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World Heritage as a placebo brand: a comparative analysis of three sites and marketing implications

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ABSTRACT

The UNESCO World Heritage (WH) List is often regarded as a successful tourism brand that motivates site nominations. However, there is relatively little research dealing specifically with WH brand attraction effects, and what does exist shows conflicting results. There is a significant research gap in terms of awareness of the WH brand and its potential impact on visitation, which this study seeks to fill through a comparative analysis of three diverse case studies: Independence Hall, USA; Studenica Monastery, Serbia; and the Archaeological Site of Volubilis, Morocco. Survey data ($n = 771$) from these three sites were collected and analyzed resulting in three distinct clusters of visitors. One of the clusters does exhibit higher levels of awareness of the WH brand, but members of this group were not motivated by this knowledge when planning their site visit. It is concluded that the WH brand may function as a placebo, and that its importance may be tied more to political interests than economic advancement. Thus, dependency on the WH List for tourism development may potentially be detrimental for locations in the long term. The WH brand's placebo effect could result in long-term problems for both the site and those whose livelihoods depend on tourism.

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Introduction

It has long been maintained by government, industry, non-government organizations and even some academics that United Nations Education, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage (WH) listing provides a significant boost to tourism numbers. Giovanni Puglisi, the President of the Italian National Commission for UNESCO, best expressed this position when he stated that “it has been proven that inscription to the [World Heritage] list increases tourism flows by between 20 and 30%” (Berni, Author’s translation, 2005, p. 11). These types of claims are often a significant contribution to the decision to nominate a site to the list, and are the motivation for this current work. This study focuses on the relationship between the WH brand and motivations for visitation. There are few studies that have been undertaken which directly assess if tourists are aware of a site’s WH status and if this information impacted their decision to visit (Marcotte & Bourdeau, 2006; Wall-Reinius & Fredman, 2007; Yan & Morrison, 2008). No existing studies have been undertaken which use not only a cross-contextual analysis but also a comparative one based on different levels of development. This is particularly important as less developed countries often regard WH site status as a means of

increasing tourist visitation (Millar, 2006). Ryan and Silvanto (2011, p. 315) argue that the WH brand can function as a signpost for international tourists via promotional materials when other local brands are not well known. Therefore, especially for less developed countries, the WH brand can be seen as a desirable designation that is recognizable to a larger international audience.

Although the term “brand” is often applied to WH, it should be noted, however, that there is no consensus as to whether or not WH is a recognized brand. Researchers are in disagreement over whether or not the WH List attracts individuals at all, and if so, for how long. Some studies (e.g. Marcotte & Bourdeau, 2006; Moscardo, Green, & Greenwood, 2001; Yang, Lin, & Han, 2010) noted a broad recognition of the brand though not necessarily an increased inclination to visit based solely on that aspect. Others (Hardiman & Burgin, 2013; Smith, 2002; Tisdell & Wilson, 2002; Williams, 2004) found that tourists were generally unaware of the WH status of studied sites. In their statistical analyses, neither Buckley (2004) nor Hall and Pigginn (2001) could find any evidence that listing increased the number of visitors above existing growth rates. Current research on WH sites provides little insight into the actual brand strength of the WH List in terms of visitation or even tourist recognition of the brand itself. Furthermore, while previous studies commonly focused on individual sites or a collection of sites within a single country, several authors have recommended that future research on WH examines broader contexts (Buckley, 2004; King & Prideaux, 2010; Poria, Reichel, & Cohen, 2013; Yan & Morrison, 2008). Therefore, this study fulfills a recognized gap and presents a cross-contextual analysis of WH brand awareness in order to determine the potential effects on tourism.

This work is of special importance to the study and practice of sustainable tourism for two main reasons. There has long been an argument that natural WH sites are the most secure form of Protected Area (PA) because of the legal and political framework that surrounds them (Buckley, 2004; Hall, 1992), and that PAs are more and more reliant on, and proponents of, sustainable tourism and its practices (Job & Becken, in press). Second, it is increasingly recognized that marketing and sustainable tourism are strongly interlinked (Font & McCabe, 2017), and branding is central to some aspects of marketing. As the number of WH sites continues to grow, there is clearly a need for further examination of the role of the WH brand in attracting tourists, particularly given that visitors to WH sites have been found to differ from traditional heritage tourists (Adie & Hall, 2017).

Conceptual background

Tourism branding

In order for a tourism brand to function, there should already be some level of awareness of the destination or attraction. According to Leiper (1990, p. 379), “at least one *generating marker* is necessary, referring to some kind of phenomenon that acts as a *primary nucleus*, before an individual can become motivated to set off on a touristic trip”. Thus, there “is a necessary level of awareness of a specific aspect of a destination in order to work as a pull factor for the tourist, though they will have varied expectations related to the destination based on the differing levels of personal import attached to the site” (1990, p. 374). From this perspective, the lower the awareness of a site, the less likely that it will be prioritized in terms of visitation (Lew & McKercher, 2006). In contrast, Milman and Pizman (1995, p. 27) argue that “awareness results, at best, in curiosity that can lead to interest and eventually to trial”. Nevertheless, brand image is regarded as important. Bigné, Sánchez, and Sánchez (2001), p. 613 suggest that “an improvement in the overall image of a place held by an individual enhances his or her intention to return and to recommend in the future. It also increases the propensity to make a positive assessment of the stay and to perceive a higher quality”. A positive brand image can also be used to attract specific tourist markets (Kozak & Baloglu, 2010). Thus, positive language and imagery in tourism branding can have a strong impact on tourists’ decision-making process. How then does this function in terms of cultural/heritage tourism?

