use of interview schedule. A sample of 296 respondents, who were both domestic and foreign tourists visiting the states between the months of October to December 2017 made up our sample frame. The researcher interviewed selected tourists met at hotels, the Beaches, events and recreational facilities. The statements from the visitors were recorded on a writing pad and on a recording device (smart-phone) and analyzed by themes. Findings from the study revealed that most tourists showed interest in festivities hosted at the destination because the festivities were entertaining and had a lot of traditional and cultural significance. It was recommended that events and festivals that especially have cultural and traditional significance to the states should be promoted widely, as they have a way of exposing the hospitable nature of the people at the destinations and showcasing the indigenous tangible products of the States.

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INTRODUCTION

Attractions are the primary elements of destination appeal (Vengesai, 2003). A destination has its own attributes and these attributes are supposed to be an important source of its attractiveness. Tourism as products are categorized into four (4) levels namely; the signature or core products, the facilitating products, the augmented product and the supporting products (Emaria, Zahari and Nur-Adilah, 2015; Kotler, Bowen and Makens, 1996; Swarbrooke and Page, 1995). The core or signature products are major products or main tourism attraction being offered by a destination to tourists. They include natural resources/environment, beautiful scenery, climate, ecology, culture and historical sites/architecture or even man-made features (Emaria, *et al.*, 2015), social and traditional festival events, shopping and tourism infrastructures, recreation or sporting events, (Emaria, Zahari and Nur-Adilah, 2015; Bui, 2012; Goeldner *et al.*, 2000; Hu and Ritchie, 1993), entertainment and amusements, all project destination attractiveness. The facilitating products are associated with services and goods that must be together with the core products (Kotler, Bowen, 1996; Wakefield, Blodgett, 1999). Booking services are one of the examples of the facilitating products (Emaria, Zahari and Nur-Adilah, 2015). The ease of booking

for transportation and accommodation as well as other tourism associated activities at the tourism destination make up the facilitating products. Meanwhile, augmented products are those products offered by a destination in forms of bonuses and extras that may become a reason for competitive advantage. According to Smith (1994) the augmented products are referred to the individual or tourists' perception, attitudes, participation and interaction with the service organizations. Complimentary meals or drinks on arrival, a free night at lounges after spending three days to a week among others can constitute the augmented products of a tourism destination. The supporting products also known as extra products or by-products are the added value products to the core products being offered by the tourism destination and can help distinguish the image of that destination from other destinations. These products are 'stand-alone' and include traditional and ethnic crafts, local souvenirs, miniature, foods, merchandise, etc. (Emaria, *et al.*, 2015).

The different destination attributes do not impact on tourist destination choice or destination attractiveness equally, some destination attributes may play a more prominent role than others (Swarbrooke, 1999). The benefits of tourism have been recognized by the Federal Government of Nigeria. This recognition led to the formulation of the Nigerian Tourism

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Development Master Plan in 2007. The Master Plan as a road map for the development and sustenance of the entire Nigerian tourism industry is aimed at marketing Nigeria's tourism assets both at the local and international level (Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation, 2014). The Nigerian Tourism Master Plan proposes and elaborates enhancement that should be carried out to transform tourism sites/attractions for visitors (Esu, 2015). Akwa Ibom have recently become a choice destination of tourists in Nigeria. This is because of the existence of historical hall-marks as well as traditional events and festivals which the state is identified with.

There are studies on promoting festivals, but those studies were aimed at finding the social impact of festivals on tourism development or the impact of an element of festivity on tourism development. Of all the studies carried out so far on tourism, there is no known study that has attempted to examine how the contemporary and traditional festivals hosted by Akwa Ibom state, Nigeria, could enhance tourism destination attractiveness. This necessitated our study to investigate the influence of Festivities on destination attractiveness of Akwa Ibom State. Based on this background, the objective of this study is to determine the relationship between Festivities hosted at Akwa Ibom State as a tourism destination and its destination attractiveness. The basic question to be answered here is; What relationship exists between the Festivities at the destination and the tourism destination attractiveness of Akwa Ibom State?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Destination Attractiveness

The terms destination attractions and destination image are often used interchangeably. Crompton (1979) defined destination image as a sum of beliefs, impressions, ideas, and perceptions that people hold of objectives, behaviors, and events. Based on this assertion, tourism destination attractiveness in this study is operationally defined as those, impressions, and perceptions that tourists or intending tourists hold about the physical, cultural or ambient features of a place as meeting one or more of their specific leisure related needs. Our operationalized definition gains support from Lue, Crompton and Stewart (1996), who acknowledge destination attractiveness as something or a place recognized by individuals as a factor that influences their decision-making of pleasure travel.

