



MEASURING THE PERCEIVED DESTINATION IMAGE OF PLATEAU STATE, NIGERIA



T. K. Gontul¹, E. G. Gonap^{2*}, N. M. Timchang¹ and A. J. Chinedu¹

¹Department of Geography & Planning, University of Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria

²Department of Hospitality Management & Tourism, Federal University, Wukari, Taraba State, Nigeria

*Corresponding author: gonap@fuwukari.edu.ng

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Abstract: Presumably, Plateau State has had a battered and distorted tourism destination image due to intermittent ethno-religious conflicts since the year 2001. However, presumption is neither, a good building block nor a good cornerstone. Hence, the researchers became interested in the certainty of measuring the actual tourism destination image as perceived by tourists found in the State (in situ tourists' perception). Measuring the actual perceived tourism destination image of a place can provide a very important and a surer diagnostic insight for marketing strategy, planning, development and promotion of the tourism industry of a destination. The specific goal of this study was to determine the actual perceived tourism destination image of Plateau State over different time outlines (peace profiles). The study was undertaken at nine purposively sampled tourist sites in the State in which 1,023 tourists were sampled and interviewed. The study established that peace, safety and security are pre-requisite (sine quibus) for a positive destination image perception. The study also confirmed that though Plateau State is very rich in tourist attractions, which if adequately planned, developed, promoted and managed, will make her one of the leading tourist destinations in Nigeria her tourism image has however, oscillated between positive when the state enjoyed peace, safety and security, to negative image, during and shortly after a cycle of violent ethno religious conflict that befalls the State. Findings of this study strongly confirmed that image perception is a reciprocal of image projection. Thus to achieve a good, attractive and sustainable tourism destination image of Plateau State, the researchers recommended religious, political and ethnic tolerance and understanding, provision of regular and adequate security machinery for a sustainable peace enthronement, good governance, decent tourism planning, development, management and promotion, as well as objective news reportage about incidences in Plateau State.

Keywords: Destination, perception, Plateau State, projection, tourism

Introduction

Image is defined as a perceptual phenomenon formed through a consumer's reasoned and emotional interpretation, which has both cognitive (beliefs) and affective (feelings) components (Konecnik, 2004). Perceptual or cognitive evaluation refers to beliefs and knowledge about an object/place whereas affective evaluation refers to one's feelings about the object or place/destination. Affective components are basically emotional responses concerned with feelings and meanings attached to a destination in this case (Baloglu and Brinberg, 1997; Gartner, 1993; Walmsley & Jenkins, 1993).

Destination image perceived by tourists can change depending on the peace profile of the destination in view. In times of peaceful coexistence and favourable conditions at a destination, a positive image can be projected and perceived, but in times of communal crises, insurgencies and disasters, the positive image earlier formed can turn into a negative one. The experiences of tourists at a destination also influences image, either while still at the destination (*in-situ* image) or after a return home and when the holiday experience is revisited and evaluated by the tourists (*a posteriori* image). Moreover, should the perception be positive (satisfactory), it may lead to the intention of revisiting the destination or recommending it to others. But, should the perception be negative, it may lead to negative word-of-mouth and no intention of revisiting or recommending it to others. Researchers should investigate the tourists' destination image perception as it is critical for destinations to be aware of how they are perceived, because selecting a destination is related to how it is perceived (Jenkins, 1999).

Crompton (1979a) defines destination image as an internally accepted mental construct representing the attributes and benefits sought of a destination. It is, according to Kotler (1994), the net results of beliefs, ideas, feeling, expectations and impressions that a person holds of a destination. Although each is worded differently the essence of these definitions are

identical, that the perceived destination image constitutes everything that one knows, hears or believes about a place. As such it is imperative that the knowledge circulating about a destination is largely positive, if any real serious tourism activity is to be undertaken. The perception of a destination image therefore determines to a very large extent the quantity and quality of tourists that visit the destination.

Destinations plagued by war and random terrorist acts for example cannot expect to be as desirable to visit as destinations synonymous to or notorious for peace, relaxation and fun to say the least. Human beings, and by extension, tourists, place a high value on life and will avoid these potentially threatening destinations where security and safety may be compromised. Images therefore, differentiate tourists' destinations from each other; it is an integral and influential part of travellers' destination process (Baloglu and Brinberg, 1997). The focus placed on the formation and maintenance of a positive destination image therefore can neither be overemphasized nor underestimated. Destination selection is a complex process. Gunn (1988) believes that the initial formation stage before the trip is the most important phase in tourists' destination selection processes.