Destination brands need to be relatable to their clientele on a cultural level. Ng, Lee, and Soutar (2007, p. 1505) proposed that cultural distance impacted a destination’s attractiveness and that

“stressing culturally similar aspects is likely to increase the effectiveness of a tourism destination’s promotion and marketing activities”. In terms of cultural heritage tourism, [Poria, Reichel, and Biran \(2006, p. 324\)](#), in their study of tourists to a heritage site in Amsterdam, found that “the more tourists perceive the site as being part of their own heritage, the greater interest they show in learning, feeling emotionally involved, being connected to their heritage and passing the legacy on to their children”. Thus, there are both emotional and cultural elements to the selection of a tourism destination. However, visitation also requires a certain level of knowledge. [Kerstetter, Confer, and Graefe \(2001\)](#) suggest that more highly specialized visitors within the heritage tourism market have a higher level of prior knowledge, which could explain their higher probability of expressing satisfaction with their overall visit (p. 271).

These previous studies highlight the varied ways in which WH branding can be understood specifically as WH sites are simultaneously both attractions and destinations depending on context. While small sites would be considered attractions, especially when located in larger destination areas (e.g. Temple of Heaven, Beijing), [Hall and Piggin \(2002\)](#) note that size can result in a WH site being considered a destination as opposed to an attraction, using the Great Barrier Reef as an example. This is due to the area of the site dictating the existence of tourist amenities as befits a destination. In relation to cultural WH sites (generally, cultural sites are listed under Criteria I–VI and natural sites are found under Criteria VII–X), this variety of facilities would be most commonly found in listed cities (e.g. Verona, Italy; Rabat, Morocco; Luang Prabang, Laos). Therefore, for both attractions and destinations, the literature suggests that a globally recognized tourism brand would promote visitation across varied contexts, and, as was noted, strong tourism brands can result in the creation of “must-see” destinations, which could work to promote tourism in destinations wherein the tourist does not have cultural ties. It is in this manner that the WH List may function as a tourism brand.

The World Heritage brand

Several studies have been undertaken to assess the effectiveness of the UNESCO WH brand at the level of the tourist. [Su and Lin’s \(2014\)](#) work, for example, scrutinized the connection between international tourist arrivals and WH sites on a global scale, and they found that increases in tourism fell on a U-curve, with initial tourism increases occurring when no WH sites exist but then only experiencing growth again once there are more than 21 WH sites. “This increase means that when a country possesses sufficient WH sites, the ‘gearing effect’ of WH sites will emerge” ([Su & Lin, 2014, p. 57](#)). This suggests that WH listing does have an impact, though it is dependent on the pre-existing number of sites that a country has. In contrast, [Hall and Piggin’s \(2001\)](#) survey of WH sites in OECD countries found no evidence that growth in tourism at WH sites could be distinguished from national and/or local tourism growth. These works highlight the conflicting results found within the WH marketing literature.

Some studies found that tourists were generally aware of a visited site’s listed status. [Marcotte and Bourdeau \(2006\)](#) revealed that 55% of interviewed tourists in Quebec City, Canada, knew that the site was on the WH List, with 15% stating that this status led to their decision to visit. In Australia, [Moscardo et al. \(2001\)](#) indicated that over 90% of sampled visitors knew that the Great Barrier Reef was on the WH List. [Palau-Saumell, Forgas-Coll, Sánchez-García, and Prats-Planagumà \(2012\)](#) found only about half of visitors to La Sagrada Família, Spain, were aware of its WH status but that “any action on the heritage building or improvement of its contents will have a much greater effect on emotions and will result in greater satisfaction among the tourists that know the heritage site is a UNESCO WHS” (p. 373). Other studies segmented tourists by residence (domestic/international). [Patuelli, Mussoni, and Candela \(2012\)](#) noted a 4% increase in domestic tourist visitation to an Italian region after listing. [Yan and Morrison \(2008\)](#) found that 67.1% of international tourists decided to visit Huangshan, China, due, in small part, to its WH status. [Yang et al. \(2010\)](#) in analyzing international arrivals to Chinese tourist sites, found that “an increase in one World Heritage Site will induce about six times the amount of international tourist arrivals for a new [highly ranked national] spot” ([2010,](#)

p. 834). While these studies seem to indicate a strong level of brand recognition tied to touristic increases, this is not always the case.

Hall and Piggin (2002, p. 410), for example, found there to be no conclusive evidence as to whether or not WH listing actually affected businesses in the vicinity of two New Zealand sites regardless of the majority of businesses maintaining that there were positive impacts and that it would work as a tourist attractor. In fact, Cellini (2011) reinterpreted Yang et al.'s results and disagreed with their conclusions, noting that "UNESCO recognition appears to be ineffective in fostering international tourist arrivals" (p. 453). This is supported by Wall-Reinius and Fredman's (2007) study of the Swedish Laponian Area World Heritage site, which noted that, while almost 60% of surveyed individuals knew the site's WH status, only 5% indicated that it had any impact on their decision to visit. Part of the difficulty lies in the usage of data immediately post-listing. For instance, Huang, Tsaur, and Yang (2012, p. 46) discovered that, in the case of Macao, the WH inscription functions as a short-term marketing method to increase tourism, but over the long term, it is not a significant motivator. This acknowledges a potential increase following listing, but it also emphasizes the potential long-term problems of relying on the WH brand for its touristic potential.

Additionally, not all tourist increases are equal across sites. Tisdell and Wilson (2002, p. 46) found at Australian sites that while visitation does increase, albeit minimally, even once listed, not all sites received equal visitation levels, with some experiencing very low flows (see also Buckley, 2004; Hall & Piggin, 2001). A similar situation was found in Patuelli et al. (2012). Their research indicated that, while WH status can cause visitation increases, there are a myriad of contextual factors, which can counteract these assessed positive benefits. Their results emphasize the importance of WH as a mechanism to entice visitation over similar regions of the same country. Both of these studies are particularly interesting as they deal with sites within the same national context. While there is no guarantee that these results could be applied in a cross-contextual analysis, it could be supposed that the disparities between increased visitation to WH sites in already highly popular countries would be much greater than those in countries which do not experience a heightened global presence in the tourism sphere. In other words, "already popular places will become more popular, while unpopular, remote or contested sites will likely gain few additional visitors" (Jansen-Verbeke & McKercher, 2010, p. 192).