Attractions are the primary elements of tourism destination appeal. They are the fundamental reasons why prospective visitors choose one destination over another (Crouch and Ritchie 1999). Researchers have grouped, classified and categorized attractions differently. Goeldner *et al.* (2000) categorized attractions into five main groups; cultural, natural, events, recreation and entertainment attractions. Gartner (1996) emphasize that virtually any feature of a destination could become a tourism attraction, if it is correctly marketed and adequately presented.

Festivities as tourism attractions

Festivities have a long history of acting as tourist attractions (Quinn, 2009). Various types of festivities have long existed as a significant part of human society and were devised as forms of public display, civic rituals and collective celebration (Quinn, 2009; Sonja, 2015). According to Getz (1991) festivals

and public celebrations are found in all societies. Together with a variety of other special events, they are increasingly seen as unique tourist attractions and as destination image market (Mohammad, 2014). Festivals belong to the group of created attractions and aim at increasing the interest in learning about cultures, customs and traditions of different countries and areas, aside other aims like recreation and entertainment (Vukašin and Dejan, 2011). Gonzalez and Morale (2009) define festivities as experiences that are unique and can create time and space to convey specific objectives for a specific or non-specific audience. According to Getz (2009) several types of events and festivals can be distinguished, they include;

- Cultural celebrations; festivals, carnivals, religious events, parades, historical commemorations;
- Arts and entertainments; concerts and other public performance, exhibitions, award ceremonies;
- Economy and trade; trade fairs, stock market, consumer fairs, presentations, meetings and conferences, public events, charity events;
- Sport events; professional and amateur;
- Education and sciences; seminars, workshops, conferences, interpretive events;
- Recreation; games and sports for entertainment, leisure;
- Politics and government; party campaigns, inaugurations, investment conferences, VIP visits, meetings, conferences;
- Private events; anniversaries, family gatherings, parties.

Vukašin and Dejan (2011) assert that the role of festivities are to create a specific atmosphere that characterise the spirit of different people, their uniqueness, authenticity, tradition, hospitality, certain themes and symbolism. Community festivals and special events have grown rapidly in number throughout the world during the past decade (Chang, 2006). Festivals celebrations and dances are integral part of Nigerian culture depicting the country's native customs and traditions in a meaningful and colourful way (Ndanusa, Yoshifuni, and Md. Aminul, 2014). Culture as a dimension of festivities is one of the strongest attractions in terms of facilitating a genuine experience of a place (Hinch and Barre, 2005). One of the factors behind the success of Nigerian tourism, apart from natural beauty is its socio-cultural festivals and events (Ogunberu, 2011). The recognition of festivities in tourism as a socio-economic driver of tourism destination image has propelled the emergence of increase in the number of touristic festivals and events being held in recent times in Nigeria (Esu, 2015).

According to Tyrgay and Dikmen (2013) tourist's choice of attending festivities could be related to many factors such as accessibility, entertainment, performance, and relaxation. Getz (2009) supports that events are important motivators of tourist's choice of a destination, and figures prominently in the development and marketing plans of most destinations. Knowles, Diamantis and El-Mourhabi, (2004) adds that events can encourage tourism development and attract visitors to a destination and increase its attractiveness.

Festivals and Events in Akwa Ibom State

Tourism to some states like Akwa Ibom State is a source of revenue to support its current and recurrent expenditures. The State have several festivals and events that attract many visitors annually especially towards the end of the year. These festivals and events complement the historical, ethnic and cultural distinctive features of the state that have in themselves become main tourist attractions. Some contemporary and traditional festivities in Akwa Ibom State are; The Guinness world record of 9,999 assembly of Christmas carol group, an event that holds every third Friday of December, yearly in Uyo; Seasonal International and National Sporting Events held at the God'swilln Akpabio Stadium Uyo. A 33,000 Capacity Stadium, bird nest design modelled after the Allianz Arena, official pitch of Bundesliga Champion, Bayern Munich; The annual Dakkada Carnival which holds in Uyo; Ekpe and Ekpo outings, a celebration of the masquerades at Uruan, Oron, Ikot Abasi and Mkpato Enin Local Government Areas and the Mfuho festival, a state festival of masquerades; The feast of Etefia Deity (a festival of appeasement to the communal deity of Uyo, Ikono, and Ini, L.G.A; The Atakpo Festival (in honor of the Uruan clan deity) and the Ekprikata Festival held at Itu and Uruan L.G.A; The new yam festivals celebrated at Ikot Ekpen, Ikono, Nsit-Ubium, Ibiono; The Boat Regatta Festivals held at Itu; The Ibeno Beach party; and Mbremmong (biannual aquatic festival) at Nsit-ibom L.G.A.