Several studies have illustrated that destination images do, indeed, influence tourist behaviour (Hunt, 1975). In essence, those destinations with strong, positive images are more likely to be considered and chosen than those that hold negative and bad images in the travel decision process (Goodrich, 1978; Woodside and Lysonski, 1989). As a result, destination image has an important role in the various models of travel decision to date (Moutinho, 1984; Woodside and Lysenko, 1989). Once at the destination, satisfaction largely depends upon a comparison of expectations based on previously held images and the actual reality encountered at the destination (Chon, 1987).

The perceived image of a destination is very critical to the tourist's decision making process. The perceived image is subjective and conditional and therefore changes over time

and space spatio-temporal variation (Crompton, 1979), yet it is at the crux of tourism destination packaging and marketing (Jenkins, 1999; Tasci and Gartner, 2007). A successful marketing strategy requires information on tourists' perceived image of the destination to enhance the attractiveness, strengths and opportunities of a destination and minimize its weaknesses and threats. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 1980) all destinations depend on their positive images to succeed as tourist destinations or their negative images to fail in attracting tourists.

Hunt (1975) was the first to demonstrate the importance of positive "destination image" in increasing the number of tourists visiting a destination as much as, or even more than, tangible resources. Destination image is a key factor in the destination selection process of potential tourists; who, having a limited personal experience of the destination, act on the basis of their image of the destination, even if their perceived image does not necessarily coincide with objective reality (Gunn, 1988; Hunt, 1975). It is also a way to differentiate a destination from others with the same relative attributes and to enhance destination competitiveness. This is why destination image is one of the current issues in tourism marketing and tourism surveys.

Plateau State had enjoyed a long period of positive image as a tourist destination. Incidentally, recent communal crises and conflicts in the state appear to have dented that image. After more than a decade of deadly communal crises, Plateau State is beginning to reset itself as the prime tourist destination in Nigeria. However, it has to, first, launder and reconstruct its image. To do this, image makers require information on the perceived tourism image status of the state, and important factors that influence these tourists' perceived image of a destination; in this case, Plateau State. This is the challenge that this study-explores.

Plateau state has been embroiled in series of communal crises and conflicts between September 2001 and 2014. These have resulted in the death of thousands of people and destruction of properties worth billions of naira. Associated with this has been the assumed loss of the positive image that the state had groomed over the years. Many residents have relocated to other preferred destinations and stream of tourists, visitors and new residents had dwindled. The reputation of the state as a "home of peace and tourism" has suffered calamitously, nationally and internationally. The colouration of the conflicts is mostly religious and ethnic or indigene ship which all bothers on the very essence of the Nigerian Constitution and its nationhood. These are very sensitive emotional and sentimental issues.

The polarization has mostly pitched one camp against another and elicited both sympathy and condemnation from across the country, based on general grounds of religion, ethnicity and geographic origin in the country. As a result of the religious polarized incessant communal conflicts, Plateau State no longer enjoyed the prime status it had as a tourist destination in Nigeria. The main interest of the research is, 'the influence of the conflicts on the perceived tourism image of Plateau State'. Specifically, the study investigates the perceived tourism destination image of Plateau State at the different time scales. The salient research question being: What is the perceived tourism destination image of Plateau State at different time profiles? An accurate assessment of perceived destination image is a prerequisite to designing an effective marketing strategy and helps the destination marketer to offer what its visitors are expecting and create more realistic expectations, if necessary. The aim of this study is therefore to investigate the perceived tourism destination image of Plateau State at different times.

Destination image varies at different time profiles. This is because destination image results from a continuum of mental

process, in which two different major forces, a controllable force and an uncontrollable force, act. The former refers to promotion efforts, tourism infrastructures built by stakeholders and marketers to stimulate tourists to visit their destination. The latter refers to those forces beyond the control of any stakeholders or marketers, such as internal and external conflicts/crises, disasters and other disturbances at a destination. Research indicates that as a result of visiting a destination, image finally formed tends to be more realistic, complex, and differentiated (Chon, 1987; Phelps, 1986; Pearce, 1982).

