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Zimbabwe tourism branding in perspective: Can the undiscovered tourism gems be the panacea to destination competitiveness?

Kumbirai Mirimi ^{1*}, Keron Shumba ¹, Simon Chiutsi ¹, Brighton Hurombo ¹, Marvellous Mangwiro ²

¹ *Department of Travel and Recreation Management, Chinhoyi University of Technology, Zimbabwe*

² *Department of Hospitality and Tourism, Chinhoyi University of Technology, Zimbabwe*

Abstract

The macro-economic and political challenges experienced in Zimbabwe in the last decade have impacted negatively on the competitiveness of Zimbabwe as a tourist destination. However the new political and economic dispensation ushered through the Government of National Unity (GNU) has created stable conditions thereby bringing in a new lease of life for the Zimbabwe's tourism sector to rebrand itself. This paper proposes that in this rebranding exercise Zimbabwe can exploit its undiscovered tourist gems to regain competitiveness. These undiscovered tourist gems include culture of the BaTonga people, the Shangaai people, and farm or agro-tourism in the Eastern Highlands, Chimanimani area and Masvingo in terms of wildlife, Domboshava and Chiredzi in the lowveld as noted from the research. A descriptive research design was used because the primary objective was to describe the effects of the dynamic interaction between tourism branding, industry environment and its characteristics on tourism performance. The paper proposes that the rebranding strategy, rather than being only an implementation strategy for image promotion, relates to a way of understanding the changing branding process within a tourist destination.

Keywords: Destination, Image, Branding, Corporate branding, Undiscovered gems

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* Corresponding author. E-mail address: kmirimi@yahoo.com, kmirimi@cut.ac.zw

1. Introduction

Destination branding plays a significant role in positioning and marketing a destination (Morgan et al., 2002). Other authors also highlight that destination branding is important in tourism destination strategy and planning (Cooper et al., 2005). Destination branding in Zimbabwe is important for destination management and can be shown by the investments that are made at national and regional level. This is what Anholt (2007) refers to as the creation of a competitive distinctiveness. It is believed that tourism can, and should be branded to compete with other countries, just as companies brand their products and services (Pappu and Quester, 2007; Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009; Balakrishnan, 2008). This is because, whether or not a country consciously brands itself, it will be perceived in a certain way by tourists within and outside the country (Pike, 2005). The Ministry of Hospitality and Tourism Industry, spearheaded by the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority is pursuing an intense branding campaign with a new image launched in March 2011. This paper explores the ideals and complexities enshrined within branding a destination with reference to various schools of thought and concludes by proposing branding of “undiscovered gems” as an effective tool to brand a contemporary tourist destination. The paper concludes by making recommendations that for Zimbabwe’s tourism sector to regain competitiveness there is need to reinvent its tourism resource base by tapping from off the beaten track tourism resources in the mould of the BaTonga peoples’ culture, the Shangaai people, farm or agro-tourism in the Eastern Highlands, Chimanimani area, Masvingo in terms of wildlife, Domboshava and Chiredzi in the lowveld.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Destination branding in perspective

Destination branding offers marketers the opportunity to counter one of the greatest dilemmas facing destinations-the sheer substitutability of their offerings. As Morgan et al. (2002) discuss, however putting destination branding into practice is no easy task and destinations face a number of challenges which each have the potential to derail the best branding initiatives. Destination branding complexities and challenges depict the whole phenomenon of branding and as such there is a need to understand these.

2.1.1. *The complexity of destination branding*

Destination branding is generally viewed as a process that is used to develop a destination’s unique identity and personality that is different from all competitive destinations (Gallarza et al., 2002; Shaw and Williams, 2004). The concept of tourism destinations is important in understanding the uniqueness of the process of destination branding. The first view on a tourism destination can be understood as a physical space in which tourism takes place. From this viewpoint, the tourist is regarded as “an active participant in the production of tourism spaces and actively acts on them and interact with them with the consequence that tourists practice contribute to the ways in which places are constituted” (Shaw and Williams, 2004, p. 13). In the tourism

system, a tourist destination can be viewed as an amalgam of products, facilities and services that when combined comprise the travel experience in a holistic manner (Buhalis, 2003). Hence, the destination is seen merely as just a part of the tourist product (Middleton and Clarke, 2001) and simply as a geographical area within which a number of tourism products can be purchased and consumed (Govers et al., 2007). This gives rise to the concept of the needs of the new international tourist and the idea of tailor packaging a destination to meet the needs of the tourist.