The disconnect between the positive and negative levels of recognition and tourism increases were well expressed in a study undertaken by Poria et al. (2013, p. 273) in Israel, wherein the WH List was seen as a "global recommendation to visit" by the interviewees while they simultaneously were incapable of identifying the WH logo. In another study at religious Israeli WH sites, Poria, Reichel, and Cohen (2011b) found "that the title WH [Site] does not serve as a magnet for tourists". Cuccia, Guccio, and Rizzo (2013) explained the problems related to the use of the UNESCO listing for tourism purposes as being twofold with an overemphasis on extreme, short-term increases due to listing without, generally, a concise long-term plan to not only assist in the maintenance of visitation numbers but also create a sustainable environment for the potential visitation increases (see also Hall, 2006). As stated by Hall and Piggin (2003, p. 218), there is no indisputable indication that WH listing has any direct impact on visitation numbers. Lo Piccolo, Leone, and Pizzuto (2012) found this to be true in their research related to visitation levels at Agrigento and the Aeolian Islands, where visitation actually declined by 13.3% in the nine years after listing. Thus, not only is there an unsubstantiated belief that WH listing will increase tourist numbers outside of pre-existing trends, but this assumption, in turn, can pose problems for planning.

Furthermore, there exist several studies which indicate that tourists are not always cognizant of a site's status or WH in general. Hardiman and Burgin (2013, p. 64) found that there was a very low level of awareness of the Australian WH areas among visitors to the Greater Blue Mountains site, and about half were completely incapable of naming any sites at all. Furthermore, the site's WH status did not appear to have been a motivating factor for visitation five years post-listing, and the majority of tourists were not conscious of their having visited a WH site. Tisdell and Wilson (2002) emphasized that tourists in Australia were not always aware of a site's WH status prior to visitation, which suggests a lack of influence of the WH brand on site choice. King and Prideaux (2010) noticed a similar trend in

relation to visitor awareness of WH status in their visitor-based study on Australian natural WH sites. However, they did find that “a small percentage of visitors at each site self-identified as a World Heritage Area collector” (King & Prideaux, 2010, p. 243).

At natural sites in Australia and one in the USA, King and Halpenny (2014) noted a lack of awareness, particularly in being able to recognize and correctly identify the WH symbol. In the USA, Williams (2004, p. 413) indicated that while favorable benefits could be noted from listing, in general, the average visitor to a listed US national park is totally unaware of WH status. This ignorance at American parks was also noted by Hazen (2008, p. 259), who stated that over 40% of individuals had no firm opinions regarding the WH Convention, which was attributed to the fact that most stated that they were not knowledgeable enough about the subject. In Macao, Dewar, du Cros, and Li (2012), p. 325) discovered that “it is clear that the average visitor has only a vague understanding of WH”. Smith (2002) also found a lack of overall awareness of Maritime Greenwich’s WH status. However, she noted that WH listing “appears to be valued more as a catalyst for investment, regeneration and tourism development than as a significant icon in its own right” (p. 146). In relation to an archeological WH site in Israel, Poria, Reichel, and Cohen (2011a) noted not only low levels of awareness of the WH logo and name but also a higher motivation to visit a non-listed site in comparison with a listed one.

Fyall and Rakic (2006, p. 165) refer to the overemphasis on the WH List as a guaranteed tourist attractor as “naïve” as it “overly simplifies the nature of visitor trends at World Heritage Sites”. Moreover, the continuously growing list could actually work against those who are actively trying to utilize the WH brand as a tourism promotion tool. Logan (2012) notes that with a constantly expanding list, many sites no longer fulfill the requirements of Outstanding Universal Value, but are instead of specifically national interest. Therefore, the universality of “Outstanding Universal Value” is being called into question. “Overexposure of the World Heritage ‘brand’ is likely to dilute the benefits to be derived from such a quality ‘trademark’ with the source of differentiation achieved through brand recognition no longer carrying influence in the market” (Fyall & Rakic, 2006, p. 171).

This is especially important for countries who find themselves on the lower end of the Human Development Index (HDI). As Timothy and Nyaupane (2009) noted:

... there is a scramble in [Less Developed Countries] to inscribe as many heritage sites as possible on UNESCO’s World Heritage List (WHL). As developing countries often have lower levels of global visibility, they frequently use the WHL as a way of making their countries visible. (p. 11)

Millar (2006) remarked that “in states with weak economies World Heritage Site status was eagerly sought as a kite mark for the promotion of mass tourism, under the guise of international cultural tourism” (pp. 38–39). Ashworth and van der Aa (2006) similarly note that there is a greater emphasis on economic gains than on the actual purpose of the WHC, site preservation and conservation in such countries. This is a precarious strategy, as Dewar et al. (2012), p. 324) indicated, there are “tangible disadvantages at site level or places relying heavily on the tourist dollar for management and conservation revenue”. Thus it can be seen as potentially problematic to rely heavily on the WH brand. As more seek to reap the unsubstantiated benefits from listing they are, in turn, potentially diluting the “special” WH brand.

Method

Study context

In order to test the brand effectiveness of the UNESCO WH List, three cultural sites (Independence Hall, USA; Studenica Monastery, Serbia; Archaeological Site of Volubilis, Morocco) were selected. Independence Hall, listed in 1979, is located in Philadelphia, PA, USA. It is of great national importance as the site of the signing of the United States Declaration of Independence as well as the Constitution. It is listed under Criterion VI. Studenica Monastery, which is located in South-western Serbia, was

inscribed on the WH List in 1986 under the recommendation of what was then Yugoslavia. Following the Balkan Wars, Serbia succeeded to the WH Convention in 2001 and Studenica fell under its auspices. It is one of the oldest monasteries in Serbia, the site where the Serbian Orthodox Church was created, and it also houses the remains of the first kings of Serbia. It is listed under Criteria I, II, IV and VI. The Archaeological Site of Volubilis (hereafter referred to as Volubilis) is found in the province of Meknès El Menzeh, Morocco. Volubilis was founded in the third century BC as the capital of Mauritania and would later fall under Roman control. The town continued to exist, with evidence of Christian habitation followed at some point by conversion to Islam, and was briefly the Idrissid capital in the eighth century AD. It became part of the WH List in 1997 under Criteria II, III, IV and VI.