The process of destination image formation highlights two important points. First, it suggests that an individual can have an image of a destination even if they have never visited it or even been exposed to more commercial forms of information. In designing marketing strategies, it would be useful to measure these base images. In this manner, the various strengths, weaknesses, accuracies and inaccuracies of the existing destination image could be more effectively addressed in the design of the promotional strategy. Secondly, since there are changes in destination image before and after visitation, it is desirable to separate the images of those individuals who have visited and those who have not. This can be accomplished when measuring image by either controlling for or monitoring those individuals that have visited the destination.

There is collective agreement by many scholars that image is two dimensional; separated into perceptual/cognitive factors and affective factors. Affective evaluation is seen as the appraisal of the quality of environment while cognitive evaluation refers to the perceptual appraisal of physical features of an environment. Cognitive component is the knowledge about places or object attributes while the affective appraisal is the feelings that is evoked towards a place or object (Beerli & Martin, 2003). In purely practical terms therefore, the attributes such as nightlife, cultural attractions, and transport systems etcetera are all mushroomed under the perceptual/cognitive component of destination image. This is so because all these things are features that can be visibly seen and an evaluation made upon them. Affective factors on the other hand can be exemplified by descriptive words that come to mind when thinking of, or may be used to describe, a destination; e.g. relaxing, charming, enchanting or distressing. An empirical study conducted by Kim (2003), evidenced that tourism destination image is highly influenced by cognitive and affective image. The results of his study showed that affective images rank even higher than the cognitive images of a destination in contrast to the beliefs of some other researchers.

The current research attempts to investigate some elements of both the affective and cognitive components of destination image in its data collection and analysis phases. Although the cognitive and affective factors are related, they are different from each other as Holbrook (1978) illustrated through research. He found that information sources influence the cognitive but not affective component of the image. This finding is supported by Gartner, (1993) who reiterates that the variety (type and amount) of informational sources received influences the formation of the cognitive component but not the affective.

The World Tourism Organization (WTO, 1980) has stressed the importance of positive images for the tourist destination thus: "while it is important to any producer of goods and services to know that the notion of image is of capital importance to a country/destination, measuring and mastering it should be placed very high in the order of priorities for planning tourism promotion". No studies have yet been conducted to measure the perceived image of Plateau state as a tourist destination despite the fact that it is regarded as a

prime tourism hub in Nigeria. Such information should be a priority for tourism managers especially in Plateau state with its recent checkered history of disturbances that possess the capacity to distort, dent and even destroy its image as an attractive tourist destination.

A research hypothesis was postulated on the perceived tourism destination image of Plateau State and tested later using empirical evidences from the data generated for the study:

H₁: There is significant temporal variation in the perceived tourism destination image of Plateau State among tourists.

Image formation process is a valuable insight for correct understanding of consumer behaviour. The formation of image has been described as the development of a mental construct based upon a few impressions chosen from a flood of information. In the case of destination image, this 'flood of information' has many sources including promotional literature (travel brochures, posters), the opinions of others (family/friends, travel agents) and the general media (newspapers, magazines, television, books, movies). Gunn (1988) in his model propose sea seven phases of the travel experience in image formation as follows:

1. Accumulation of mental images about vacation experiences
2. Modification of those images by further information
3. Decision to take a vacation trip
4. Travel to the destination
5. Participation at the destination
6. Return home
7. Modification of images based on the vacation experience.

Using this model, three states of destination image formation can be identified at Phases 1, 2 and 7. In Phases 1 and 2, destination images are formed based upon secondary sources of information, whereas in Phase 7, actual first-hand experience is used to modify the destination's image. Gunn (1988) labels the destination image formed in Phase 1 an organic image. At this stage, the image is based primarily upon information assimilated from non-touristic, non-commercial sources, such as the general media (news reports, magazines, books, and movies), education (school courses) and the opinions of family/friends. It is only in Phase 2 that more commercial sources of information, such as travel brochures, travel agents and travel guidebooks, are used. As a result of accessing these additional sources of information, the organic image (Phase 1) may be altered. This modified image, which occurs in Phase 2, is labelled an induced image. It is interesting to note that for the majority of products and services, information sources are for the most part commercial. In other words, the role of the general media and school courses in formulating most product images is very limited. Destination images, however, seem to be derived from a much wider spectrum of information sources. This is because there is a link between a country's tourist image and its national image (World Tourism Organization, 1980). This means that the information gleaned from non-commercial sources concerning various historical, political, economic and social factors is incorporated into the destination image. Therefore, the distinction between organic and induced images, as identified by Gunn, is quite unique to the formation of destination images.