Destination packaging, a concept that has been made synonymous with destination branding by some marketing personnel has taken centre stage in the realm of tourism image development spanning the world's major tourism blocs. Cooper et al. (2005, p. 345) note that attractions act as a trump card in luring visitors, that is;

“For many tourism destinations around the world, it is their attractions that often serve as the catalyst for tourist visits”

They further note that, although one attraction can be a key pump-primer in tourism development, a destination rarely survives in the long term, calling for creativity and design in manipulating tourism resources to establish a unique appeal.

2.1.2. Demands of the “new international tourist”

The notion of a new tourism appeal in destination branding is in sync with the issue of change in the demands by the contemporary tourist. Morgan et al. (2002) highlight that today's tourists do not ask, “*What can we do on holiday?*” but, “*who can we be on holiday?*”, and they are increasingly looking less for escape and more discovery. This calls for the branding of the not so common tourist resources and the rebranding of the now no longer popular tourist areas since the battle for customers in tomorrow's destination market place will be fought not over price but over hearts and minds (Freire, 2007).

Weaver and Lawton (2000) reiterate that the tourism sector operates as a star system, of which if there is nothing very special about a destination's tourist wealth, the brand will not get noticed and that increasingly means that there will not be any meaningful reward. Cooper et al. (2005) subscribe to this notion and make reference to it as the development of “*endemic tourism*”, that is the recognition that a destination has its own special character. The approach entails putting undiscovered tourist gems on the spotlight through the utilisation of local materials and architecture as well as the encouragement of local cuisine, crafts and festivals not known to tourists so as to stress a destination's “*point of difference*”.

2.2. Challenges in destination branding

Making reference to Ireland and Wales, Morgan et al. (2002) note that, too often, the creativity and ambition of marketing departments within tourist boards have been constrained by the existence of two additional “P's” that are invariably linked to destination marketing, that is, “*politics*” and “*paucity*”. These pose challenges of introducing new thinking into a public sector risk-averse culture. The culture which

discourages innovation is noted as being widespread among many key destination stakeholders and tourism businesses. Such challenges and others have been contextualised and this paper notes some of the variables accentuating challenges in destination branding.

a) Limited budgets

Morgan et al. (2002) note that, no matter where destinations are in the life cycle, they all face a number of marketing challenges. Most NTO's generally have limited budgets to use yet they have to market globally, competing not just with other destinations but also with other global brands (Morgan et al., 2002).

b) The challenge of politics

Successful destination branding is all about achieving a balance between applying cutting-edge advertising and public relations approaches to a marketing problem and the realpolitik of managing local, regional and national politics (Morgan et al., 2002). Real success stories reflect destination brands which have been able to resist the political dynamics exerted at all levels of the political scene (Buhalis, 2000).

2.2.1. The challenge of the destination product

Buhalis (2000) concur with Haywood (1986) that destination marketers have somewhat little control over various aspects of their destination product and a diverse range of agencies and operators are partners in the task of crafting brand identities. The essence of creating a successful brand is to build a personality link between the product and the consumer.

"Smart managers find out what is the meaning of their destination as a product to their potential consumer. They exploit that meaning in finding the value they can add to the total experience. Their advertising, when it is done well should reflect that added value...that point of differentiation" (Morgan et al., 2002). Most destinations have various unique selling opportunities that can be translated into unique selling propositions. This is the argumentation on which branding of undiscovered gems stem from.

2.3. Undiscovered tourist gems and destination branding

The literature on the branding of undiscovered tourist gems is still far from the level of research quality found in the generic product and services marketing literature, mostly because of the complexity of the connotations that come with the term "undiscovered" (Gnoth et al., 2007). Several studies (e.g. Haywood, 1986; Lew, 1987; Framke, 2002; Saraniemi and Ahonen, 2008) have suggested that too little attention has been given to the identification of what is, arguably, the most appropriate unit of analysis in tourism research – the undiscovered tourist resources.