To be selected, the sites needed to fulfill specific requirements in terms of geographic position, level of human development and specificities of the cultural attraction. The sites were required to be set in geographically diverse locations in order to maximize differences in potential visitor origins, which in this case consisted of North America, Europe and North Africa. Furthermore, each site was required to be accessible to domestic and international tourists while simultaneously not being located in the most famous tourist locations within each country. Additionally, the sites were located in countries with different levels of human development, based on the United Nations Development Program's HDI. "The HDI was created to emphasize that people and their capabilities should be the ultimate criteria for assessing the development of a country, not economic growth alone" (UNDP, 2015). According to the UNDP (2015), the USA is more developed, Serbia moderately developed, and Morocco less developed. These criteria were used in order to observe if there were certain trends that overrode geographical or development-based factors. Additionally, the three sites were also required to fulfill certain site-specific requirements. Namely, they had to be listed under the first six UNESCO criteria (UNESCO, 2015), which are distinctly cultural, and have defined entry and exit points in order to ensure that all potential survey respondents had visited the site.

Survey instrument

In order to fully assess the impact of the WH status on tourist decisions to visit a specific site, it was determined, based on previous research methodologies (Dewar et al., 2012; Hall & Piggitt, 2001; Hardiman & Burgin, 2013; Yan & Morrison, 2008), that a survey was the most appropriate, with the questions developed in light of the existing literature. It should be noted that the data used in this work is part of a larger study. Awareness of the WH status was measured by two items: "I have heard of the UNESCO World Heritage List" and "I knew this site was on the UNESCO WH list prior to the visit," which, on the survey, were the first and second questions, respectively. These were measured using a yes/no option. A positive answer to the first question prompted a response to the second. If both responses were affirmative, the respondents were asked to respond to a set of five questions which were related to the influence of the WH brand on their decision to visit this specific site, their previous experience with WH sites, and whether or not they generally chose to visit WH sites. The responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree).

An additional section presented the 10 listing criteria and an additional 4 (protection, management, authenticity and integrity) and assessed, through the use of a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly agree). This section required respondents to indicate how much they agree that the site that they had just visited represented each of the criteria. Demographic and travelling characteristics were also measured. The surveys were available in English, Serbian, Arabic and French. The English survey was translated into French by a native speaker and then cross-checked by the researcher. As the researcher did not speak Serbian or Arabic, heritage academics that natively spoke the two languages translated the survey in collaboration with the researcher. The survey instrument can be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

Sampling, data collection and analysis

As there was no data in terms of average number of visitors to each site prior to commencing the research periods, a probability sampling technique could not be used. As a result, a convenience sampling method was chosen. This allowed for the surveying of visitors to the individual sites upon completion of their visit. These visitors were asked if they wished to fill in the survey, and there was a concerted effort to avoid any bias in the selection of individuals. As Richards (2010, p. 20) notes, “surveying all visitors enables an analysis to be made of the relationship between different visitor groups and to contrast motivations, behaviour and background of local residents and tourists”.

The sampling period began at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, PA, USA, from 31 July to 10 August 2013, followed by Studenica Monastery, Serbia, from 7 September to 21 September 2013, and ending with Volubilis, Morocco, from 7 October to 21 October 2013. Surveys were completed by the respondents in either English or the dominant language(s) of the country in which the site was located: English at Independence Hall; Serbian and English at Studenica Monastery; and English, French and Arabic at Volubilis. At both Studenica Monastery and the Archaeological Site of Volubilis, sampling occurred within the confines of the site itself, while permission at Independence Hall was given only for the area near to the exit gate, but outside of the security perimeter. In total, 771 surveys were collected across the three sites (See Table 1 for a site-by-site breakdown). In regards to Independence Hall, visitation numbers were available post-study, and it was found that 71,563 individuals visited the site in August 2013, which is used as the base month since more than 90% of the surveying occurred then (National Park Service, n.d.). As there were on average 2308 individuals at the site each day (approximately 25,393 over the 11-day period), the sample size of 396 usable surveys is found to have a confidence interval of 4.89 at a 95% confidence level. Reliable visitor statistics for the other two sites were not available. The sample size of 771 meets the requirements ($70 \times$ number of items used for clustering) for effective data-driven segmentation (Dolnicar, Grün, Leisch, & Schmidt, 2014).

The data from all three sites were pooled together to identify homogeneous visitor groups based on similarities in perceptions of the four criteria (protection, management, authenticity and integrity). The use of these criteria is supported by the positive qualities attributed to all WH sites by nature of the brand as a marker of quality and authenticity (Rakic & Chambers, 2007; Ryan & Silvanto, 2011). WH Criteria I–X were still assessed though they were deemed too specific to the individual sites, which are diverse in nature. Data were analyzed in three stages. In the first stage, similar to previous data-driven segmentation studies (Khoo-Lattimore & Prayag, 2015; Park & Yoon, 2009; Prayag, 2012; Sarigöllü & Huang, 2005), the raw scores were used to derive the segments using cluster analysis. The use of raw scores produces more accurate or detailed segmentation by preserving a greater degree of the original data (Dolnicar & Grun, 2008; Sheppard, 1996). Accordingly, a non-hierarchical K-means clustering algorithm was used to develop two-, three-, four- and five-cluster solutions. An examination of group membership and group sizes, as suggested in previous studies (Park & Yoon, 2009; Prayag & Hosany, 2014; Sarigöllü & Huang, 2005), confirmed the three-cluster solution as the most appropriate. In the second stage, the appropriateness of the three-cluster solution was further verified using discriminant analysis (Prayag & Hosany, 2014). In the final stage, the clusters were profiled on the basis of respondents’ prior knowledge of, and potential influence of, WH status and site-specific criteria, as well as demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Survey response rate by site.

