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Same, Same but Different: Perceptions of South Pacific Destinations Among Australian Travelers

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SAME, SAME BUT DIFFERENT: PERCEPTIONS OF SOUTH PACIFIC DESTINATIONS AMONG AUSTRALIAN TRAVELERS

Stephen Pratt

ABSTRACT. The South Pacific has a long history of being portrayed as a tropical paradise. Similar imagery is depicted for different destinations in the region, creating one homogeneous place. The issue for destination marketing organizations is how to attract tourists to their particular destination. This study surveys Australian travelers' awareness, visitation history, and perceptions of destination image for a range of South Pacific destinations. The study examines the extent to which Australians perceive these South Pacific destinations as similar or different to each other on a range of attributes. The findings reveal there are many common features of the destinations; hence, there is a large degree of substitutability between destinations.

KEYWORDS. South Pacific, Brand Australia, destination image, perceptual map, correspondence analysis

INTRODUCTION

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS, 2013) Overseas and Arrivals data, 528,632 Australian residents departed on a short-term basis for the South Pacific¹ in 2010. This is an increase of 16% on the 2009 figure of 454,482. The main destination for Australian tourists in the South Pacific is Fiji. In 2010, 311,051 Australians visited Fiji, up by 29%. This growing destination is the dominant South Pacific destination for Australian tourists with a 59% share. Other destinations with significant shares include Papua New Guinea (14%) and Vanuatu (11%). The remaining South Pacific destinations each have less than a 4% share.

Not surprisingly, from a tourism perspective, Australia is more important to the South Pacific

than the South Pacific is to Australia. Table 1 shows there were 528,632 Australian visitors to the South Pacific in 2010. With 1,443,161 international visitors to the South Pacific, this represents a share of 36.6%. Over 7 million Australians departed the country on an international trip in 2010, thus the South Pacific's share of outbound Australian tourism is 7.4%. In terms of traffic into Australia, there were 5,885,000 international visitors to Australia with South Pacific visitors (161,462) comprising 2.7% of the total.

Because of this increasing travel market share, it is important to know to what extent each South Pacific destination has its own unique identity, or destination image, in the minds of the potential tourist. As noted by Pike (2010), the issue of destination branding

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TABLE 1. 2010 International Tourist Flows Between Australia and the South Pacific

Australian tourist arrivals to the South Pacific	528,632
International tourist arrivals to the South Pacific	1,443,161
Australian departures to the South Pacific	528,632
Total Australian departures	7,111,400
South Pacific tourists to Australia	161,462
International tourists to Australia	5,885,000

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013.

and image creation has become a major focus of operations for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) striving for differentiation in cluttered markets. Destinations are becoming increasingly substitutable and difficult to differentiate (Pike, 2005). Branding enables destinations to effectively differentiate their destination crowded with competitors and substitutes (Pike, 2007). A destination brand is designed to create a unique and appealing identity that conveys its attributes, giving it a sense of place (Wheeler, Frost, & Weiler, 2011). The South Pacific Tourism Organization (SPTO) is the regional DMO whose mission it is to "Market and Develop Tourism in the South Pacific." SPTO members include the Pacific Island nations of the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tahiti (French Polynesia), Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea.

While the regional DMOs attempts to drive tourists to the region, the individual country destinations try to differentiate themselves as much as possible to gain their share of tourists. This juxtaposition makes for an interesting dilemma for both the regional tourism organization marketing the South Pacific to the world and the national tourism organizations that endeavor to promote themselves over and above their competitors. For Fiji, the most established destination in the region, this is less of an issue because of its existing strong image and brand. Tourism Fiji, Fiji's DMO, uses the tag line "FijiMe" to provide the potential tourist with the idea that Fiji will have such an effect on them, they will be 'Fiji'ed. The extensions are provided through the niches of "CruiseMe," "RomanceMe," and "DiveMe,"

etc., for the respective market segments. Given that it is the most mature destination in the region, there is less of a reason to "discover" and more of an incentive to actively participate in different types of tourism activities but other destinations all focus on "discovering." The Solomon Islands Visitor Bureau's tagline up until November 2011 was "Discover Somewhere Different" A re-branding exercise modified this to "So Solomons, So Different." Vanuatu Tourism Office's tagline is "Discover What Matters"; Kiribati uses "For Travellers, Not Tourists"; and Papua New Guinea has "A million different journeys" as its slogan. Until recently, the Cook Islands were using "Live differently" as their strapline. In 2011, Cook Islands Tourism adopted catch-phrases with a decidedly Fiji style to them. In the Cook Islands, "Discover us," "Plan with us," "Stay with us," and "Play with us" sounds very similar to Tourism Fiji's "FijiMe" theme. Tuvalu use "Timeless Tuvalu" as their slogan and Nauru's National Tourism Office has (<http://www.discovernauru.com>) as its website URL. As can be seen from this mix of slogans, there is a lot of "discovering" going on for a lot of "different" places.

These marketing straplines remind the author of the scene in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (Goldstone, 1979), where Brian is addressing a large crowd who mistakenly believe him to be the Messiah:

Brian: . . . You've got to think for yourselves! You're ALL individuals!

The Crowd: Yes! We're all individuals!

Brian: You're all different!

The Crowd: Yes, we ARE all different!

Single man in crowd: I'm not. . . .

Like "The Crowd" in the film, many South Pacific DMOs are proclaiming that they are all different. This research looks to uncover how different, if at all, are the South Pacific destinations in the minds of the Australian traveler.