Theoretical framework

Theoretically, this study draws its strength from the Expectancy Theory (ET) developed by Victor Vroom in 1964. It is a theory of rational choice based on the principles of expected value (Pfeffer, 1985). The theory assumes that humans are knowledgeable about the consequences of their behaviour and that the desire for certain psychological benefits motivates the search for an activity/environment that will provide such benefits. The theory suggests that travel experience that meets or exceeds tourists' expectations will be remembered positively (Andereck, McGehee, Lee and Clemmons, 2011). In applying this theory to this work, it explains tourist's choice of visiting a destination based on the destination's festivals and events offerings, Driver and Tocher (1970) and Andereck, McGehee, Lee and Clemmons (2011) assert that tourism activities that include travel and leisure can be considered as behaviour in which individuals engage with expectations of certain outcomes or rewards. Individuals may travel for several reasons, but some kinds of travel may be more likely to provide specific outcomes. Most people participate in leisure travel to satisfy more than one expectation. The more important expectations most likely play the greatest role in decisions to participate in a tourism activity or choose a destination (Schreyer and Roggenbuck 1978). Tourists would project, revisit, or even rate a destination highly based on how much the features of that destination meet or exceed their visit expectations.

Empirical framework

Esu (2009) carried out a study on tourists' satisfaction with cultural tourism festival, a case study of Calabar Cultural festival, Nigeria. The objective of the study was to investigate the relationship between tourists' overall satisfaction and cultural festival attributes. The population of the study

consisted of all spectators of the carnival festival who were 20 years and above. The cross-sectional survey design was used in collecting data, and the convenience sampling method was used to collect data from 500 spectators at the event venues. The instrument for data collection was a five-point Likert scale questionnaire, and the statistical tool used to determine the relationship between cultural festival attributes and attendees' satisfaction was the multiple regression analysis. Findings from the study showed that organisation, promotion, facilities and friendliness of locals as attributes of cultural festivals were predictors of the level of attendees' overall satisfaction with the festival. The study recommended that festival attributes that are explanatory of attendees' satisfaction should be factored into festivals and events as tourism products, to increase the attractiveness/image of a destination. The study revealed that festivals have become a quick to use means of promoting tourist destinations and could be used to represent and measure destination image.

Oluwatoyin and Afolabi, (2013) carried out a study on traditional marriage festivals and tourism development in Ekiti State on four groups of 200 persons, made up of inhabitants of the state, tourists, government agencies, private agencies and their workers, using purposeful sampling methods. The results from their study showed that respondents see traditional marriage as a festival and tourism potential that could project the cultural heritage of the people. They went on to recommend that members of the community should be educated and informed that traditional marriages have tourism potentials. They also recommended that traditional marriages should not be seen as idolatry but rather as cultural heritage and tourist attraction.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in selected areas of Akwa Ibom, with its state capital at Uyo. It is located in the coastal South-south part of the country. The main languages spoken here are Ibibio, Annang and Oron languages. Akwa Ibom state is divided into 31 Local Government Areas.

The study utilizes the survey research design approach. The population of this study consists of all domestic and international tourists who were visiting Akwa Ibom State within the study period. This constitutes an infinite population. It covers those that were found at tourist attraction sites, Hotels, Resorts/Beach, service accommodations, and festivity venues within the state. To determine the sample size for the customers, the Topman formula was adopted. Based on the formula, 296 customers formed the sample size for the study.

The sampling technique adopted for this study was the convenient sampling. Eight local government areas where festivities were hosted within the study period were judgmentally picked for this study. These communities include: Uyo, Uruan, Ikot Abasi, Ikot Ekpen, Ibeno, Itu, Ibiono, and Mkpato Enin. Information required for this study were gathered from Visitors at these locations. A total number of 296 visitors were interviewed on different days at these locations. The state capital Uyo was scheduled with the highest number of 90 interviewees because they were host to major festivities that attract many domestic and international visitors. The other locations were scheduled based on the number of tourist sites and Festivities hosted by the areas, where tourists were

anticipated to be found. The rationale for which the interview was scheduled to the different locations in the state is Uruan had 30, Ibeno was assigned 60; MkpateEnin 16; Ikot Abasi 35; Itu was assigned 30 and Ikot Ekpene 35 interviewees.

The instrument of data collection for this study was an Interview schedule. The interview schedule was made of seven questions which helped clarify responses gathered from the tourists on the subject under study. Ten Research assistants were assigned to interview tourists at locations in the state on different days. The statements from the visitors were recorded on a writing pads and on a recording device (smart-phone) and analyzed by themes. The research instrument had both face and content validity.