Sites	Usable	Collected	Approached	Response rate
USA (Independence Hall)	396	401	472	85%
Serbia (Studenica Monastery)	104	105	109	96.3%
Morocco (Volubilis)	271	274	343	79.9%
Total	771	780	924	84.4% (average)

To assess for bias due to common-method variance (CMV), we employed Harman's single-factor test, which requires all of the variables being loaded in an exploratory factor analysis. Given that none of the factors accounted for more than 25% of the variance, it suggests that CMV is not a pervasive issue in this study (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986).

Results

Demographic profile of samples

The demographic profile of respondents for each individual site can be seen in Table 2. Except for the Archaeological site of Volubilis (Morocco), the sites had a higher percentage of male respondents. As expected, Independence Hall (USA) and Studenica Monastery (Serbia) had higher percentages of respondents from North America (77.6%) and Europe (92.9%), respectively. To identify significant differences between the demographic profiles of each site, chi-square tests were conducted. No significant differences were found between the sites on the basis of visitors' gender. There was a significant difference between the sites on the basis of residence of visitors ($\chi^2 = 237.64, p < 0.001$). The Independence Hall site attracted more local (12.7%) and rest of country visitors (60.8%) compared to the other sites. The Volubilis site attracted more visitors from abroad (86.7%) compared to the other two sites (see Table 2). As expected, the sites of Studenica Monastery (92.9%) and Volubilis (52.6%) attracted more visitors from Europe compared to the Independence Hall site, which attracted more visitors from North America (77.6%). This difference was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 444.14, p < 0.001$). There was also a significant difference between the sites on the basis of the age of visitors ($\chi^2 = 53.79, p < 0.001$). The site of Volubilis attracted older respondents (>60 years old, 24.2%) more than the other two sites, while the Independence Hall site attracted younger visitors (20–29 years old, 37.8%) more than the other two sites. A significant difference was also noted on the basis of travel party size ($\chi^2 = 46.95, p < 0.001$). Studenica Monastery attracted more solo travellers (11.8%) compared to the other two sites, while Independence Hall attracted (86.3%) a party size of between two and five visitors more than the other two sites. There was a significant difference between the three sites on the basis of the education level of visitors ($\chi^2 = 32.21, p < 0.001$). The Studenica Monastery attracted more visitors that had completed secondary school (20%) in comparison to the other two sites. The sites of Volubilis (41.9%) and Independence Hall (40.3%) attracted more visitors that had postgraduate qualifications (Masters/PhD) compared to Studenica Monastery (25%). The site of Volubilis attracted more retirees (21.1%) while the site of Independence Hall attracted more students (22.1%) compared to the other two sites. These differences were statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 63.32, p < 0.001$).

Identification of clusters based on WH site general criteria

As mentioned above, the three-cluster solution was chosen for interpretation given that it achieved the highest percentage of correct classification (97.6%) of the original grouped cases, using discriminant analysis, compared to the four-cluster (97.3%) and five-cluster (95.3%) solutions. From Table 3, it can be seen that Clusters 2 ($n = 203$) and 3 ($n = 447$) are larger in size in comparison to Cluster 1 ($n = 85$). Cluster 1 can be labeled as "Unpleased Visitors", given that this group tends to neither agree nor disagree that the sites were authentic ($M = 3.74$), while disagreeing that the sites were well protected ($M = 1.55$), well managed ($M = 1.68$) or maintained their integrity ($M = 2.52$). Cluster 2 was labeled "Undecided Visitors" given that this group agreed that the sites were authentic ($M = 4.15$) but neither agreed nor disagreed with the remaining three criteria. Cluster 3 was labeled "Pleased Visitors", given that this group agreed that the sites were well protected ($M = 4.46$), well managed ($M = 4.53$), authentic ($M = 4.53$) and maintained their integrity ($M = 4.56$).

Table 2. Demographic profile of sites.