The aim of this research is threefold: to assess the level of brand awareness among South Pacific tourist destinations; to estimate the visitation incidence of several South

Pacific destinations; and to test perception of brand image attributes of several Pacific Island Countries—namely, Fiji, the Cook Islands, Samoa, and Vanuatu.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Destination image is developed and created through various means and is an important influence in the selection of a choice of destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Chon, 1990; Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002; Hankinson, 2005; Pike, 2002; Prayag & Ryan, 2012). It determines, to a large extent, tourists' satisfaction with a destination through the comparison of expectations regarding the destination and perceived image of the destination (Pike, 2002; Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Tasci and Gartner (2007) surmise that the destination image literature reveals three sources of image formation: supply-side or destination factors; independent or autonomous factors; and demand-side or image receivers. Destination sources including advertising and other forms of publicity while autonomous image creators include media such as news articles, and popular culture media (films and books; compare with Gartner, 1997). Destination images depend also on who is receiving the images, hence perceivers' sociodemographic characteristics as well as their past travel experiences will have an effect on the image formation process.

Baloglu and McCleary (1999) argue that initial image formation before the trip is the most important phase in tourists' destination selection process. These authors cite a plethora of studies that seek to understand the development of image formation. Others develop models of tourism destination choice, which include both push (socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of the tourist) and pull (destination image and marketing) factors (Papatheodorou, 2001; Seddighi & Theocharous, 2002; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). Beerli and Martín (2004) develop and empirically validate a model which explains the different factors which form the post-visit image of a destination. These factors include primary and secondary sources of information pre- and post-visit as well as

motivations, previous tourism experiences, and sociodemographic factors. Yet Gallarza et al. (2002), in their review, note that there is little consensus on the process and nature of destination image formation.

Additionally, there is little agreement on how to assess and measure perceptions of destination image (Pan & Li, 2011). Echtner and Ritchie (1991) seek to quantify the measurement across four dimensions: functional characteristics, psychological characteristics, holistic images, and attributes of the destination. There is a general consensus that destination image comprises both what tourists think about a destination (a cognitive component) and what tourists feel about a place (an affective component; Pan & Li, 2011).

Prentice (2004) looks at the impact of familiarity on image recognition and propensity to visit. He contends that first time visitors to a destination cite more stereotypical images of the destination but, though repeat visitors persist in recalling stereotypical images of a destination, repeat visitors develop more nuancing of imagery.

Further, the concept of "image" is also the subject of much research with many different definitions of the concept espoused (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). Pike (2002) reviews 142 papers from 1973 to 2000 examining destination image. He concludes that destination image is complex, relativistic, and dynamic. It should not be expected to be otherwise, as both tourists and hosts/residents' motivations are heterogeneous; sources of information depicting destinations are multifaceted and often conflicting and destinations' attributes consist of both generic and unique elements. Destination image is related to the "personality" of a brand or destination. A brand personality is the set of human attributes associated with the brand and is perceived to be a key motivator for preference and visitation (Lee & Back, 2010). Murphy, Benckendorff, and Moscardo (2007) link destination image to behavioral intentions and evaluative outcomes such as intention to visit/revisit and satisfaction with the destination. In sum, destination image has proven to be an essential component in destination choice, influencing and being influenced by satisfaction and loyalty.

As such, it is important that destinations create a unique identity that can be used as an advantage over its competitors (Wheeler et al., 2011).

Li and Stepchenkova (2012) assess a collective mental picture of the United States as a travel destination among Chinese outbound travelers. They acknowledge that destination image is one component in tourists' brand knowledge. Prayag and Ryan (2012) proposed and then test a theoretical model which relates destination image, place attachment, personal involvement, and visitor satisfaction as antecedents to loyalty. They find that overall satisfaction mediates the relationship between destination image and future intentions to visit. Qu, Kim, and Im (2011) test a theoretical model of destination branding which integrates the concepts of the branding and destination image. They find the multidimensional construct of destination image (cognitive, unique, and affective images) affect tourist behavior.

Recognizing from the above literature review that destination image and its relationship to destination brand and tourists' behavior is complex; this article focuses on the perceptions of image of different South Pacific destinations among Australians.

IMAGES OF THE PACIFIC

Images and perceptions of tropical destinations have been created and reinforced over a long period of time. The images and representations of the Pacific are similar to other previously colonized areas of the world where the colonizers are responsible for the collective representation of 'Other' (Said, 1994). For example, Mayer (2002, pp. 2–3) traces the images of Africa in the Western world, examining cultural stereotyping through popular culture.

In the Pacific, early colonial photography of indigenous people documented this new society and people group for others back in the "center" and helped create the representation of South Pacific society that subsequent tourists expected to see (Annear, 1997, p. 27). Stephen (1993) argues that the taste for South Seas exotica coincided with the period from the 1880s to the 1900s when Australia introduced the "White

Australia" policy. The early tourism pictures and postcards portrayed the "South Pacific with islands with alluring females who suggested sexual possibilities. These postcards and photographs were a surrogate for those 'back home' who could not afford an island cruise" (p. 15). Early travel brochures, produced by Burns Philp & Co. Ltd., an Australian trading company who sold holiday packages for leisure travel to Australians and New Zealanders from 1910, created some of the formative images of the Pacific. Even back then, these early publications—such as *Picturesque Travel* and *Picturesque Isles of the South Seas*—depicted the islands as practically interchangeable so that the South Pacific was construed as a "single world." For example,

Isles of the Pacific, set like jewels on shimmering seas of blue and green that glisten like silk in the vivid sunshine; soft winds that gently stir the graceful palm trees; virgin beaches that gleam milk white against a background of verdant tropical growth; and over all the quietude of Nature in restful mood. . . . Always there is the peace of Nature. . . . Time here is a not a hard taskmaster and one has leisure for the quiet pleasures. (Gibson, 1993, p. 30)

Thomas (1993) notes that innumerable texts and visual images depict "welcoming" and "happy" islanders waiting to greet these early tourists. Early photographs, postcards, and illustrated guides helped create a South Pacific destination image as the images were viewed as a representative of the essential character of a place. This remained constant despite the specifics of and changes that may have occurred in the local geopolitical and socioeconomic environment (Thompson, 2006, pp. 5–6). Thompson (2006) uses the term *tropicalization* to describe the visual systems through which the islands were imaged for tourist consumption. It delineates how certain ideals and expectations of the tropics informed the creation of the destination image in islands. Thompson is referring to the Caribbean but it can equally be applied to the South Pacific. Despite cultural, environmental,

and geographical diversity within the region, a singular concept of what a tropical South Pacific island should look like has developed.