Undiscovered gems are the unspoilt, untouched and virtually unexplored tourist resources which give a new dimension on which service providers, locals and visitors, interact through the co-creation of experiences (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Tourism is increasingly about new experiences rather than about places and things. When building a destination-wide brand or promoting co-operation amongst different stakeholders of the same region, there is need to understand the nature of tourism destinations (Morgan et al., 2002). In tourism literature, destinations have been studied from several perspectives (see

Framke, 2002). The following discussions can be identified: 1) marketing management-oriented (e.g. Kotler et al., 1993; Middleton and Clarke, 2001), 2) customer-oriented (e.g. Komppula, 2005), and 3) cultural (e.g. Pritchard and Morgan, 2001; Saraniemi and Ahonen, 2008). The discussion has developed from a 'destination as a product' approach towards more holistic perspectives in view of tourist needs.

Tourism marketing, particularly at a country level, is often organised in three distinctive types of tourism bodies, with interests in destination tourism development. The Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) is responsible for promotion. It is a government ministry, tasked with providing policy advice for government, and also acts as an umbrella industry association for the private sector, as it is responsible for the causes of member organisations (Pike, 2008, p. 30-31). In most cases the country level DMO is a national tourism organisation (NTO) that is responsible for marketing the country as a tourism destination (Pike, 2008). In Zimbabwe, the NTO is The Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA). NTO, local DMOs, or regional destination marketing organisations (RTO), various associations, as well as private sector firms, form the basic organisational structure of the destination at the country level.

3. Research methods

3.1. Sampling frame

The sampling frame considered ZTA affiliated hospitality and tourism organisations and government ministries and interested parties in tourism promotion. This sampling frame provided categorisation of the organisations into various facets that exist within the hospitality and tourism industry in Zimbabwe e.g. tour operators, hoteliers, secondary support services, tourists etc. These organisations and personnel were chosen based on the criteria that they would have to be active in the industry where organisational influences play an important role in affecting the industry.

All respondents selected from these organisations were contacted and asked to participate in the study. Those who agreed were sent a questionnaire either via mail or hand delivery. Questioning areas included the nature of the tourism corporate branding strategy, the brand evaluation techniques, the major resource capabilities in line with destination branding, the extent of stakeholder engagement in branding strategy formulation, the expectations that participants had of Zimbabwe's tourism brand, gaps between expectations and the reality, and any differences between the tourism brand and tourist perceptions.

3.2. Research design

The research design used was descriptive because the primary objective was to describe the relationship between stakeholder engagement, branding strategies and the overall tourism industry performance. The use of qualitative and quantitative research methods was adopted for the study. Qualitative research in the form of in-depth interviews was used to clarify findings from the literature review. Quantitative researches in the form of questionnaires were administered to respondents from various stakeholder organisations. In-

depth interviews were conducted with key informants from tour operators, travel agencies, hoteliers and the NTO. These key informants had adequate knowledge of the branding strategies used in Zimbabwe and tourism performance in the country since they were senior management staff from these organisations.

4. Data analysis

Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) version 12 and graphs were done using the Sigma Plot and MS Excel 2007 version, and related using correlational tests to the literature review, and journals used in the study together with other studies elsewhere. The objective of analysing data was to come up with conclusions from the research following the objectives of the project.

5. Results and discussion

These were done using a thematic approach highlighting key issues that came out of the study.

5.1. Zimbabwe as a top choice international tourist destination

A major portion of the respondents in this research no longer see Zimbabwe as one of their premier tourist destination in Africa, 35% of foreign visitors still consider Zimbabwe as their top choice international destination. The majority of these who still favour Zimbabwe as a destination are from African and Asian countries. Lack of many areas with an adrenalin experience and an unknown tourism product, among other factors were noted. The respondents mentioned that they are no longer fascinated by viewing Zimbabwe's known tourist resources such as the Victoria Falls, Kariba and Hwange as Morgan et al. (2002) highlight that today's tourists do not ask, "What can we do on holiday?" but, "who can we be on holiday?", and they are increasingly looking less for escape and more for discovery. The economic drawback in Zimbabwe, coupled with unknown tourist resources is said to have made the tourism product of a poor quality and expensive, creating a paradoxical situation in the brand of Zimbabwe's tourism. A few adventurous tourists have indicated that areas like Chimanimani and some parts of the Lowveld are worth visiting for a different tourism experience but where unknown to them.