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Many authors have proposed different types of tourism destination images. For instance, an interpretation of the image (1) before visiting the tourist destination and (2) after the visit is seen differently. Phelps (1986) defines the primary image as the image built after the visit to the destination and the secondary image is seen as the image built before the visit to the destination:

1. **Primary image:** After visiting the destination: the recall of the experience
2. **Secondary image:** Before visiting the destination

Jenkins (1999) undertook an international destination success survey, identified six critical factors as well as six most important strategic issues. These are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-economic characteristics of the respondents

Respondent Characteristics	Variables	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	523	51.1
	Female	500	48.9
	Total	1023	100
Age	22 – 29 years	200	19.6
	30 – 39 years	300	29.6
	40 – 49 years	400	39.1
	> 50 years	123	12.00
	Total	1023	100
Marital Status	Married	400	39.1
	Single	500	48.9
	Divorced	100	9.8
	Others	23	2.2
	Total	1023	100
Educational Level	Primary	100	9.8
	Secondary	200	19.6
	Tertiary	600	58.7
	Others	123	12.0
	Total	1023	100

Source: Field Survey, 2017

Table 2: Destination critical success factors and strategies

Success Factors	Strategies
1 Safety/stability/security of the destination	Creating a safe and secure destinations
2 Unique and diverse attraction	Distributing effective information
3 Accessibility of destination and attractions	Easy access to major attractions
4 Quality of tourism experience	Providing an up-to-date product offering
5 Effective and collective marketing effort	Decreasing cost
6 Destination image and reputation	Achieving sustainable tourism development

Source: International Delphi Survey by Jenkins (1999).

Safety/Stability/Security: was identified as the most important critical success factor. Crouch and Ritchie (1999) also identified safety as one of four important critical success factors. It is obvious that tourists are gravely concerned about crime, violence, political unrest, natural disasters, or the quality of medical services.

Image of the destination: Various studies (Davidoff and Davidoff, 1998; Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; Kim, 1998) indicate that the primary goal in promoting a destination is to project a positive image to potential tourists so that the product becomes desirable to them. The Delphi survey (Jenkins, 1999) confirms that destination image is critical for success.

Materials and Methods

Plateau state is located in the middle belt zone of Nigeria and lies between latitudes 8°30' and 10°30' North and longitudes 7°30' and 8°37' East. The state shares common boundaries with Bauchi state in the North, Taraba state in the East, Nasarawa state in the South and Kaduna state in the West. The state has an area of landmass covering 26,899 square kilometres

Plateau state is a land of beautiful sceneries, rich cultural and historical heritage and excellent weather. The people of the state are very hospitable and accommodating. These explain why Plateau state has come to be identified as the "home of Peace and Tourism".

Plateau state has equally distinguished itself as Nigeria's foremost tourist haven. The history of tourism development in the state has followed that of the national trend. To attain and maintain a leading position by harnessing its rich potentials, the state government formed the Plateau State Tourism Corporation in 1986 to develop, as a parastatal under the Tourism Division of the State Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

Perhaps, it can be said that the efforts that government has made over the years to develop the tourism sector of the state that has earned the sobriquet 'Home of Peace and Tourism' as the slogan for the state. This slogan is to boost the image of the state as a tourist destination than can be next to none in the country. This research is to investigate the justification of such claims by finding out the tourism destination image of the state among domestic tourists/visitors in Nigeria.

The study was undertaken at nine purposively sampled tourist sites in the state in which 1,023 tourists were sampled using non-proportional quota sampling technique.

The study population comprised mainly of the domestic tourists found at selected tourist resorts in Plateau State. Tourists who are residents of Plateau State were however, excluded to avoid biasness in the image appraisal. These are limitations of the study for further researches.