Much of the image of the South Pacific originates from the first European contact of explorers, traders, and missionaries. From anthropology (Margaret Mead) to art (Paul Gauguin and Henri Matisse), to literature (Robert Louis Stevenson, Paul Theroux, Daniel Dafoe, William Somerset Maugham), to film (*Mutiny on the Bounty*, *South Pacific*, *Blue Lagoon*), and science (Captain James Cook, Charles Darwin), the representation of the South Pacific has been created and molded through many disciplines since the 1700s (Sutton, 1995). This imagery has become stereotyped in the minds of current visitors to the region. Early advertising of the region showed untouched scenery and voluptuous native women wearing only a sarong performing traditional dance. Added to the imagery of swaying coconut trees, warm crystal clear water, and a golden sandy beach, the South Pacific is referred to a "tropical paradise" *ad nauseum*. Sturma (1999) argues that it is portrayed as "timeless" and that this "timelessness" has been replicated and reinforced through narratives, fiction, art, and films. Advertising refers to eminent visitors to the region such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Captain James Cook, and Paul Gauguin; a romanticized past which has remained constant (Sturma, 1999).

However, Berno and Ngaire (1998) provide a counterpoint to the homogenous, uniform view of the South Pacific. They note the different geographical and environmental features, the different sociocultural organization, protocols and customs; and the different levels and types of indigenous participation in tourism between Polynesia and Melanesia. They may describe a more accurate picture but what is of interest in this research is whether potential Australian international tourists perceive these differences in these South Pacific destinations or if they perpetuate the created utopian image.

The issue of differentiation of destinations in close geographic proximity with similar imagery has arisen elsewhere. Byrne and Skinner (2007) examine the extent to which Dublin's positioning and image as a destination for business tourism is influenced by the

perceptions of Ireland as a whole. They found that while Ireland is perceived as rural and scenic, Dublin was viewed being entertaining, lively, and cosmopolitan. However, Dublin was also able to capitalize on the perception of the country as a whole so it was also seen as having a friendly and welcoming population with strong cultural heritage. In contrast, Daye (2010) examines the brand image of six Dutch Caribbean islands to determine the extent of their unique identities. She finds that these Dutch Caribbean islands are mainly undifferentiated in terms of their tourism product offerings.

D'Hauterive (2011) examines the advertisements for the international tourism market to determine how tourism promoters represent New Caledonia. She does this using postcolonial discourse and finds that the images used to promote New Caledonia on international markets position New Caledonia as a pleasure periphery for the French in the Pacific rather than promoting the indigenous culture. Cassidy and Brown (2010) seek to identify the key determinants of tourism to Vanuatu among Australian holidaymakers. They find that climate and reputation as a holiday destination as the factors likely to influence choosing Vanuatu to visit. While on their holiday, these Australian tourists expressed the highest satisfaction with the friendliness of the locals, the range of restaurants, and the quality of accommodation while lack of time and expense were cited as the barriers to visiting the outer islands of Vanuatu. This highlights the importance of reputation, or in other words, marketing and a positive perception through such channels as word of mouth as a motivator to the destination.

METHODOLOGY

The respondents in the survey are Australians who have recently (last 12 months) indicated that they have been on an international holiday or plan to in the next 12 months residing in the New South Wales and Victorian metropolitan regions. These respondents may or may not necessarily have been to the South Pacific. The study sought to interview Australians who had

traveled internationally rather than Australians who had specifically been to a South Pacific destination. This is because Australians who have recently visited a South Pacific destination have already been "converted"; that is, they have traveled to the South Pacific. Further, it is important to examine the attitudes and behavior of both actual tourists and potential tourists if South Pacific DMOs are to gain market share from the South Pacific's main competitors of Bali, New Zealand, and Thailand.

The data were collected through a questionnaire survey administered via Internet. The researcher used myopinions.com to source in the internet research panel, the largest online market research panel in Australia with 360,000 active panel members as at September 2010. Potential respondents were sent an introduction e-mail explaining the topic of the survey with a hyperlink to the Internet survey site. The $N = 350$ was essentially chosen to ensure that the maximum sampling error would be $+/-5\%$ at the 95% level of confidence. Based on the expected incidence and demographic characteristics of those in the Internet panel, 3,570 potential respondents were invited, 696 panelists accepted the invitation to complete the survey, though 100 dropped out of the survey before completing it. These partial responses were excluded from the analysis. The reason for not completing is not known. Fifty-three respondents did not meet the screening criteria; that is, these Australians needed to either have traveled on an international holiday in the last 12 months or intend to travel on an international holiday in the next 12 months. The screening process ensured that respondents had traveled internationally. Quotas were established to ensure that there was an equal mix of respondents from Australia's two most populated metropolitan areas, Sydney and Melbourne and an equal mix of gender. One hundred eighty-eight respondents did not complete the survey as their particular quota required was full at the time they attempted to complete the survey. This left a final sample size of $N = 355$, a response rate of 19.5%. The average length of time taken to complete the survey was 12.6 minutes. The data were captured over a 1-week period in December, 2010.

