

# THE BRAND EQUITY AND VALUE OF DOLPHINS AS A CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ICON: A CASE STUDY OF MAPUTO NATIONAL PARK

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2023



**TREES**  
Tourism Research in Economics  
Environs and Society

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VISIT US

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## About TREES

This innovative tourism research unit, Tourism Research in Economics, Environs and Society, has existed for over 20 years. The Unit forms part of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences at North-West University. Our team of researchers is well known on both a national and international level. In the team of 21 researchers, we are proud to have 9 NRF-rated team members, 7 full professors and 7 extraordinary researchers.

Never before has research been as vital as it is today. With tourism growing in importance in the country, we are relevant with the type of studies we conduct and the quality thereof. Our research focus aligns with the goals and objectives of the National and Provincial departments by analysing economic, environmental and community (society) issues. Specific topics related to marketing and management. Globally, the tourism industry has changed over the last few years, and South Africa's situation is no different. Research is needed to ensure that the tourism industry will return to its former position (even be in a better position) and continue to be one of the economic drivers in this country.

Our contribution to the private sector is of note since it guides decisions and gives strategic direction to tourism products. We also adapt themes and focuses where necessary to address the specific needs of the industry and or scholarly communities. Our post-graduate programme (Magister and Ph.D. students) directly contributes to skill development and educating students who can develop the industry with a positive outlook. I am excited about the current research projects and the difference they can make in the industry and scholarly environment.

We publish in both national and international accredited journals. In 2019 our highest number of articles in the history of TREES was published, an exceptional achievement. Several of our staff serve on editorial boards or act as reviewers for reputable journals. The TREES team members have also received many accolades, such as Women in Science Awards, Most Productive Senior Researcher at NWU, Most Productive Junior Researcher at NWU, one staff member served on the Research Forum of the Minister of Tourism, and three of our Master students received the Vice-Chancellors award for best Magister students.

### ***Striving towards excellence***

#### ***Our research outputs: 2012-2023***



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Wildlife species around the world have been used to brand specific areas, such as national parks and natural protected areas, to promote conservation and sustainable wildlife tourism (Ariya et al., 2020; Rop, 2015). The strategy of wildlife-based branding is an important tool as it can support environmental protection, economic development, community pride, and public education about the value and vulnerability of wildlife (Forristal and Lehto, 2009). Developing countries in particular can benefit from the application of wildlife-based branding, as they often face important issues such as human-wildlife conflicts and a lack of resources to integrate conservation into sustainable economic development (Chibaya, 2013). One of the critical facets of wildlife-based branding is that it can promote sustainable wildlife tourism, which can contribute to all levels of sustainable development (environmental, social and economic) (Gnanapala, 2017).

Research has shown that terrestrial wildlife species, such as the rhino and the lion, have been used to brand tourism destinations and protect threatened species, with positive outcomes as described above (Ariya et al., 2020; Hood, 2008; Kihima, 2014; Rop, 2015). However, scientists have advocated for greater attention towards determining the brand value of various marine wildlife species, such as the great white shark, to assist in the conservation of such species, raise public awareness and stimulate the growth of sustainable tourism to counteract the adverse effects of human impacts like fishing (Lucrezi & Gennari, 2021).

The Maputo National Park (MNP) is a vast national park located in southern Mozambique, which was proclaimed in December 2021. It incorporates in part the Ponta do Ouro Partial Marine Reserve (PPMR) (678 km<sup>2</sup>), which extends 86 km from the border with South Africa (Kosi Bay) to Maputo Bay, stretching up to three nautical miles offshore and 100 m inland. Declared in 2009 and facilitated by the Peace Parks Foundation (PPF), the PPMR forms part of the Lubombo Transfrontier Conservation Area (LTFCA), together with the Maputo Special Reserve (MSR) in Mozambique (which is now also part of the MNP), and the Maputaland MPA and iSimangaliso Wetland Park in South Africa. The LTFCA was proposed and is managed by PPF as a facilitator of transfrontier conservation areas (TFCAs) across southern Africa (Symons, 2018). The PPMR is under review by UNESCO for inclusion in its tentative list of properties to be considered for World Heritage site nomination.