This study comprised of two populations: all the tourist resorts/sites in Plateau State and the population of tourists that came visiting Plateau State at the time of the study. The study population comprised mainly all the domestic tourists found at sampled (important) tourism sites in Plateau State. Tourists, who were residents of Plateau State, were deliberately excluded to avoid bias in the tourism image appraisal of the state. Domestic tourists who were below 18 years in age were also excluded in the study population. Reason for the exclusion of the under - age being that matured adults can be better relied upon for a more objective assessment of an image of a place.

The researchers, with the advice of the staff of the Plateau State Tourism Corporation purposely identified and selected the most physically developed and patronised resorts for questionnaire administration. Nine (9) tourist resorts were selected for the exercise including: Assop Falls, Jos National Museum, Hill Station Hotel, Museum of Traditional Nigeria Architecture (MOTNA), Pandam Game Reserve,

RayfieldResort Jos, Zoological Garden and Jos Wildlife Park. The researcher also took advantage of the Plateau State Trade Fair, which took place in November, 2015 at the Polo Trade Fair Ground to administer some questionnaires to the participants who came from different parts of the country.

Convenience sampling involves choosing respondents at the convenience of the researcher. In this particular study, the convenience sample adopted was the selection of tourists at the sampled sites for administration of study questionnaire. Convenience sampling is helpful especially when it is difficult to draw a probabilistic sample due to lack of reliable data as is the case here with the number and distribution of tourists in Plateau state over the years. The method also saves time and cost substantially. All in all, a total of 1,023 copies of questionnaires were validly filled and returned. The remaining three hundred and twenty-seven (327) copies were either badly filled or taken away by tourists who were expected to fill the questionnaires. Finally, the Chi-Square inferential statistic was used to test the research hypothesis 1.

Results and Discussion

The goal of this study was to establish the perceived tourism destination image of Plateau State at different time profiles. But as earlier noted in the literature reviewed, image perception can be measured *a priori*, *in situ* or *some posteriori*. This particular study adopted the *in situ* perception assessment procedure. In this approach, the study measured the perceived tourism destination image of Plateau State by the tourists that were found at the selected tourist sites in the state. The researchers asked the sampled tourists about their perceived tourism destination image of Plateau State. Their responses are summarised in Table 4.

Since the first eruption of a violent/bloody communal conflict in September, 2001, Plateau State has become an "intermittent" flashpoint of violent communal clashes. The State, which had hitherto been one of the most peaceful in Nigeria, has been deeply enmeshed in a series of bloody communal conflicts which received mainly religious polarization: Christians verse Muslims. As reported by the 'Plateau Resolves' forum in 2008 and many other source : "the incessant communal conflicts that have occurred in Plateau State clearly carry ethno religious colouration characterized by genocide attacks, burning of residential houses and worship places, maiming and killings of several persons and loss of business investments and property worth several billions of Naira, all within the spate of only about fourteen years, several violent communal conflicts have been witnessed". The incessant crises, many of gruesome outcomes, resulted into the first ever State of Emergency imposed on a state in the Fourth Republic dispensation. There were also periods when bombings were rife, especially in Jos, the state capital. Several villages were sacked by rampaging gunmen and hundreds of lives were lost along with properties worth billions of naira. For over a decade, the profile of Plateau State as "Home of Peace and Tourism" suffered greatly.

All efforts to restore peace did not achieve the desired end. Here followed below is a box of summary of major cycles and the nature of communal conflicts that occurred in Plateau State from 2001 to 2014 according to Gontul (2014).

Table 3: Crises profiles in Plateau State

Period	Incidence
2001 - 2002	Ethno Religious crises and civil disturbances in Jos town, Shendam, Quan-Pan, Langtang North and Wase.
2003 - 2004	Ethno Religious crises and civil disturbances in Shendam, Langtang North, Langtang South and WaseLGAs which led to the imposition of state of emergency in the state in 2004
2008	Violent Ethno-Religious clashes after Local Government elections
2009-2014	Series of Bombings of Churches and Other Public Places by the Boko Haram Sect and Attacks and Killings in both Urban and Rural Areas (Dogo-Nahawa, Maza and pockets of others in RiyomLGA that led to the killing of Senator Dantong in 2012)