There has been some academic research into the advantages and disadvantages of conducting tourism (and other) research over the Internet compared with other methods. Representativeness is much more of a concern than response rates (Cook, Heath, & Thompson, 2000), as an Internet research sample profile generally differs from a certain destination's visitor profile. Sigala (2004) found that Internet usage skews toward males, and is negatively related to age, although this is slowly changing in more developed countries. For this reason, soft quotas were implemented for gender and age in this study. Internet usage is positively related to income and dependent to some extent on ethnicity or race (Zhang, 1999). Hung and Law (2011) give an overview of Internet-based surveys that have appeared in journal articles. The authors found that the adoption of the internet as a tool for conducting research is becoming more common in some disciplines, including tourism and hospitality. They predict that the majority of future studies will be conducted online.

Table 2 shows the profile of the Australian respondents. As mentioned earlier, the respondents live in the metropolitan areas of Sydney and Melbourne. The sample was split, by design, approximately in half by gender. However, this closely matches the gender split of the metropolitan population data for New South Wales and Victoria, which is 48.6% male and 51.4% female (ABS, 2007). The average age of the respondents was 39 years with approximately 39% being in the 18- to 34-year bracket and 38% being 45 years and older. This compares to Australian Bureau of Statistics data for New South Wales and Victoria metropolitan regions, where the average age of residents is 45 years and 45% of this population are 45 years or older (ABS, 2007). Over half of the sample has either an undergraduate or postgraduate university degree. The average for the total household income for respondents in 2009 was approximately \$A87,400 with a quarter of the sample having a total household income of over \$A100,000 but less than \$A150,000 and another 9% of the sample having a total household income of \$A150,000 or more. Australian travelers in this sample earn more, on average,

TABLE 2. Profile of Respondents

City of residence	Count	%	Travel history & intentions	Count	%
Sydney	180	50.7	Been on an international holiday in the past 12 months and plan to take an international holiday in the next 12 months	218	61.4
Melbourne	175	49.3	Been on an international holiday in the past 12 months but have no plans to take an international holiday in the next 12 months	36	10.1
Gender			Not been on an international holiday in the past 12 months but I plan to take an international holiday in the next 12 months	101	28.5
Male	175	49.3	Education level		
Female	180	50.7	Some high school/High school graduate	82	23.1
Age			Vocational/technical or some university/college	91	25.6
	18–24 years	49	University degree	124	34.9
	25–34 years	89	Postgraduate degree	58	16.3
	35–44 years	83	Total Household Income (2009 \$A)		
	45–54 years	78	Up to 30,000	32	9.0
	55 years and over	56	30,000 to 59,999	78	22.0
Average (years)			60,000 to 99,999	122	34.4
			100,000 to 149,999	90	25.4
			150,000 or more	33	9.3
			Average (\$A)	\$87,465	

than the general metropolitan populations of New South Wales and Victoria, who have an average household income of \$A78,740 (ABS, 2007). Respondents were screened to ensure that they travel internationally. This meant they had traveled internationally in the last year or planned to in the next 12 months. Sixty-one percent had been on an international holiday in the past 12 months and planned to take another international holiday in the next 12 months while 10% had been on an international holiday but did not plan on taking another trip overseas in the next 12 months and 29% had not taken an international trip in the past 12 months but planned on doing so in the next 12 months.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section contained a relatively standard set of questions on buyer readiness (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2009, p. 209). Questions related to buyer readiness include top-of-mind awareness of the destination, other spontaneous destination awareness, trial (ever visited), purchase (recently visited), intention to visit in the next 12 months, and desire to visit if time and money was no obstacle (aspirational visit). For those destinations that Australian

travelers aspire to visit, respondents were asked their motivation for wanting to visit this destination. These questions have been used in a range of different research (Bianchi & Pike, 2011; Pike, 2010; Trembath, Romaniuk, & Lockshin, 2011). The second section asked about importance of a set of 13 destination brand attributes with responses captured on a 7-point Likert scale. This section also included questions on perceived destination image of four particular South Pacific destinations—namely, the Cook Islands, Fiji, Samoa, and Vanuatu on the same set of attributes. Destination images are formed through many channels including sources of information, previous experience and distribution as well as personal factors, both psychological and social (Beerli & Martín, 2004). These destinations were chosen because they host many tourists to the region and represent both Melanesian and Polynesian destinations. Again, a 7-point Likert scale was used to capture the results. The final section contained sociodemographic questions.

Capturing perceived destination image ratings across a range of attributes for different destinations allows the visual comparison of destinations via a perceptual map. A perceptual

map is created using correspondence analysis, a multi-dimensional scaling technique that allows the destinations and the brand attributes to be displayed on a two-dimensional plot (Kim & Agrusa, 2005). This technique shows the relative positioning of destinations so that destinations that are geometrically close to each other are perceived as close competitors and destinations geometrically close to an attribute are said to "own" or closely associated with that attribute. DMOs can then use the perceptual map to understand their current market position, as well as to see which attributes they are most closely associated with in the mind of the potential tourist and which other destinations share a competitive position (Chen & Uysal, 2002). There are many examples of tourism applications of this technique (Chen, 2001; Gartner, 1989; Haahti, 1986; Kim, 1998; Uysal, Chen, & Williams, 2000).