The vastness of the PPMR hosts a diversity of ecosystems, from coral reefs and the pelagic zone to intertidal rocky shores, mangrove forests and sandy beaches. While the PPMR touches many coastal communities, the focus of this study was on the village of Ponta do Ouro, which is the southernmost, most populated and best-developed village in the PPMR. Ponta do Ouro's economy primarily depends on tourism, particularly scuba diving, marine mammal tours, recreational fishing, surfing, and beach-based tourism and recreation (Lucrezi et al., 2019).

The LTFCA allows the movement of dolphin species, including the bottlenose dolphin, humpback dolphin and spinner dolphin; this enables a thriving marine mammal tourism industry in the PPMR alongside scuba diving tourism (Lucrezi et al., 2019; Rocha et al., 2022). Ponta do Ouro represents a location where tourists are allowed to partake in swim-with dolphin tours, a unique activity regulated by the PPMR's authority and the only two marine mammal tour operators present in the village (Rocha et al., 2020). The activity is particularly popular among tourists from South Africa since swim-with-dolphin tourism is not allowed in South Africa (DFFE, 2008). Additionally, one of the swim-with-dolphin tourism operators in Ponta do Ouro offers alternative forms of tourism revolving around dolphins, including volunteer tourism, where people can engage in participatory research and conservation activities (Cilliers, 2022). Despite the popularity of dolphins and swim-with-dolphin tourism in the PPMR, the newly declared MNP seemingly focuses

its marketing strategy on attracting tourism for sighting terrestrial species like the elephant and marine species like the loggerhead turtle, which has always been and remains a symbol of the PPMR and its vision for marine conservation (PPF, 2022).

Destination branding using wildlife species is an important mechanism to promote benefits for areas where tourism and development can be integrated, especially developing countries and protected areas (Ariya et al., 2020; Chibaya, 2013; Forristal and Lehto, 2009; Gnanapala, 2017; Rop, 2015). While terrestrial wildlife species, especially charismatic ones, are often used for destination branding, marine species can benefit from more attention for the same purpose (Lucrezi & Gennari, 2021). This is particularly important in the wake of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030), which calls for efforts to support ocean conservation and sustainable development through the Blue Economy (McLean, 2018). The PPMR is a large marine reserve that was recently incorporated into the newly proclaimed MNP in Mozambique. The MNP's governing authorities are very ambitious concerning conservation and development goals, as they aim to reach specific conservation targets while simultaneously promoting sustainable economic development through eco-tourism and community participation (PPF, 2022). The MNP hosts many important marine ecosystems and wildlife species, which can be deployed in properly planned marketing strategies to attract responsible tourism to the Park (Lucrezi et al., 2019). However, at present, it seems that the potential for this deployment is yet to be fully tapped since the Park is still in its infancy, and so are marketing strategies based on the brand value of the many charismatic wildlife species and related tourism activities (e.g. safaris, scuba diving, marine mammal tourism) that the Park hosts (PPF, 2022). Dolphins and swim-with-dolphin tourism are unique offerings of the MNP, especially since they are well-regulated and neighbouring South Africa cannot offer the same offerings (Rocha et al., 2022). While the MNP uses emblematic wildlife species like the elephant and the marine turtle in branding its image, the brand value of dolphins to promote the MNP as a responsible wildlife tourism destination can offer insight into the more significant potential of the MNP as a conservation site and a tourism destination.

## **2. RESEARCH AIM AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This project aimed to evaluate the perceived brand equity and value of dolphins as a competitive product for tourism in the MNP. The anticipated outcome is a brand framework to effectively measure tourist perceptions of the MNP as a dolphin-based tourism destination to effectively promote and market dolphins and swim-with-dolphin tourism as a sustainable product for the MNP that can promote development and conservation.