Source:Gontul (2014)

Table 4: Tourists’ perceptions about the attractiveness of Plateau State before, during and after each cycle of ethno-religious crises

Period	Plateau State was Attractive	Plateau State was Unattractive	No. of Response	Total
Pre-crisis	773	190	60	1023
During the crises periods	60	860	103	1023
Post-crisis periods	597	337	89	1023

Arising from the cycles of bloody communal conflicts which received ethno religious polarization, an assessment of the people’s perception/feelings about the state as a tourist destination over these different time profiles is very crucial and critical as in designing befitting marketing and promotion strategies that suit the situation on ground. The 1,023 sampled tourists were asked their general feelings about the tourism attractiveness of Plateau State before, during and after each cycle of ethno-religious crisis experienced in the State (Table 3). The table shows a significant shift in the perceived tourism image of Plateau State at the different time profiles witnessed in the State (pre, during and the post cycles of ethno-religious/communal crises). While over 75% (about three-quarter) of the sampled tourists said that Plateau State was an attractive tourist destination before the eruption of the intermittent ethno-religious crises, only about 6% of the sampled tourists felt that the State was still an attractive tourist destination during the crises periods, and about 85% of respondents felt that the State wore a negative (unattractive) tourism image during the periods of ethno-religious crises.

Table 3 has clearly shown that most of tourists (about 75%) changed their image of Plateau State from being positive (attractive) to negative (unattractive) to about 6% only maintaining that the State was still attractive during the conflicts- a 69% drop or an increase from about 19% unattractive before the conflicts to about 84% unattractive - a 65% increase during the conflicts. This finding shows significant changes in image perceptions about Plateau State from pre-crisis period to the crises periods.

The Chi-square (χ^2) statistic was used to test the research hypothesis which is on the influence of conflicts on the perceived destination image of Plateau State. Inferentially, the calculated value of Chi-square which is 187.3 is greater than the table value of 15.1 at confidence level of 99%. We therefore reject the null research hypothesis, H_0 . The conclusion is that conflicts significantly influence tourists’ perceived destination image of Plateau State.

The findings of this study on the perceived tourism destination image of Plateau State from the sampled tourists to the State show that Plateau State has had different tourism destination images depending on the prevailing situations on ground in the state. The tourism destination image perceived depend on quite a number of factors and the perceived image can vary from positive to negative through mixed/neutral types of image. The good tourism destination image that the state enjoys during a peaceful time profile can easily shift to a

negative image during and shortly after a cycle of a bloody communal clashes/terrorists’ attack as revealed by the study.

Generally, incidences such as communal crises and terrorism/insurgency usually receive negative reportage through the improved communication technology. The word of mouth (WOM) and the print and electronic media would paint instantly awash Plateau State with negative or mixed images at a supersonic speed all over the world during and after any incident of communal conflicts as has happened to Plateau State in the finding of this study. At the global scale, terrorism, civil disturbance, natural disaster, economic recession and political instability have all come to dominate the discussion of current international affairs (Morgan *et al.*, 2004). At the same time their impact on tourism demand has become increasingly apparent through negative media coverage/reportage causing long-term damage to a destination’s image. Thus, in the same way that places such as Bali, Spain and the UK have suffered short-term decreases in inbound tourism as a result of terrorism, the tourism industry in Plateau State has been seriously harmed by sustained periods of ethno religious conflicts and terrorist activities. Fear and anxieties about the possibility of sudden outbreak of ethno-religious conflicts, terrorism and insurgency, have clearly impacted negatively on tourism perception and demand for the affected destinations (Plateau State inclusive) as noted by other earlier researchers (Milman and Pizam, 1988).

As noted in the literature review, formation of destination image is influenced by the information obtained from different sources. In crises periods tourists mostly rely on information obtained from both conventional and unconventional sources flying around. Most of the information that circulate are usually unfiltered, unrefined, misleading, exaggerated, highly diluted and palatably biased to wipe sentiments, support, and sympathy as cheap propagandas. As a result, the destination image projected may not be real and factual. Experience therefore remains the best building block for authentic image for perception as the resulting perception is better refined by ground trothing. This fact challenges and questions the destination image herein established by this study

Plateau Peace conference convened by the State Government in 2009 was an essential forum for chatting the peace process to provide the opportunity and forum for each and every ethnic nationality represented in Plateau State to present and discuss contending issues, and to find lasting solutions for

peace and establish the yard-stick for peaceful co-existence between the diverse ethnic and religious groups in the state.