FINDINGS

The first step in the marketing process is for potential tourists to be aware of the destination. Table 3 provides a summary of brand performance measures across South Pacific destinations. Top-of-mind awareness is a way to measure how well the destination ranks in the minds of potential tourists. This *brand salience* measures the strength of awareness of the destination in the mind of the potential tourist (Bianchi & Pike, 2011; Pike, 2010; Trembath, et al., 2011). Operationalized as

unaided top-of-mind awareness, brand salience represents the strength of the destination's presence in the mind of the target segment. Respondents were asked to spontaneously mention a South Pacific tourism destination. Not surprisingly, Fiji is the most frequently cited top-of-mind South Pacific destination; almost one in two respondents (45%) spontaneously nominated Fiji as the first South Pacific tourism destination they thought of. Vanuatu was the next most spontaneously mentioned South Pacific tourism destination, followed by French Polynesia/Tahiti with just under 6% of the total mentioning these two countries first.

A follow-up question was asked, asking respondents to name spontaneously all South Pacific tourist destinations they could think of. Fiji maintained its foremost position with over three in four potential Australian travelers (78.3%) spontaneously mentioning Fiji as a South Pacific tourism destination. Just over two in five respondents (42.0%) spontaneously mentioned Vanuatu as a South Pacific tourism destination. New Caledonia then follows, and just over a quarter of respondents (25.4%) cite Samoa as a South Pacific tourism destination. One in five Australians surveyed (21.1%) are aware, on an unprompted basis, that the Cook Islands is a South Pacific tourism destination.

In terms of visiting South Pacific tourism destinations, half of all respondents (50.1%) have visited a South Pacific destination. Just under a third (31.8%) of these Australian travelers had visited Fiji in the past and approximately one

TABLE 3. Summary of Brand Performance Measures Across South Pacific Destinations

	Top of mind unaided awareness %	Total unaided awareness %	Ever visited %	Visited last 12 months %	Intend to visit next 12 months %	Aspirational visit %
Fiji	45.1	78.3	31.8	11.8	23.7	46.5
Vanuatu	5.6	42	17.2	1.6	10.1	38.3
French Polynesia/ Tahiti	5.6	22.3	5.9	0.8	8.5	51.0
Cook Islands	2	21.1	7	2.4	7.9	33.0
New Caledonia	1.7	29.6	14.1	2.4	5.6	33.8
Samoa	1.7	25.4	3.7	1.2	5.9	21.1
Tonga	1.1	18.6	2.5	0.8	3.7	19.4
Solomon Islands	0.3	9.9	3.9	1.2	3.9	16.6
None	3.9	—	40.9	76.8	52.7	9.9

in six Australian travelers (17.2%) had visited Vanuatu and 14.1% had visited New Caledonia. Less than 1 in 10 respondents had ever visited the other destinations listed. In terms of a recent visit, just over 1 in 10 (11.8%) Australian travelers had visited Fiji in the last 12 months, with very small proportion of others having visited other South Pacific destinations in the last 12 months. In total, 23.2% had visited one of the South Pacific destinations listed in the previous 12-month period. The ratio of recently visited (last 12 months) to ever visited provides a measurement of "currency" of the destination. This currency ratio could be an example of behavioral loyalty (Bianchi & Pike, 2011). For the eight destinations tested, five have a currency ratio of between .30–.37. Vanuatu (.09), French Polynesia (.13), and New Caledonia (.17) have somewhat lower currency ratios. For Vanuatu and New Caledonia, this may be related to their close proximity to Australia, so that Australians have visited these destinations previously but are seeking new destination to try in the South Pacific.

With respect to future travel intentions in the South Pacific over the next 12 months, 47% replied they had plans to visit at least one South Pacific country in the next 12 months, with Fiji being the country nominated most often. Intention to visit is an indicator of attitudinal loyalty (Bianchi & Pike, 2011). Almost 1 in 4 (23.7%) Australians responded that they plan on making a trip to Fiji in the next 12 months while approximately 1 in 10 potential visitors responded they would visit Vanuatu, French Polynesia, and the Cook Islands.

When asked which South Pacific destination they would like to visit/revisit if time and money weren't an obstacle, half of all respondent would choose to visit French Polynesia closely followed by Fiji. Vanuatu, Cook Islands, and New Caledonia are among the 2nd tier choices with just over a third of respondents stating they would like to visit these destinations.

For each South Pacific destination that respondents wanted to visit or revisit, they provided the motivation for their aspirational visit. For the third (33%) of all Australians who want to visit or revisit the Cook Islands,

it is novelty of wanting to visit a previously unvisited destination. Characteristics relating specifically to the destination—namely, the scenery and beaches—are the next most frequently mentioned reasons for Australians wanting to visit the Cook Islands.

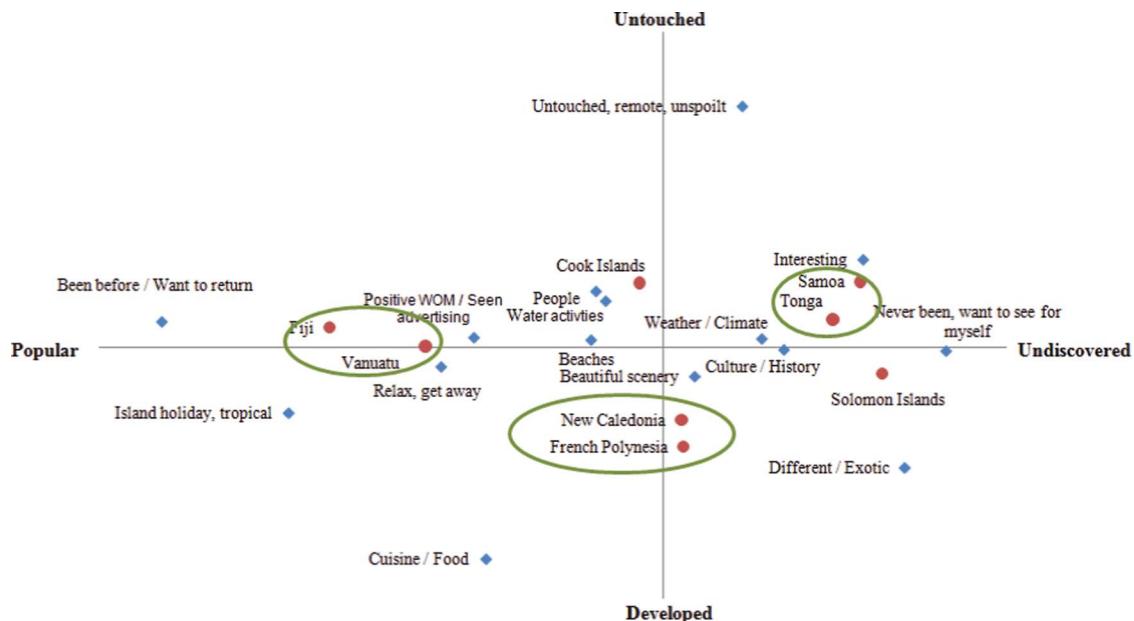
Almost half of those surveyed wanted to visit/revisit Fiji if time and money were not an obstacle. The main reasons for wanting to do this were positive word of mouth or because of advertising. This is followed equally by the physical environment (beautiful scenery and beaches) and then by the need for rest, relaxation, and to get away.