### **2.1 Consumer-Based Brand Equity**

Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) refers to the value placed on a brand, derived primarily from the consumers' attitude towards the brand – based on the attributes and the overall experience associated with the brand (Christodoulides et al., 2015; Cunningham, 2018). CBBE is a multi-dimensional construct (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2010), and according to some of the literature (Heding et al., 2009; Wood, 2000), there are primarily two approaches to evaluating brand equity: the accounting/firm approach (focusing on the economic/financial value), and the consumer-oriented approach (focusing on the qualitative aspects of value). Within the context of dolphin-based tourism branding, the consumer-oriented approach to brand equity is most pertinent as it considers brand equity as a measure of the brand attachment between the brand and the consumer (tourist) based on the strength of the associations and beliefs held of the brand by the consumer (Lasser et al., 1995; Wood, 2000). To this end, Aaker's (1996) seminal work posits that brand equity may be evaluated based on five key bases: brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand association and other related brand assets. Thus, akin to conventional brands, the MNP's dolphin-based tourism brand equity may

be predicated on crucial aspects such as brand awareness and the brand associations that dolphins as tourism brand products espouse within the tourist market (Christodoulides et al., 2015; Speed et al., 2015).

## 2.2 Consumer Perceived Value

Consumer perceived value (CPV) refers to the overall perceptual assessment of the utility of a product or service from the consumer's perspective based on the product/service received concerning what is given in exchange (Choi et al., 2018; Petrick, 2002). CPV is considered to be an important measure in the determination of competitive advantage (Chang & Tseng, 2013; Petrick, 2002), and some authors (Sanchez-Fernandez & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2009) contend that perceived value supersedes the significance of customer satisfaction and quality in predicting consumer behaviour. According to Choi et al. (2018), there are essentially two approaches to assessing CPV, the unidimensional (focusing on the economic utility of brands) and the multidimensional (focusing on social, functional and emotional aspects of brands) approach. Within the dolphin-based tourism context, the multidimensional approach to CPV is the most appropriate for determining the antecedents of consumer perceived value as it goes beyond the economic utility of dolphins as a tourism product in potentially explaining consumer (tourist) behaviour (Choi et al., 2018). Thus, within the context of the proposed study, the multidimensional approach to CPV will consider key antecedents such as the social, functional and emotional value of human brands, which are multi-dimensional. Notably, as an additional dimension to CPV, the proposed project will also measure tourists' perceived conservation value of dolphins (Capmourteres & Anand, 2016).

## 2.3 Operationalisation

The brand equity and value of dolphins were operationalised as a tourism product offering within the MNP's tourism context. Table 1 summarises the operationalisation of CBBE and CVP within dolphin-based tourism in the MNP.



**Table 1: Operationalisation of CBBE and CVP of dolphins within the tourism context**

Latent variable	Adapted Definition	Source adapted from
<b>Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) of dolphins</b>		
<b>Dolphin awareness</b>	The customer's knowledge, and the potency of dolphins in the customer's mindset.	Aaker (1996); Hietajarvi (2012)
<b>Dolphin recognition/recall</b>	The ability of the consumer to remember dolphins based on their familiarity or experience with dolphins or reference from other consumers about them.	Hietajarvi (2012)
<b>Dolphin favourability</b>	The positive associations the consumer attributes to dolphins.	Pappu et al. (2005)
<b>Dolphin uniqueness/personality</b>	Dolphin characteristics that differentiate them from other marine animals.	Gill and Darwa (2010)
<b>Dolphin loyalty</b>	The deeply held attachment to the dolphins is characterised by the intention to consume/patronise dolphin tourism products.	Pappu et al. (2005)
<b>Dolphin brand leadership/endorsements</b>	Dolphins as an attractive heuristic cue for marketing a corporate product or service.	McCormick (2016)
<b>Dolphin association</b>	The attitude of the consumer (tourist) towards dolphins is based on the qualities that consumers link the dolphins with.	Hietajarvi (2012)
<b>Consumer Perceived Value (CPV) of dolphins</b>		
<b>Economic Value of Dolphins</b>	Value perception of the dolphins is based on the associated primarily financial sacrifice the consumer must make.	Sanchez-Fernandez and Iniesta-Binillo (2009)
<b>Functional Value of Dolphins</b>	The utility level of the dolphins concerning alternative brands.	Maurya and Mishra (2012)
<b>Social Value of Dolphins</b>	The dolphin and its relevance to the consumer's willingness to please others and be socially accepted.	
<b>Emotional Value of Dolphins</b>	Dolphins as choices that are based on emotion and/or aesthetics.	
<b>Conservation Value of Dolphins</b>	The more general idea and goal of prioritising conservation efforts.	Capmourteres and Anand (2016)