5.2. Corporate branding strategy and policy and its implementation

55% of the respondents gauge Zimbabwe's branding strategy and policy as ineffective in terms of creating a vibrant brand for the country. This was mainly because of the limited scope of the branding strategy that focuses on few tourist areas, like Anholt (2002) points out that, a lack of objectivity can be fatal to the image strategy of a country, no matter how good the intentions are at the start. The question we wanted to address centred on the macro view of whether policies implemented were correct and effective or whether it was a 'chase of the wild goose'. The deteriorating tourism brand of Zimbabwe has been labelled by some as an

'incurable virus'. The table below shows responses given concerning policy effectiveness in the country for the period 2000-2008.

Table 1. Policy effectiveness on destination branding in Zimbabwe

CATEGORY	VERY EFFECTIVE	NOT SURE	INEFFECTIVE
Ordinary Citizen	15%	15%	70%
ZTA	20%	17%	63%
ZCT	11%	19%	70%
RBZ	5%	2%	93%
Tour operators	16%	17%	67%
Embassies	6%	18%	76%
Parks and wildlife	15%	14%	71%
CAAZ	10%	13%	77%
Air Zimbabwe	20%	10%	70%

The answer clearly expressed the concerns of everyone concerning the everyday policies that were put in place to try and salvage Zimbabwe's tourism brand. Some respondents actually expressed their dissatisfaction as they were not sure of whether the policies were correct in the first place.

5.3. Zimbabwe's current branding strategies in relation to tourist demand

Most respondents (72%) were of the view that a much more focused and narrowed outlook was needed on the current branding strategy in Zimbabwe. The country's position as a tourism brand was said to be in a poor state because of the fact that visitors are now expecting a new tourism dimension of which they say it is lacking and as such they cannot continue visiting the country. The respondents mentioned that the continued offering of the same tourism product have hindered greatly the destination brand; this is in line with what Anholt (2002) suggest that, it is ideal for countries to identify where their real product offering or potential that really do put them in a class of their own beyond competitors. This potential can be harnessed in terms of destination size, population or economy. All countries in general have something that is uniquely theirs, and inherently competitive globally. Respondents (65%) also mentioned that the poor performances have been a result of bad image caused by a restricted tourism product political instability, outbreak of diseases, economic instability and accessibility, just to mention a few. The exhibit below shows the major causes of the deterioration in Zimbabwe's tourism brand.

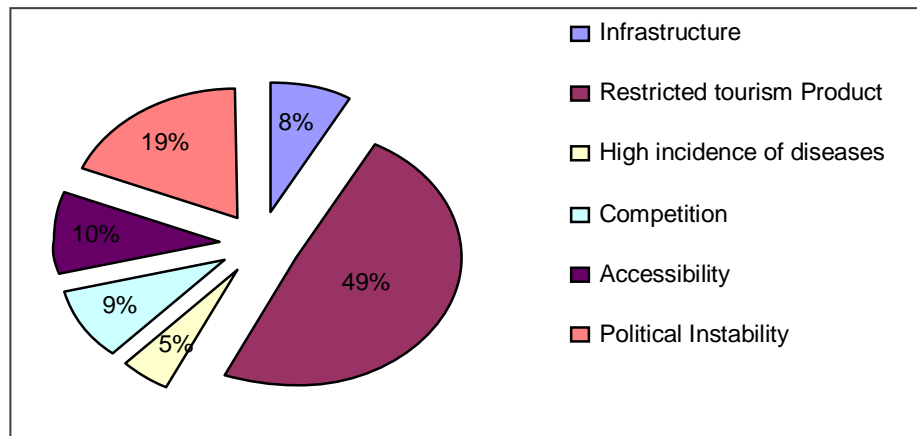


Figure 1. Perceived causes of the poor status of Zimbabwe's tourism brand

5.4. Challenges faced by ZTA in the past in branding Zimbabwe

This research wanted an in – depth and holistic perspective of the problems perpetrated by past branding strategies on the current strategy on branding Zimbabwe. We found that about 40% of the respondents pointed out that to some extent, past branding problems have an influence on the current strategies. Some provided information that tourist resources in Chimanimani, Inyanga and Masvingo are laggards when it comes to branding in line with tourist demand. ZTA has not been using proper branding strategies to fully package such areas with a plethora of tourist potential and as such blame cannot be completely placed on the past. Respondents also pointed out that the tourist attractions in the country no longer have an international appeal meaning to say that they are not up to the standards in the eyes of the new international tourist.