For the one in five respondents who want to visit or return to Samoa, as with the Cook Islands, the main reason for visiting would be to discover a new South Pacific tourist destination, having heard about the destination. This was followed by wanting to experience the Samoan culture and history and the friendliness of the people, and then to experience the physical environment.

For Vanuatu, over a third of respondents desired to visit or return to the destination. Of those who did, the primary reason was for a relaxing holiday—to get away. The next most cited reason was the positive word of mouth and/or advertising that potential Vanuatu tourists had seen or heard. The attractive beaches and then culture and history of Vanuatu were the third and fourth most cited reasons for wanting a future visit to Vanuatu.

This data can be displayed via a perceptual map. Figure 1 shows the top 15 coded (verbatim) of reasons for wanting to visit or revisit eight destinations in the Pacific. The two-dimensional plot displays the eight destinations along with 15 motivations for wanting to visit. The vertical axis could be interpreted as the degree of development with the motivation of "untouched, remote and unspoilt" at one end and "French Food" signifying high quality, developed gastronomy at the other end of this spectrum. As can be seen from the plot, not many of destinations are closely associated with either extremes, with the French colonies of New Caledonia and French Polynesia having French cuisine as a driver to the destination. On the horizontal axis,

FIGURE 1. Perceptual Map of South Pacific Destinations and Motives for Wanting to Visit (color figure available online)



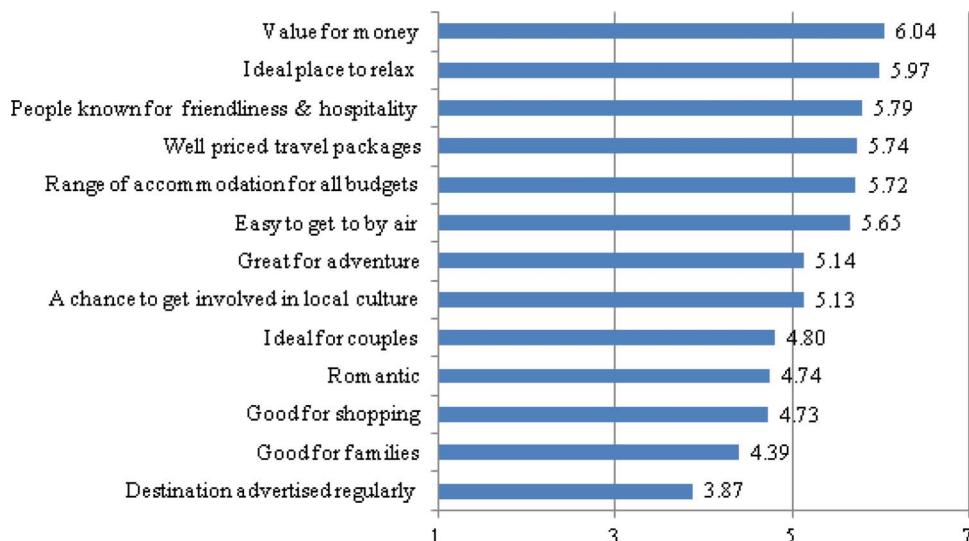
there is more dispersion between the attributes and destinations. This dimension relates to the degree of familiarity Australians have with the destination.

Fiji and to a lesser extent Vanuatu are perceived as close competitors and most closely associated with an island, tropical holiday, a relaxing place, and positive feedback. The positive feedback is either from word-of-mouth, advertising, or previous visits. Cook Islands and the French colonies are relatively close to the origin of the map, implying that they are not linked strongly with any particular attributes. The Solomon Islands and Samoa and Tonga, which are close competitors, are perceived as undiscovered destinations. At the other end of this dimension is Fiji and Vanuatu, which Australians already feel are familiar. It is interesting to note, however, than many of the attributes are shared by all these South Pacific destinations. In the mind of Australians, these destinations are synonymous with friendly people, good climate, beautiful scenery, tropical weather, and a range of water activities that can be undertaken. This is in line with previous perceptions that have been created about the South Pacific. Likewise, they are all perceived

as having a relative amount of development and not being totally remote, or untouched.