### 3. METHOD OF RESEARCH AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research followed a quantitative approach where self-administered questionnaires were distributed to visitors to Ponta do Ouro. Convenience sampling was used, and visitors were approached at the beach, swim-with-dolphin centres (two) and dive centres (five). Sampling was carried out from 12 to 21 April 2023. The questionnaires were distributed by five trained fieldworkers who approached potential participants, explained the purpose of the research to them (also with the aid of the informed consent letter), and asked if they were willing to participate in the survey. Respondents were not forced to participate and did not receive any compensation for their participation. The respondents were provided ample time to complete the questionnaires, after which the fieldworkers retrieved the questionnaires. A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed, and 245 were completed.

To provide a profile of the participants, various sociodemographic questions were asked, such as year of birth (open-ended), gender (open-ended) and level of education (close-ended). Sociodemographic questions are necessary as the variables they represent are known to influence the main variables under investigation. The sociodemographic questions were followed by the main questions on brand equity and the perceived value of dolphins. These questions were close-ended and scaled.

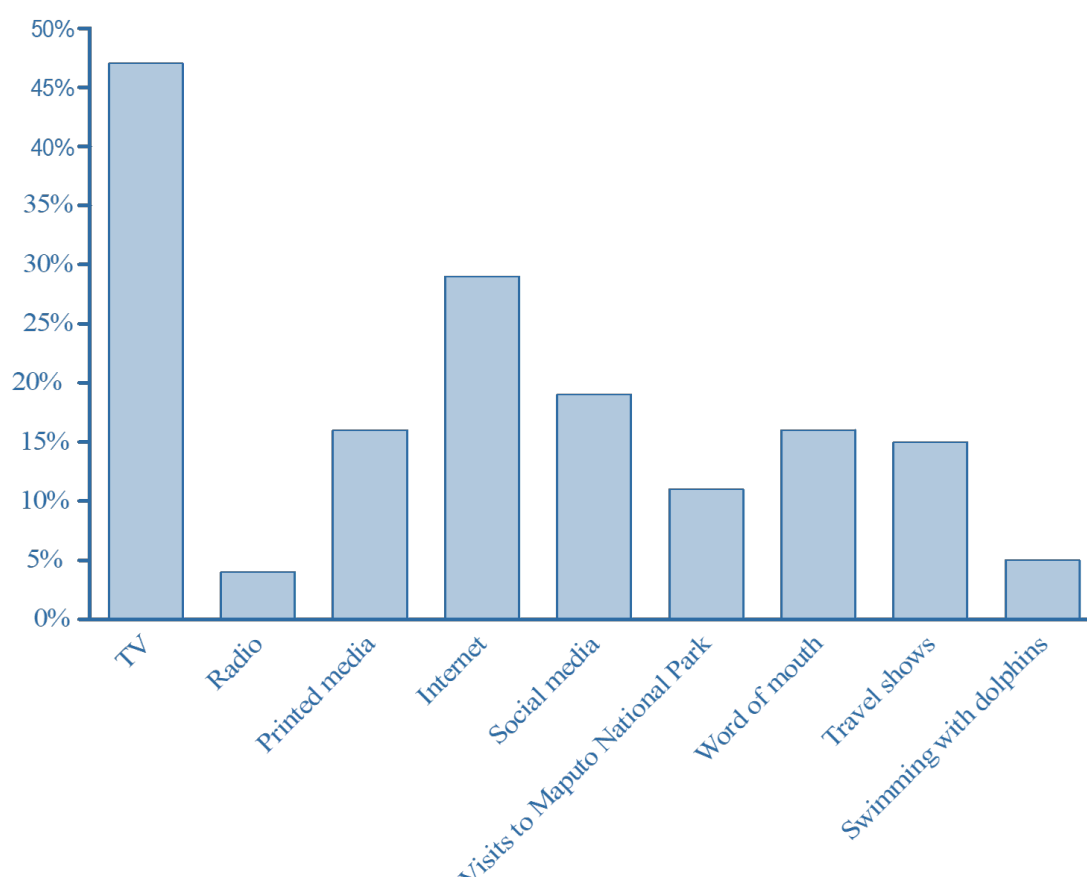
The data were analysed using programmes such as TIBCO Statistica. Analyses included basic descriptive statistics (e.g. frequency tables); exploratory factor analysis and reliability tests; structural equation modelling; and regression analysis.