5.5. Measures in place to manage and evaluate Zimbabwe's tourism brand

Most of the respondents were positive on the strategies put in place to manage and evaluate Zimbabwe's tourism brand. They mentioned that so far Victoria Falls, Kariba, Great Zimbabwe and Inyanga are so far leading in terms of tourist attractions. The only weaknesses associated with these are that these areas have now become common and there is need for new tourist attractions since this has been pushing away foreigners. Cooper et al. (2005) in light of this suggest that a tourist destination has to make emphasis on its point of difference by using endemic resources, i.e. special characters in a tourist destination.

5.6. Stakeholder collaboration for Tourism Development

The majority of respondents pointed out that Zimbabwe's tourism branding and marketing is being attended to by various tourism stakeholders. Promotions of various unknown tourist resources are going on and long-term strategies have been crafted. Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) marketing personnel and various tourism promotion companies are working flat out to restore dignity in Zimbabwe's tourism brand to foreign

markets. However, some noted that the work on developing Zimbabwe’s tourism brand in foreign land is being received with different thoughts. The political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe is said to have caused potential clients to ignore the call by Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) for them to come and enjoy a new tourism experience. Lack of adequate resources especially in terms of budget allocation was also cited as another inhibiting factor in seeing developments in Zimbabwe’s tourism brand.

5.7. Stakeholders contribution towards destination branding in Zimbabwe

This question required participants to give an overview of the extent to which stakeholders in the tourism sector are accorded a chance to contribute in destination branding. The objective of this question was to find out if these stakeholders have anything to do with the deterioration of Zimbabwe’s tourism brand. Most respondents pointed out that Zimbabwe does not have an open platform for the contribution of ideas towards branding of the country. As a result this has affected the flow tourists to the country as their desired destination.

5.8. Overview of policies towards image building and branding of Zimbabwe as a tourist destination

Respondents were of the notion that policies meant for the development of a renowned tourism brand in Zimbabwe lacked substance as there is failed effort to address its various important issues. Most of them mentioned that policies were there just on paper and implementing them is being ignored. Respondents were also adamant that necessary resources were absent in putting the plans into action, thereby making policies ineffective in trying to promote Zimbabwe’s tourism brand. Cited also among the major causes of the decline in Zimbabwe’s tourism brand was the ever declining economy. Economic and tourism related figures show the rate of economic growth in relation to tourism development and growth.

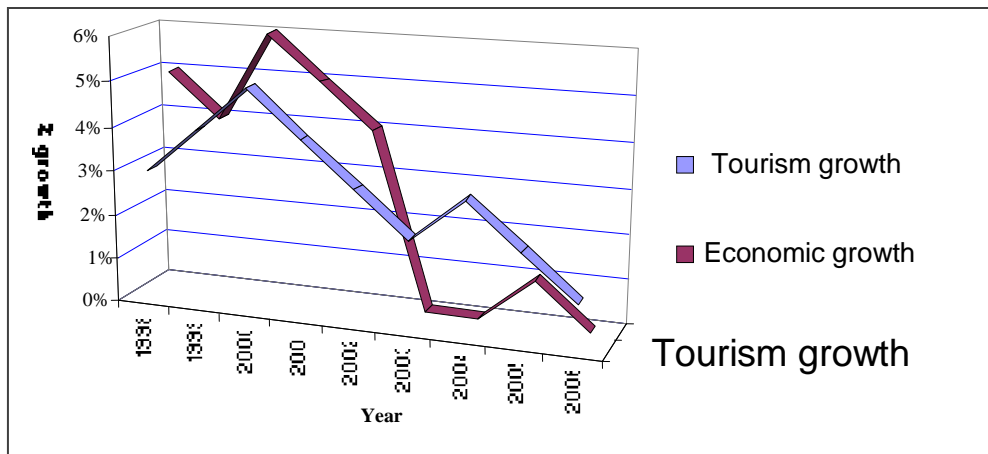


Figure 2. Economic growth and long haul tourism trends for Zimbabwe (1996-2006)