RESULT OF FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEW

Tourists plans to attend festivals or events in Akwa Ibom State in Future Most of the tourists interviewed expressed their optimism to attend major events hosted by the states at the end of the year. Some of the respondents were in the state for the first time and had heard a lot about the events that hold in the state such as the 9,999 assembly of Christmas carol groups event at Uyo. They were hopeful to re-visit the state to witness the events in the subsequent years.

Tourists interest in festivals and events and the Unique Features of those Events

Popular among the events mentioned by tourists were the Guinness world record of 9,999 assembly of Christmas carol group held in Uyo, and traditional events with charades of masquerade display at different locations in the state, among others.

Respondents expressed that the events at the study area that captured their interest were unique because of elements of tradition shown in music, dance, food and celebration, which had a strong influence on their excitement and was different from what they had back home. Few respondents especially international tourists expressed that the security and safety of the place as compared to other parts of Nigeria, was a unique factor they considered in their decision to come to the state. At a time when some parts of Nigeria were under attack by insurgencies and with the tales of Ebola, as well as stories of militancy and kidnapping, the international tourists said that their experience was different from the stories they heard. They expressed their desire to re-visit and witness tourism events hosted by the State in the nearest future.

Impression about the people at the Destination

Most respondents expressed that the people of Akwa Ibom State were hospitable and warm. This they indicated had a significant impact on their visit and had created a positive impression about the people of the state. The visitors were of the view that the general cleanliness, peace, unique lifestyle, as well as receptiveness of visitors they experienced through interaction with people in the state, was an endowment of the people and was commended.

On the Cost of Visiting destinations

The tourists encountered during this study expressed that expenses incurred on accommodation and feeding were moderate as compared to other places they had visited at other

times within and outside the country. The commended the rich traditional heritage including the food served during their visit which were different from what they had at their home towns and was a push factor to revisit the destination. To some of the tourist, the cost of visiting the location was not really a major factor because what was offered was commensurate with the price. The quality of offerings they had encountered was good enough to encourage a repeat visit to the state.

Suggestions on what could improve the image of the destination

The visitors raised certain observations that they believe could help the destination if considered such as;

- Provision for disabled friendly facilities especially at accommodations (Hotels).
- There was the absence of non-parking notices for cars at some places and this exposed them to harassments by impolite task forces.
- Introduction of tour programs in hotel's list of offerings that would attend to tourists need to visit locations of historical significance like the slave trade route, the Mary Slessor house and the amalgamation house, among others.
- Tourists also recommended that considering the fast-growing tourism status of the State, it was necessary for them to have several large shopping areas apart from the general market places. Such large malls could house relaxation spots and game areas. They also recommended that tourism agencies in the state should consider providing tourist's information centers or customer care units/telephone contacts to aid visitors in their enquiries.

All visitors commended the state for their general cleanliness. Visitors were also emphatic about the security of the state, as well as the receptiveness of the host. This could become a selling point for the state to build other tourism potentials upon. However, the study showed that most visitors to the State were impressed and expressed that they were most likely to revisit and to recommend the state as attractive tourist destination to other people.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Our findings corroborate with Esu (2015), who found that festivals have become a quick means of promoting tourist destinations and could be used to represent and measure the destination's image. The result of findings also gains justification from Getz (2009) who asserts that events are important motivators of tourist's choice to visit a destination, and figure prominently in the development and marketing plans of most destinations. The work of Oluwatoyin and Afolabi, (2013) supports our findings that respondents see traditional festivals as a tourism potential that could project the cultural heritage of the people.

In answering the research question on whether there was a relationship between the two variables, the study revealed that tourists show interest in festivities at the destination because the festivities were entertaining with good artistic and cultural performances. Such festivities ranged from cultural celebrations, arts and entertainments, sport events and

recreation, politics, education and private events that held at the destination which had a significant positive influence on the destination's attractiveness.

CONCLUSION

Festivals and events that especially have cultural significance had a way of creating a memorable experience in the minds of visitors. This is because most visitors to the state are thrilled when they experience an unfamiliar event that have cultural significance to the place visited. These visitors may nurse an intension to revisit and even tell others about their experience, there by promoting the tourism image of the destination. The recommendations made were that events and festivals that especially have cultural and traditional significance to the states should be promoted widely. Tourism stakeholders and the state should also develop historical and traditional evidences located within the state. The could also draw up annual tourism programs to accommodate traditional festivals in all local governments in the state and create wide range awareness on such traditional festivals and event and project them more internationally to get tourists attention.

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