The following ethical considerations were laid out for this research:

1. The research was approved by ANAC – Administração Nacional das Áreas de Conservação (permit number 04/0/2023) and the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences (F-EMS) at the North-West University (NWU-00559-23-A4).
2. The study did not target any vulnerable groups or underage people (<18). The study targeted visitors to Ponta do Ouro intercepted at the beach, swim-with-dolphin centres and scuba dive centres. The participants in this study did not receive incentives.
3. All questionnaires were accompanied by a cover letter and a standard verbal introduction by the fieldworkers. The questionnaire included copyright details and an ethical clearance number.
4. By agreeing to participate in the research, the objectives of which were always outlined upon invitation, the participants provided informed consent. They were free to leave the research at any moment. No unnecessary data were collected. No data mining was performed.
5. Concerning the handling of the participants' data at any phase during this study, there was no occasion in which the identity of the participants was made known. All data were treated anonymously. No sensitive data were requested throughout the research, respecting the participants' privacy. The data were handled according to national laws on privacy, following all national POPI Act rules and regulations as well as Universities of SA Guidelines.
6. Five trained fieldworkers collected the data.
7. There was no direct benefit to participating in this study. However, the information obtained from this study will assist with drafting a positive destination image for the MNP, based on the value of dolphins as a conservation icon and a tourism product.
8. The results of this study will be used for academic purposes and will be available to the wider public through scientific publications.
9. The researchers will store the data in the appropriate data repositories of the research unit at North-West University. The data will remain the property of North-West University.

## 4. PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

A total of 75 marine mammal tourists, 78 scuba divers and 92 general visitors completed the questionnaire survey. Marine mammal tourists were female in a higher proportion (58%), while other visitors especially divers were male in a higher proportion (57-63%). Marine mammal tourists were on average 43 years old, a few years older than the other groups. Their origin (56%) and that of divers (45%) was mainly South Africa followed by Mozambique and other countries, while beach visitors were mainly from Mozambique (45%), followed by South Africa and other countries. Marine mammal tourists were the most educated, with 72% having tertiary education qualifications. The remaining categories still had higher proportions of people with tertiary education than high school education. The favourite animal to see in the Maputo National Park was the dolphin for 35% of marine mammal tourists and 13% of divers and other visitors. Other favourite animals included elephants and sharks (mentioned mainly by the divers). The participants learned about dolphins through TV programmes, followed by the internet, social media, word of mouth, and previous visits to the Maputo National Park (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Frequencies of respondents who became acquainted with dolphins in different ways

## 5. CONSUMER-BASED BRAND EQUITY OF DOLPHINS

The participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements related to the CBBE of dolphins, where the scale of choices went from strongly disagreeing (1) to strongly agreeing (5). Figure 2 shows the response frequencies provided by the participants in answering the questions.