The issue of the deterioration in the performance of Zimbabwe as a tourism brand was attributed to a limited choice of tourist resources coupled with political and economic instability in the country. This is because, for a country to be a brand there is need for a variety of tourist resources. Thus Zimbabwe's tourism brand can only grow and develop if there are an increased number of tourist resources to offer variety to visitors i.e. where the country's real genius lies and its unique abilities. Some tourism players pointed out that there was a need to brand Zimbabwe's undiscovered tourist gems. Almost 70% of respondents agreed that there was a need to brand Zimbabwe's undiscovered tourist gems. 70% of respondents agreed promoting Zimbabwe's tourism brand appeal since tourism is contingent upon economic recovery. Rather they suggested that necessary measures must be put in place to have the right resources available in the correct pot. This has been aided by the coming on board of the unity government that has worked on attracting aid from the international front. Some were of the notion that resources are there, but only unclear circumstances are defining the systems. Respondents mentioned various tourist resources that can be exploited for the promotion of the country's tourism brand. Respondents mentioned such resources as the Culture (BaTonga and the Shangaai people), agro tourism (Eastern Highlands, Chimanimani etc) and Masvingo known for abundant wildlife (e.g. in Kyle Recreational Park) and Domboshava among others. Respondents were adamant that these tourist resources could salvage the country's tourism brand.

6. Conclusions and implementation

A review of the existing literature indicates that the image of Zimbabwe as a tourist destination is constantly being portrayed in relation to time-honoured tourist resources like Victoria Falls, Great Zimbabwe, Lake Kariba and Inyanga Mountains. Consequently, this has not been very helpful for the brand "Zimbabwe" in relation to attracting tourists. However, a meticulous review of tourist resources in Zimbabwe reveals that the country has several tourism opportunities in various forms such as sports and adventure tourism, dark tourism; nature based tourism and cultural tourism but not adequately publicised. Therefore, there is a need to espouse these potentials by branding Zimbabwe such that these virtues would be widely communicated to the international tourist to enhance the brand equity of the country. Furthermore, the country's ability to create brand awareness, unique competitive identity and customer loyalty is crucial in the competitive global tourism environment.

The growth of Zimbabwe's tourism brand has a plethora of benefits to the whole economy, thus its development is of utmost importance. Several policies have been tried and tested in trying to promote and develop the country's tourism and the researcher is going to add onto them as mentioned below. There is need to concentrate on promoting unpopular and/or unknown tourist areas to put the country in a class of its own through sourcing of foreign currency for the promotion of these tourist resources in line with the demands of the new international tourist. Proper benchmarking, accountability, transparency and clear goals for marketing will be equally essential.

Issues that affect the image of the destination must be addressed. These include promoting positive achievements of the land reform programme; stamping out corruption; improving fuel supply; improving

energy and water supplies; communicate all positive developments and achievements to target markets; engaging in image building diplomacy and finally developing public relations plan targeted at the Regional Tourism Organisation of Southern Africa (RETOSA) and source markets to improve relations.

A candid environmental analysis that puts into perspective planning policies that need to be looked at so that there is proper co-ordination between tourism planning and physical planning should be effected. Air transport policies are crucial for the destination's accessibility especially for long haul markets and there is need to implement the Xamassoukrom declaration on air transport and to promote strategic alliances with viable airlines as this has a great bearing on a destination's brand. Harmonisation of legislation with the Tourism Act is critical in achieving an integrated approach towards the fulfilment of the destination's strategic branding objectives.

The success of Zimbabwe as a tourism brand requires a comprehensive policy framework that will significantly paint a good picture on the country with numerous tourist resources on offer and also as a safe tourist destination. Mending of foreign relations in order to improve on foreign tourist inflows particularly from the traditional markets in the 'West' and new markets in the 'East' and access to foreign currency to fund plans and policies should be prioritised.

In conclusion, it will be highly useful if all stakeholders – government, citizens including celebrities, multinationals and professional bodies could work interactively towards promoting the country's tourism brand. To implement these highlighted recommendations, it is imperative for the government and concerned stakeholders to take measures to promote the country's virtually unexplored tourist resources to enhance the country's tourism potential. This will go a long way in exploring tourism opportunities in various markets as well as for investments.

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