The situation however, substantially improved to about 51% attractiveness after the crises (from an 84% unattractive rating during the crises periods) as peace measures were intensively mobilized and substantial peace was regained. It should however, be noted that the use of the term “after the crises” or “post crisis period” is relative because shortly “after” and longer “after” have very different healing possibilities and magnitudes. The longer the post crisis period is, the better the peace healing/restoration process and/or positive image recovery. Also an all-inclusive wide consultative and interactive (holistic) peace restoration interaction forum is rather more sustainable than an enforced peace made under the noisil of the gun which is very fragile. A positive or negative image perception therefore depends on sustainability of prevailing circumstance, magnitude of previous incidences/circumstances, and workability of resolutions and general public acceptability of all peace and image recovery measures mobilized

But suffice it to say that despite the bad image being given to Plateau State due to the incessant ethno-religious crises, a good number of tourists of different faiths (Christians and Muslims) still visit the state. Of course, some tourists are very adventurous and curious and would take any risks of going to a crisis-torn destination. If such a tourist destination painted with bad image is still being patronized, then it can be said that perhaps it now flourishing as a dark tourism destination. Indeed, all over the world, dark tourism is booming admits the numerous escalating man-made and natural disasters (crises) scenes befalling the world. For instance, bombed places/facilities, war-torn places, flood scenes, plane crash or accident scenes, fire disaster sites, etc have all become very attractive disaster or dark tourism destinations. It becomes dark tourism if the “trouble” becomes one of the attractions and activities for the tourists. The curiosity of some tourists to visit troubled places is therefore questioning whether destination image is really always a matter to consider when tourists make their destination choice. Except peace is sustainably restored in Plateau state, it may gradually snowball into a busy dark tourism destination as a result of the unprecedented communal crises experienced in the state. Apparently, the state has a very good share of tourist attractions that can make her to be projected and be perceived as a tourist destination with very good image. Nevertheless, no matter how a tourist destination with good image could turn into a flourishing dark destination with very bad image, it is an undesirable fact that no booming destination with good and bustling image would wish to turn into a dark tourism destination no matter what good benefits the later holds. The yearnings and struggles of all tourist destinations are to achieve peaceful and positive image that can surely guarantee sustainable markets. This is the challenge that Plateau State must face in order to save its good image as “home of peace and tourism” from imminent snowballing into a dark tourism destination in spite of her rich tourism attractions.

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Conclusion and Recommendations

The foregoing background has stressed the need to assess the perceived tourism destination image of Plateau State. The present perceived image of a tourist destination could be favourable/desirable, neutral or unfavourable/undesirable. And based on the existing perceived image and the preferred image, it is essential to know whether the preferred perceived image is deviated from the present perceived image or closely associated or neutral. In case of negative or unfavourable image, the destination managers need to focus first on either neutralizing or removing the distorted image of the destination and then develop the required impressions (desired image). In case of neutral or favourable image, the destination managers can focus on more details about the destination for creating favourably a more preferred image.

The study has established that the incessant cycles of bloody ethno-religious conflicts in Plateau State significantly affect the perceived tourism destination image of the destination. Despite the fact that Plateau State is renowned for its tourism attractions, however, the emergence of violent communal clashes and terrorism (insurgency) are argued to have perplexed the state’s image. Notably, with the alarming increase of ethno religious conflicts and terrorism/insurgency activities in the state, the issue of safety is ranked as very important when tourism is under discussion.

All over the world, aspects of dark tourism scenes abound and some have been dully incorporated into tourism aspects of many countries, especially in “memorials.” This is something that can be done in Plateau State, incorporating some “dark” landscapes into the tourism assets of the state. The researchers also recommend religious tolerance, political understanding and ethnic integration and unity, provision of adequate security, sustainable peace restoration programmes, good planning and development, objective and truthful news reportage about incidences in the state as well as sustainable marketing and promotion strategies which will all boost and sustain a good tourism image for Plateau State.

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