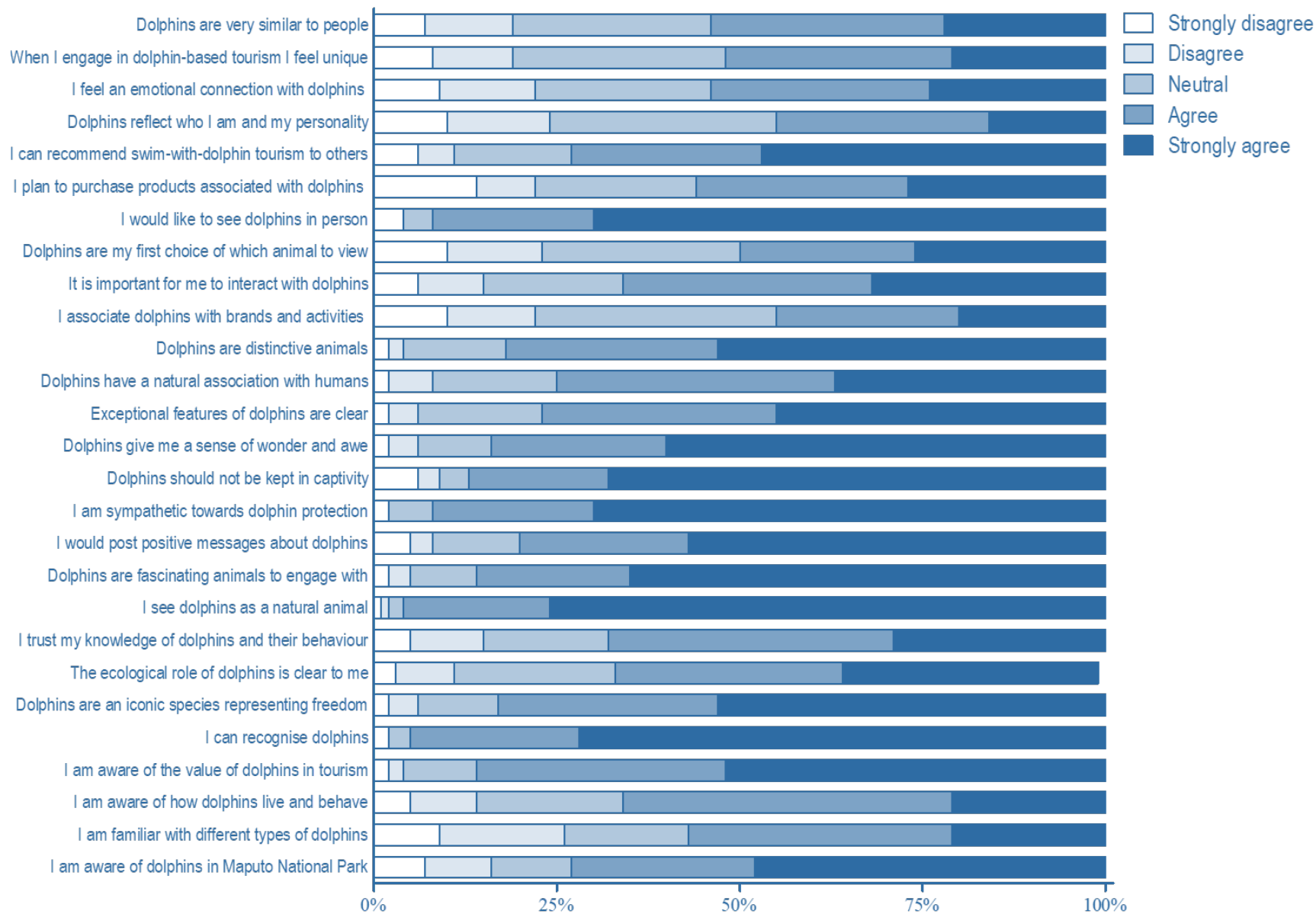


Figure 2: Response frequencies regarding CBBE of dolphins

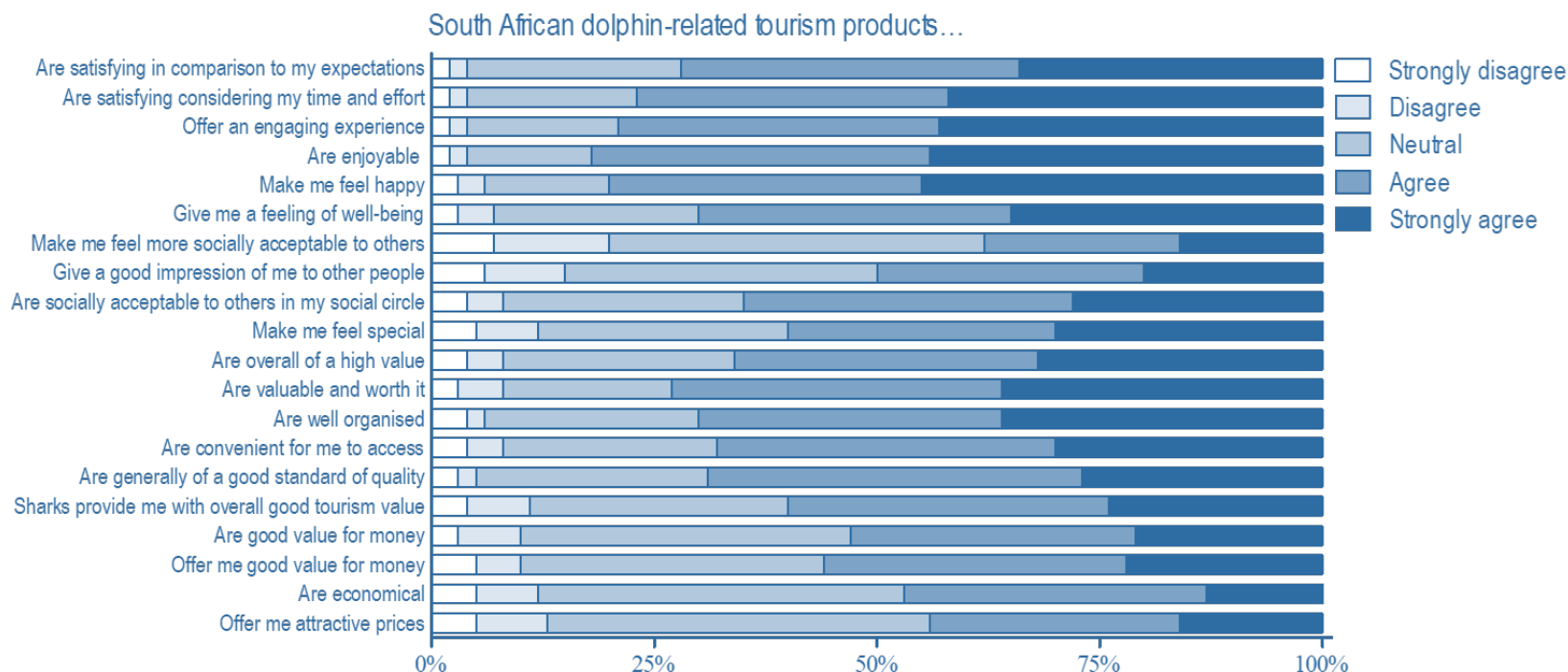
The frequencies in Figure 2 show that the participants in this study had good levels of awareness, recognition and recall of dolphins, except for ecological aspects related to dolphins (e.g. behaviour). The participants were favourable towards dolphins and recognised their uniqueness. Dolphin loyalty was moderate, as well as dolphin brand leadership and endorsement values. Finally, the participants showed good dolphin association. These results indicate that visitors to the Maputo National Park support the CBBE of dolphins. The results also indicate that scuba divers favour specific products related to dolphins, including swim-with-dolphin tourism. However, they only supported these products provided that they would take dolphins' well-being, conservation and ethical considerations into account. Several participants indicated that they previously had negative