Demographic characteristics	USA (Independence Hall)	Serbia (Studenica Monastery)	Morocco (Volubilis)	Total	χ^2 test, <i>p</i> -level
Gender					$\chi^2 = 3.64, p > 0.05$
Male	215 (54.7%)	55 (52.9%)	128 (47.2%)	398 (51.8%)	
Female	178 (45.3%)	49 (47.1%)	143 (52.8%)	370 (48.2%)	
Residence					$\chi^2 = 237.64, p < 0.001$
Local area	50 (12.7%)	10 (9.7%)	10 (3.7%)	70 (9.1%)	
Rest of country	239 (60.8%)	51 (49.5%)	26 (9.6%)	316 (41.2%)	
Abroad	104 (26.5%)	42 (40.8%)	235 (86.7%)	381 (49.7%)	
Region					$\chi^2 = 444.14, p < 0.001$
North America	301 (77.6%)	4 (4%)	36 (13.4%)	341 (45.2%)	
Europe	73 (18.8%)	92 (92.9%)	141 (52.6%)	306 (40.5%)	
Middle East	6 (1.5%)	0	5 (1.9%)	11 (1.5%)	
Asia	4 (1%)	3 (3%)	7 (2.6%)	14 (1.9%)	
Latin America	2 (.5%)	0	10 (3.7%)	12 (1.6%)	
Australia and Oceania	2 (.5%)	0	31 (11.6%)	33 (4.4%)	
Africa	0	0	38 (14.2%)	38 (5%)	
Age					$\chi^2 = 53.79, p < 0.001$
16–19	22 (5.6%)	2 (1.9%)	4 (1.5%)	28 (3.7%)	
20–29	149 (37.8%)	28 (27.2%)	68 (25.3%)	245 (32%)	
30–39	56 (14.2%)	25 (24.3%)	52 (19.3%)	133 (17.4%)	
40–49	58 (14.7%)	20 (19.4%)	29 (10.8%)	107 (14%)	
50–59	73 (18.5%)	11 (10.7%)	51 (19%)	135 (17.6%)	
≥60	36 (9.1%)	17 (16.5%)	65 (24.2%)	118 (15.4%)	
Travel party size					$\chi^2 = 46.95, p < 0.001$
Solo traveler	25 (6.3%)	12 (11.8%)	9 (3.3%)	46 (6%)	
2–5	340 (86.3%)	71 (69.6%)	208 (77%)	619 (80.8%)	
6–10	27 (6.9%)	8 (7.8%)	33 (12.2%)	68 (8.9%)	
> 10	2 (.5%)	11 (10.8%)	20 (7.4%)	33 (4.3%)	
Education level					$\chi^2 = 32.21, p < 0.001$
Primary school	5 (1.3%)	2 (2%)	1 (.4%)	8 (1%)	
Secondary school	36 (9.2%)	20 (20%)	26 (9.6%)	82 (10.8%)	
Vocational education	25 (6.4%)	4 (4%)	35 (13%)	64 (8.4%)	
Bachelors	168 (42.9%)	49 (49%)	95 (35.2%)	312 (40.9%)	
Masters/PhD	158 (40.3%)	25 (25%)	113 (41.9%)	296 (38.8%)	
Employment					$\chi^2 = 63.32, p < 0.001$
Employee	221 (56.1%)	54 (52.4%)	136 (50.4%)	411 (53.6%)	
Self-employed	44 (11.2%)	16 (15.5%)	47 (17.4%)	107 (14%)	
Retired	26 (6.6%)	12 (11.7%)	57 (21.1%)	95 (12.4%)	
Full-time parent	8 (2%)	0	2 (.7%)	10 (1.3%)	
Student	87 (22.1%)	14 (13.6%)	23 (8.5%)	124 (16.2%)	
Unemployed	8 (2%)	7 (6.8%)	5 (1.9%)	20 (2.6%)	

Table 3. Cluster analysis results.

Site characteristics	Cluster means		
	Cluster 1: Unpleased Visitors (n = 85)	Cluster 2: Undecided Visitors (n = 203)	Cluster 3: Pleased Visitors (n = 447)
Protection	1.55	3.06	4.46
Management	1.68	3.09	4.53
Authenticity	3.74	4.15	4.53
Integrity	2.52	3.69	4.56

The influence of previous knowledge on clusters

To identify the influence of prior knowledge about the WH status of the sites, the clusters were profiled on the basis of two questions (I have heard of the UNESCO WH List and I knew this site was on the UNESCO WH List prior to my visit). As can be seen in Table 4, chi-square tests revealed significant differences between the clusters and previous knowledge of WH status ($\chi^2 = 41.99$, $p < 0.001$). The cluster of "Pleased Visitors" had a higher proportion of visitors (38.3%) that had not heard about the UNESCO WH List compared to "Unpleased Visitors" (14.1%) and "Undecided Visitors" (16.7%). Only those who answered affirmatively to the previous question were required to respond to the second question. The results of the chi-square test revealed a significant difference between the clusters on the basis of visitors' knowledge that the site was on the UNESCO WH List prior to their visit ($\chi^2 = 28.57$, $p < 0.001$). Of those who had heard about the UNESCO WH List, the "Unpleased Visitor" cluster had a higher percentage (76.7%) of those who knew the site was on UNESCO WH List prior to their visit compared to the cluster of "Undecided Visitors" (66.3%) and "Pleased Visitors" (47.1%). The cluster of "Pleased Visitors" had a higher percentage (52.9%) of those that did not know that the site was on UNESCO WH List prior to their visit compared to the "Undecided Visitors" (33.7%) and "Unpleased Visitors" (23.3%).

All those that noted that they had been aware of the site's WH status were further asked to respond to five questions which focused on the influence of the WH brand on the respondent's decision to visit this specific site, their previous experience with WH sites, and whether or not they frequently chose to visit WH sites. Based on the results of a one-way ANOVA test, a significant difference in means was found in relation to two of the five questions. The first question that tested significant was "The UNESCO World Heritage status was one of my reasons for visiting this site" ($F(2, 289) = 3.952$, $p = .02$). The Tukey *post hoc* test results indicated that the "Pleased Visitors" ($M = 2.83$) had, on average, higher levels of disagreement in relation to this statement in comparison to the "Undecided Visitors" ($M = 3.20$). The second question that tested significantly different was "This is my first visit to a World Heritage Site" ($F(2, 283) = 5.124$, $p = .007$). Based on the results of the *post hoc* test, the "Pleased Visitors" ($M = 2.03$) had, on average, lower levels of disagreement in comparison with the "Undecided Visitors" ($M = 1.60$) and "Unpleased Visitors" ($M = 1.57$).

The influence of site-specific criteria on clusters

In order to analyze the influence of site-specific criteria on the clusters, initially factor analysis was undertaken on the 10 original UNESCO criteria to reduce them to a more manageable set. A KMO measure of sampling adequacy (0.858) and a Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2 = 3332.06$, $p < 0.001$)

Table 4. One-way ANOVA profiling clusters in relation to significant motivation and previous experience.

		N	M	Post hoc results
The UNESCO WH status was one of my reasons to visit.	I. Unpleased Visitors	56	2.893	II and III ($p < .05$)
	II. Undecided Visitors	108	3.204	
	III. Pleased Visitors	128	2.828	
This is my first visit to a WH site.	I. Unpleased Visitors	53	1.566	I and III ($p < .05$) II and III ($p < .05$)
	II. Undecided Visitors	108	1.602	
	III. Pleased Visitors	125	2.032	

confirmed that the data was appropriate for factorization. Based on a varimax rotation with eigenvalues greater than one, two factors were extracted (see Table 5). Factor 1 is composed predominantly of natural criteria (Criteria VII–X) except for Criterion V (be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land use or sea use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change). The loading of Criterion V on factor 1 can possibly be attributed to the wording of the Criterion itself, which suggests that the criteria deal with human interaction with the environment. As such factor 1 can be labeled as “Environmental Criteria”. The items loading on factor 2 pertain specifically to cultural criteria (Criteria I, II, III, IV and VI), and thus was labeled “Cultural Criteria”. The total percentage of variance explained by the two factors was 62.57%, and both factors were internally consistent (Cronbach’s $\alpha > 0.7$).