It is important to gain an understanding of what tourists are looking for when deciding on different destinations for holidays. This is often done by asking potential tourists how important they believe a certain attribute to be for a holiday destination. There is extensive literature on destination image, as outlined above (Chon, 1990; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Gallarza et al., 2002; Pike, 2002). For this study, a list of 13 attributes was included. The list of attributes was decided through a review of the destination image literature as well as discussing the list with industry stakeholders such as the national tourism organizations in the South Pacific region. A relatively long list was reduced to 13 attributes for the questionnaire. Respondents rated the importance of each attribute on a 7-point Likert scale where 7 = *very important* and 1 = *not at all important*. The mean scores for the 13 attributes are displayed in Figure 2. In terms of what these Australians are looking for in a holiday experience, "Value for money" and "Ideal place to relax" are rated as the most important attributes. Friendly people, easy access, and a range of accommodation options as well as

FIGURE 2. Mean Scores of Attribute Importance for a Holiday Destination (color figure available online)



well-priced travel packages are also seen as relatively important.

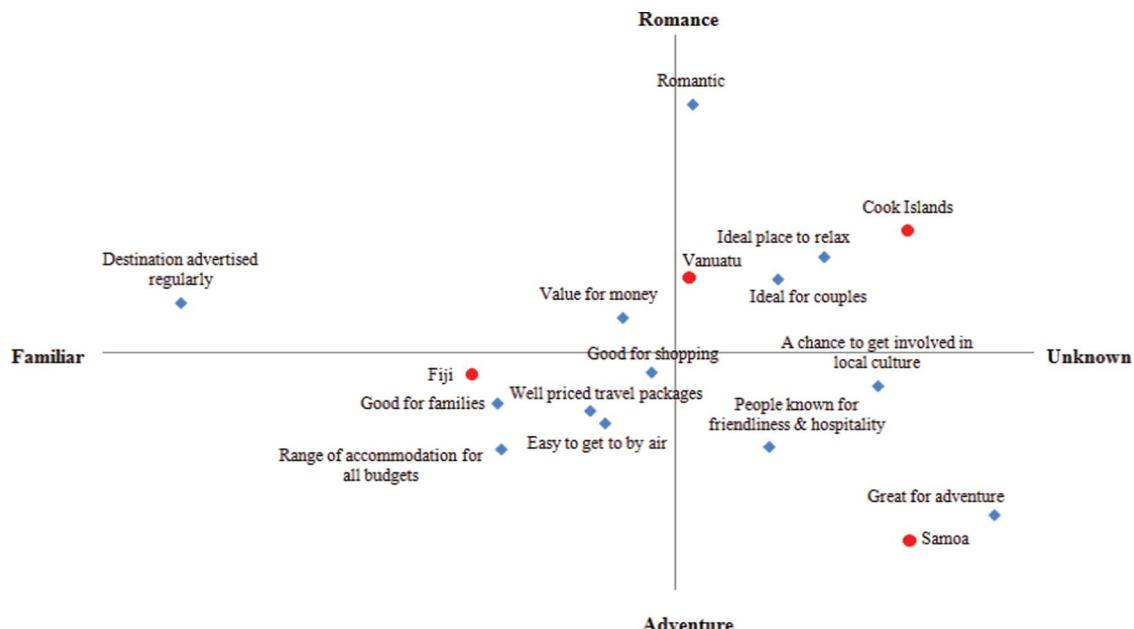
For the same attributes, respondents were asked their perception of four different South Pacific destinations; that is, Fiji, Vanuatu, Cook Islands, and Samoa. Table 4 displays the mean scores of the 13 attributes for the four destinations. Using SPSS (SPSS Version 19, SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA), paired *t*-tests were conducted to test the differences in means across the destinations. A number with a subscript

indicates that the attribute is statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence from the destination denoted by its first letter. For example, Fiji (5.70) is perceived to be different from both the Cook Islands (5.42) and Samoa (5.24) on the attribute of an "ideal place to relax." As Table 4 shows, Fiji, in part due to higher awareness and visitation, is rated higher on several attributes including people known for their friendliness and hospitality, easy to get to by air, good for families, value for money,

TABLE 4. Mean Scores of Perceived Destination Image Attributes of South Pacific Countries

Mean scores	Cook Islands C	Fiji F	Samoa S	Vanuatu V
Ideal place to relax	5.42	5.70 ^{C, S}	5.24	5.52 ^S
People known for friendliness & hospitality	5.19	5.48 ^{C, S, V}	5.15	5.15
A chance to get involved in local culture	5.09	5.12	5.09	5.06
Ideal for couples	5.09 ^S	5.31 ^{C, S}	4.84	5.26 ^S
Romantic	4.89 ^S	5.11 ^{C, S}	4.53	4.97 ^S
Easy to get to by air	4.72	5.75 ^{C, S, V}	4.88	5.34 ^{C, S}
Great for adventure	4.70	4.66	4.82	4.75
Good for families	4.63	5.36 ^{C, S, V}	4.56	4.85 ^{C, S}
Value for money	4.53	5.07 ^{C, S, V}	4.51	4.77 ^{C, S}
Range of accommodation for all budgets	4.51	5.36 ^{C, S, V}	4.60	4.84 ^{C, S}
Well priced travel packages	4.47	5.31 ^{C, S, V}	4.57	4.88 ^{C, S}
Good for shopping	3.67	4.00 ^C	3.75	3.92
Destination advertised regularly	3.42	5.25 ^{C, S, V}	3.18	4.42 ^{C, S}

FIGURE 3. Perceptual Map of South Pacific Destinations and Image Attributes (color figure available online)



range of accommodation for all budgets, and well-priced travel packages and destination that is advertised regularly. Vanuatu, while not rating as strongly as Fiji on many attributes, does outperform the Cook Islands and Samoa on several attributes including those attributes related to price, accessibility, and marketing. Other attributes—such as “a chance to get involved in the local culture,” “great for adventure,” and “good for shopping”—show little differences in their ratings across the four South Pacific destinations.