experiences with dolphin-based tourism in other countries, where dolphins were treated unethically. Scuba divers liked dolphins, but some preferred to have experiences with other species, including sharks.

## 6. CONSUMER PERCEIVED VALUE OF DOLPHIN-RELATED TOURISM PRODUCTS

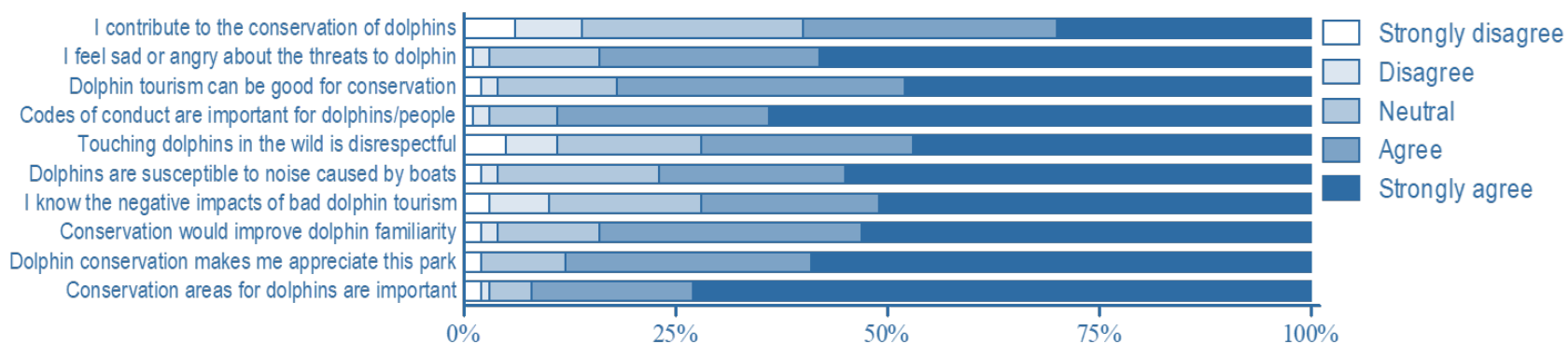
The participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements related to the CPV of dolphin-related tourism products, where the scale of choices went from strongly disagreeing (1) to strongly agreeing (5). Figure 3 shows the response frequencies provided by the participants in answering the questions. The figure shows that the participants were generally satisfied with dolphin-related tourism products like swim-with-dolphin tourism and found these products enjoyable (functional and emotional value of dolphins). However, they were not too certain about some aspects of their perceived value of dolphin-related products. These included the economic and social value of dolphins.

The participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements related to the conservation of dolphins (which formed part of the construct of CPV), where the scale of choices went from strongly disagreeing (1) to strongly agreeing (5). Figure 4 shows the response frequencies provided by the participants in answering the questions. The participants either agreed or strongly agreed with all the statements in the figure. In particular, they believed establishing conservation areas for dolphins is important. Although the participants supported the conservation of dolphins, a large proportion acknowledged that they did not contribute personally to the conservation of dolphins.





**Figure 3:** Response frequencies regarding the CPV of dolphin-related tourism products



**Figure 4:** Response frequencies regarding dolphin conservation

## 7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study confirm that scuba divers tend to value dolphins as a tourism product, based on their consumer-based brand equity of dolphins, their perceived value of dolphin-related tourism products, and their attitude towards dolphin conservation. This suggests that Maputo National Park can use dolphins as a branding tool to attract tourism. Additionally, the results of this study suggest that branding strategies revolving around dolphins must be carefully designed to attract sustainable tourism. This is particularly important since impacts from bycatch and tourism globally imperil dolphins. The researchers recommend the following approaches for government and industry to support dolphin-based destination branding for tourism in Maputo National Park:

- Dolphins should feature prominently as a brand of Maputo National Park, especially in marketing campaigns.
- Marketing campaigns for Maputo National Park should explicitly reference the central role of dolphins in the park as a source of positive tourism experiences.
- Maputo National Park should focus on marketing dolphin-based tourism centred on the codes of conduct and the sustainable swim-with-dolphin tourism industry currently thriving in the park to create distance from other negative experiences offered elsewhere.
- Maputo National Park should consider marketing heterogeneous packages offering land and sea activities from marine mammal tourism and scuba diving to safaris in a single offer.
- Maputo National Park and marine mammal tourism operators should consider advertising heterogeneous tourism packages at international tourism events, like the BOOT Show, the EUDI Show, the AMEX Show, and the DEMA Show, among others.
- Marketing of swim-with-dolphin tourism should offer clear messages about the value-for-money element of the experience compared with other forms of wildlife-based tourism. The types of messages could emphasise the unique, intimate encounter with dolphins, the financial contribution to the park and the education that can be received.
- Marketing of marine mammal tourism in the park should highlight how the park offers not only standard packages like swim-with-dolphin experiences but also more sophisticated forms of tourism, including marine volunteering (these are offered by one of the dolphin centres in Ponta do Ouro).
- Signage relevant to swim-with-dolphin tourism, whether related to marketing or management, should be as transparent as possible within the park and in the appropriate spaces.
- The management of swim-with-dolphin experiences should consider a strong interpretation component before, during and after the experience.
- Education in swim-with-dolphin tourism should not stop at the briefing but should extend to post-contact education and Q&A sessions.
- Marine mammal tourism companies in the park should consider organising events to strengthen the message that dolphins are a valuable source of income for the park and that sustainable dolphin-based tourism can support conservation and be educational. Events could host marine biologists and other relevant personalities to come and talk about dolphins.

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