The composite scores of the two factors were used to identify significant differences between the clusters on those factors. ANOVA with Tukey’s *post hoc* comparisons revealed that the clusters were not different on the basis of the environmental factor ($F(2, 714) = 0.306, p = .737$). However, a significant difference existed between the clusters on the cultural factor ($F(2, 716) = 21.04, p < 0.001$). The *post hoc* comparisons revealed significant differences between each cluster. The cluster of “Unpleased Visitors” had on average significantly lower ($M = 3.92$) agreement levels on this factor compared to both the cluster of “Pleased Visitors” ($M = 4.33$) and “Undecided Visitors” ($M = 4.12$). The cluster of “Pleased Visitors” had on average a significantly higher agreement level with the cultural factor compared to the cluster of “Undecided Visitors”.

The influence of demographics on clusters

Finally, the demographic and travelling characteristics were used to profile the clusters. No significant differences existed between the clusters on the basis of the gender, age and education level of respondents. Chi-square tests (see Table 6) revealed significant differences between the clusters on residence ($\chi^2 = 91.91, p < 0.001$), region ($\chi^2 = 112.09, p < 0.001$), travel party size ($\chi^2 = 13.79, p = 0.032$) and employment ($\chi^2 = 25.51, p = 0.004$). The cluster of “Pleased Visitors” had a higher percentage of visitors from rest of the country (53.7%) compared to the cluster of “Undecided Visitors” (24.8%) and “Unpleased Visitors” (20%). The cluster of “Unpleased Visitors” had a higher percentage of visitors from abroad (74.1%) compared to the other two clusters. The cluster of “Unpleased Visitors” (14.6%) had a higher percentage of visitors from Africa compared to the two other clusters (see Table 6). The cluster of “Pleased Visitors” had a higher percentage of visitors from North America (60.5%) compared to the two other clusters. The cluster of “Unpleased Visitors” had a higher percentage (84.7%) of those travelling in a party size of between two and five compared to the other two clusters. The cluster of “Pleased Visitors” had a higher percentage of students (18.6%) compared to

Table 5. Factor analysis results.

	Environmental criteria	Cultural criteria	Communalities
Criterion IX	.916	.020	.840
Criterion X	.894	-.014	.799
Criterion VIII	.839	.138	.723
Criterion VII	.721	.353	.644
Criterion V	.579	.491	.576
Criterion III	.005	.782	.612
Criterion II	.095	.768	.599
Criterion I	.193	.691	.515
Criterion IV	.335	.662	.551
Criterion VI	.017	.650	.423
Eigenvalues	4.265	2.017	
% of Variance	42.652	20.172	
Cronbach’s α	.878	.777	

Note: Bold figures indicate significant loadings.

Table 6. Profiling of clusters by demographic characteristics.

		Cluster 1: Unpleased Visitors	Cluster 2: Undecided Visitors	Cluster 3: Pleased Visitors
Residence	Local area	5 (5.9%)	12 (5.9%)	52 (11.7%)
	Rest of country	17 (20%)	50 (24.8%)	239 (53.7%)
	Abroad	63 (74.1%)	140 (69.3%)	154 (34.6%)
Region	North America	14 (17.1%)	54 (26.9%)	266 (60.5%)
	Europe	45 (54.9%)	106 (52.7%)	135 (30.7%)
	Middle East	1 (1.2%)	4 (2%)	5 (1.4%)
	Asia	1 (1.2%)	7 (3.5%)	4(0.9%)
	Latin America	4 (4.9%)	3 (1.5%)	4 (0.9%)
	Australia and Oceania	5 (6.10%)	15 (7.5%)	13 (3%)
	Africa	12 (14.6%)	12 (6%)	13 (3%)
	Travel party size	Solo traveler	4 (4.7%)	11 (5.5%)
	2–5 travelers	72 (84.7%)	156 (78%)	369 (82.7%)
	6–10 travelers	7 (8.2%)	16 (8%)	40 (9%)
	> 10 travelers	2 (2.4%)	17 (8.5%)	11 (2.5%)
Employment	Employed	44 (52.4%)	109 (54%)	244 (54.7%)
	Self-employed	14 (16.7%)	29 (14.4%)	60 (13.5%)
	Retired	19 (22.6%)	32 (15.8%)	39 (8.7%)
	Full-time parent	1 (1.2%)	1 (0.5%)	6 (1.3%)
	Student	6 (7.1%)	26 (12.9%)	83 (18.6%)
	Unemployed	0	5 (2.5%)	14 (3.1%)

the other two clusters. The cluster of “Unpleased Visitors” had a higher percentage of retirees (22.6%) compared to the two other clusters.

Discussion

Explicit efforts to market the WH dimension of sites will only be effective if the WH List can be proven to function as a tourist attractor. This is particularly important as there are few studies that assess WH brand awareness and its impact on tourists’ decision to visit through primary, demand-side studies (Marcotte & Bourdeau, 2006; Wall-Reinius & Fredman, 2007; Yan & Morrison, 2008). Of the previous works, two were undertaken in more developed countries, Sweden (Wall-Reinius & Fredman, 2007) and Canada (Marcotte & Bourdeau, 2006) and one in a moderately developed nation, China (Yan & Morrison, 2008). Additionally, only one of these (Marcotte & Bourdeau, 2006) specifically undertook their study at a cultural WH site. Therefore, this work is the first of its type to be undertaken at any type of site in a less developed nation, at a cultural site in a moderately developed nation, and also in an African country. Furthermore, it was the first to utilize a cluster analysis to analyze cross-site trends in relation to awareness levels and motivation, regardless of context.