As previously discussed, perceptual maps are a research tool designed to measure a brand's position relative to brand attributes and its competitors. A perceptual map visualizes the links between images in respondents' collective minds (Li & Stepchenkova, 2012). The tool is also useful for identifying a brand's competitive set and to open spaces or uncontested attributes that can represent an opportunity for repositioning away from the competition (Kotler et al., 2009). In this perceptual map, the dimensions of the plot are relatively similar to the previous perceptual map. Romance and adventure are juxtaposed on the y-axis while familiarity and the unknown are juxtaposed on the x-axis. There is

more relative distance between the destinations in Figure 3. Australians are less familiar with the Cook Islands and Samoa. Yet the perception of these destinations differs; Samoa is associated with adventure, the Cook Islands are linked with the image of romance. Vanuatu does not correlate strongly with many brand attributes while Fiji, being the most visited destination in the South Pacific for Australians, is perceived as a holiday spot that is good for families, has good transportation links, offers a range of accommodation for visitors, and is heavily advertised in Australia.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This piece of research had three main aims: to assess the level of brand awareness among South Pacific tourist destinations; to estimate the visitation incidence of several South Pacific destinations; and to understand the market positioning of several Pacific Island Countries—namely, Fiji, the Cook Islands, Samoa, and Vanuatu.

With almost half of respondents nominating Fiji as their top-of-mind South Pacific

destination, these islands have strong brand salience. In terms of total spontaneous awareness, while Fiji has high brand awareness, other South Pacific destinations are having difficulties gaining share of mind. Just over two in five Australians spontaneously mentioned Vanuatu as a South Pacific tourism destination. New Caledonia and Samoa rank next. Alarmingly, there is some confusion in the market, even at a regional level, with a significant proportion of potential travelers listing parts of South East Asia and Australia or New Zealand as South Pacific destinations.

Visitation tends to follow the awareness pattern with Australians being more likely to have visited Fiji than Vanuatu and New Caledonia than other South Pacific destinations. One interesting exception to that is Samoa which has relatively high awareness with lower visitation rates. With no financial or time constraints, along with Fiji and Vanuatu, French Polynesia and the Cook Islands are two destinations that Australian tourists desire to visit. These latter two destinations are sought out for their beautiful scenery as well as their more exotic, off-the-tourist trail characteristics.

One of the challenges for DMOs is to create and promote an effective destination positioning strategy (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). It is not surprising that destinations with strong, positive images are more likely to influence the travel decision process. As noted by Qu et al. (2011), a strong and distinctive destination image is a goal for DMOs in capturing potential tourists' minds and it also acts as a mediator to influence behavior, such as intention to revisit and intention to recommend the destination. This research reveals the relative market position of South Pacific destinations. In the mind of Australians, these South Pacific destinations share many of the same attributes indicating that there is a sameness to these destinations—something that has been reinforced over time through both travel and non-travel media. The destinations are perceived to have good weather, people known for the hospitality, and being a good place to relax. This means that these destinations can be easily substituted one for the other when events such as natural disasters or political problems, or price changes occur in one destination,

tourists can experience a similar type holiday in another South Pacific destination.

Seddighi and Theocharous (2002) note that perceptions and attitudes of potential tourists toward destinations are tempered by political instability at the destination. However, in the Pacific, while Fiji and Solomon Islands have experienced governmental instability in recent years, the tourism sector has shown strong resilience and relatively fast recoveries (Harrison & Pratt, 2010). For Fiji in particular, where the tourism resorts are a distance away from the political capital, Suva, tourists have been unaffected by any government instability.

This research has implications for other DMOs. There is always a tension between Regional Marketing Organizations motivating tourists to come to a region—such as the South Pacific, the Caribbean, or Europe—motivating tourists to visit a particular country destination. Careful attention needs to be paid to both the message and medium to tap into various markets. Further, there needs to be an appropriate mix of generic regional imagery and unique destination offerings. There is already some associated with the Cook Islands being a romantic destination for couples; while Samoa, perhaps because of their strong rugby tradition, is seen as an adventurous destination. While Fiji is particularly well-known among Australians, it has come to be regarded as good for families with easy transportation connections. Destinations with low awareness need to move beyond the attributes of "unknown" and "undiscovered" and expand their product offerings so they can take advantage not only of those South Pacific brand attributes, but also develop niche markets for those tourists interested in diving, paddleboarding, kite-surfing tourism, as well as cultural/indigenous tourism and voluntourism.

Further, perhaps these smaller destinations can position themselves as being a tropical paradise with all the attractions that such a holiday would offer but is not Fiji. This would involve being defined by their competition. Avis, the car rental company did this in 1962 with their "We Try Harder" slogan, when Hertz was recognized as the leader in this market. This was a brand promise that the company has lived up to. For

tourism in the South Pacific, it would be warm, friendly people without being harassed by taxi drivers at Nadi International Airport. It would be the white sandy beaches without the noisy jet skis and it would be the cultural souvenirs without the “made in China” labels.

Given the generic imagery of the South Pacific that has been reinforced through history and modern media, coupled with the South Pacific DMO’s desire to differentiate themselves, an area of future research may be along the lines of Prentice (2004), who for England and Scotland, where both broad and unique images of destinations could be shown to potential tourists asking them to identify specific South Pacific destinations. This would enable South Pacific destinations to further assess the degree of stereotyping their marketing portrays, enabling these DMOs to decide on the extent of further differentiation. Future research may examine the degree of substitutability between South Pacific destinations and attempt to identify those activities and attractions that might be unique in the South Pacific. This would be important so that destinations move beyond ubiquitous imagery of the South Pacific and achieve the right mix of being the same (as other regional destinations) but different.

NOTE

1. The data for the “South Pacific” consists of the following countries: New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Cook Islands, Fiji, Niue, Samoa, French Polynesia, Tonga, Tuvalu.

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