When the survey data from all three sites was combined, three distinct clusters emerged: Pleased, Undecided and Unpleased Visitors. Unpleased Visitors were more predominantly retirees, coming from abroad, and travelling in groups of two to five individuals. Pleased Visitors were more likely to be domestic visitors (though not from the local area), from North America, and were more predominantly students than the other two clusters. The Undecided Visitors had no significant distinguishing demographic factors. In general, Unpleased Visitors, who were the smallest of the three clusters, had a higher probability of knowing not only what the WH List is but also that the site they were visiting was inscribed on the list. Undecided Visitors were less aware of both the WH List and the inscription status of the site. The lowest level of awareness was found among the Pleased Visitors, of which almost two-fifths had never heard of WH. Additionally, of those that had heard of the WH List, fewer than half knew that the site was on the list. However, while there is obviously a high level of awareness of WH among a specific group of tourists, it did not appear to have any strong positive impact on any of the groups’ choice to visit the site.

Based on these results, it becomes clear that there is a specific group of individuals who have a heightened awareness of the WH List, which supports the findings of King and Halpenny (2014). However, there is no evidence that this has any impact on their site-selection process. This contrasts with past studies which noted that there was a positive, albeit small, influence of WH site knowledge on destination selection (Marcotte & Bourdeau, 2006; Yan & Morrison, 2008). Therefore, WH designation was not a strong attractor at any of the sites, indicating that there was no alteration based on the development level of the nation or the geographical location of the site. Based on these results, the WH brand can perhaps be better understood in terms of it having a placebo effect.

The word placebo is most commonly used in the medical field where it is defined by its connection to drugs, which “[produce] an effect on the body, while a placebo primarily works on the mind and imagination of the patient” (Szawarski, 2004, p. 58). In relation to marketing, a placebo can be understood as “a brand that claims to have certain properties that it does not actually possess and, through such claims, changes the consumer’s behavior” (Ling, Shieh, & Liao, 2012, p. 265). McDowell and Dick (2002), in their study of news brands, found that brand awareness can result in positive appraisals of the product regardless of actual quality, an insight echoed by Hsiao, Hsu, Chu, and Fang (2014) in their study of consumer product brands. These trends are also evident in relation to WH, but it is important to note that WH tourism is not merely a service product as there is a cultural aspect that needs to be considered when discussing its brand impacts.

Martínez’s (2014) analysis of poet name recognition is one of the few studies dealing specifically with cultural brand awareness. His analysis revealed that “the name of the author significantly influences the subjective evaluation that is made of the work” (Author’s translation, Martínez, 2014, p. 142). In a similar fashion, WH, as a cultural brand, is often perceived to be of higher quality due in part to its name and its perceived “global” significance. Interestingly, however, these placebo effect trends are evident not among the tourist consumers but instead among politicians, site managers and local businesses, who often view WH as a brand imbued with the power to attract tourists (Ashworth & van der Aa, 2006; Hall & Piggin, 2002; Leask, 2006). Nonetheless, as has been seen in this work, this has been proven to be untrue. Therefore, assertions as to its significance for tourism may be more bound up with local and national politics and the leverage of public funds by business and sectional interests, including conservation and tourism groups, than evidence-based policy-making (Buckley, 2004; Hall, 1992).

Conclusions

The WH brand has been praised as a method to increase tourism in a given area, which is especially important for developing nations (Millar, 2006; Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). However, there has been no site-level research undertaken in less developed nations to date that specifically gauges visitor awareness of the WH brand. Additionally, prior to this work, there had been no studies that tested the impact of the WH brand at cultural sites which were located in diverse geographical, cultural and developmental contexts. Thus, the results from this research are distinct in that they were found to apply to diverse sites with different visitors at different times.

While the analysis of the literature suggested that measurement of the WH brand’s impact produces varied results, the significant findings in this study were fairly consistent across all the sites. The WH brand itself was not strongly indicated as a motivation to visit any of the three sites. Furthermore, though a specific group that was more aware of the WH brand was found to exist, in general, they did not appear to plan their visits based on the WH brand. As WH listing was not a strong attractor at any of the sites, this work has suggested that the WH brand functions as a placebo. More specifically, those who promote the sites for tourism development may perceive the brand as a functional tourist attractor without, as previously mentioned, appropriate evidential proof. Thus, based on the tourism importance ascribed to WH listing by tourism and heritage conservation proponents (see Berni, 2005; Buckley, 2004; Hall, 1992) in comparison with the results found in this study, the WH brand’s placebo effect could result in long-term problems for both the site and those whose livelihoods are

dependent on tourism, especially in areas that are developed specifically based on the listing of a site. This study, therefore, does not deny at all the extremely significant heritage conservation role that WH listing provides, but it does suggest that there needs to be much greater caution with respect to the role of WH as a brand that attracts tourists.

While the results of this study prove interesting, there are some limitations to the work that need to be acknowledged. The most notable of these is in relation to the relatively small sample size, which was impacted not only by the time spent surveying at each site but also by a lack of visitation data necessary to appropriately determine a required sample size. Indeed, a significant long-term issue in undertaking research at many WH sites is that not only are accurate site-specific visitor data not maintained but that the perceptions of management authorities with respect to the nature and extent of site visitation may be significantly different from on the ground reality (Hall & Piggin 2001). Perhaps the largest limitation of this study is its applicability to other cultural WH sites. As sites and cultural contexts can vary significantly, it is difficult to generalize. However, some of these limitations can be overcome in future research, most notably by expanding the research to more sites as well as extending the surveying period. Future research should also seek to replicate the site-specific studies after the initial data collection as part of longitudinal studies in order to determine if there have been any significant alterations in terms of the visitor population.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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