Perceived and Projected Image of India as a Tourism Destination

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the perceived and projected image of India, utilizing the online content on the travel blog virtualtourist.com and of the official tourism promotion website of India, IncredibleIndia.org. The results reveal that tourists who have travelled to India report mixed perceptions of the country, both positive and negative. However, the identity of 'India' can be summarized in the word 'experience'. The projected image on the country's promotional website is lacking in intensity of both content and imagery. Comparing the perceived and projected images it is identified that there is no incongruence between the two. As the actual perceptions of tourists post visitation can widely influence travel, the paper suggest that destination marketing organizations should monitor consumer generated images, wisely capitalize on positive perceptions, and address the negative ones, in order to build a genuine and competitive destination image.

KEYWORDS: Destination Image, India, Experience.

Introduction

India has been consolidating her tourism position at a slow but steady pace. For a country steeped in history, abounding with rich cultural and geographical diversity, the major acceleration in tourism performance has been seen only after the launch of the all-encompassing 'Incredible India' brand campaign. Though over the last few years the tourism statistics have grown on account of this campaign, the country continues to struggle to achieve its self-set yearly targets of tourist arrivals. Exploring reasons for the slow growth of tourism in India, researchers have identified that the negative image associations with the country have been one of the main reasons that hinder progressive tourism performance (Chaudhary, 2000). Due to negative images the tourists shy away from the country. All though scattered research is available on satisfaction with certain tourist places in India (Das et al., 2007; Dwivedi, 2007; Dwivedi et al., 2009) not much research has been carried out to explore the holistic image of the country as tourist destination.

This study is an attempt to explore the image of India as a tourist destination from the perspective of tourists who have already had travel experience in the country. Through consumer generated data the paper identifies the post visitation perceived 'positive', 'negative' and 'overall' image reported by tourists. The
projected image induced through the Ministry of Tourism’s promotional website is also explored and analyzed in the paper to determine if there is congruency between the perceived and projected image. The results can have implications for the destination marketing organization to take a cue from actual visitor generated content, based on experiences, in order to formulate a more enhanced realistic image of the country.

**Background**

Tourism is an industry based on imagery (Buck, 1993). Hence a positive image is vital for tourist arrivals to a destination (Alhemoud and Armstrong, 1996; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Choi, Lehto and Oleary, 2007; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Woodside and Lyonski, 1989; Yilmaz et al., 2009). Though destination image has attracted keen interest in tourism research (Chen and Usyal, 2002; Jenkins, 1999; Molina, Gomez and Consuegra, 2010; Mossberg and Kleppe, 2005; Morgan and Pritchard, 1998; Morgan, Pritchard and Pike, 2002; Tavares, 2011) no consensus has been reached to adopt a single definition of image. The most cited definition has been given by Crompton (1979) who explains image as a holistic concept comprising beliefs, ideas and impressions of a destination in the minds of individual. This suggests that an image is an overall perception of a destination through an individual’s mental belief and feelings associated with a destination (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; Kotler, Haider and Rein, 1993). This image can comprise elements of climate, accessibility, natural attractions, people, culture, language, cuisine, safety, security and economy. The term ‘image’ is further deconstructed into two types i.e. organic and induced. Organic image is a result of non prejudiced sources as newspapers, periodicals, television and books, or other unbiased sources as such as friends, relatives, etc. (Beerli and Martin, 2004; Choi, Lehto and Oleary, 2007). Organic images are held as more credible by people as they relate to factual and authentically reported information. Induced image, on the other hand, is consciously designed and generated through aggressive marketing activities to develop a carefully structured and desired impression in the minds of a target market segment (Gunn, 1988). Induced images are geared at projecting the positive and alluring aspects of the product to entice the consumers.

Weaver and Lawton (2006) explain a destination image as an amalgam of assessments that is associated with pull factors of a destination like accessibility, attractions, cultural links affordability, stability, and safety. But an image is a lot more than just attributes of a destination. It is a holistic viewpoint including multi constructs (Ahmed, 1991) that can be both mental and attitudinal. In essence, images are a function of various points of reference (Alhemoud and Armstrong, 1996; Ekinci and Hosany, 2006) that have a deep cognitive and emotional content (Baloglu, McCleary, 1999; Gartner, 1993; MacKay, Fesenmaier, 1997; Pike & Ryan,
The cognitive component is based on understanding and is regarded as antecedent (Gartner, 1993) to the emotional component which has an evaluative dimension of good or bad to it. Echtner and Ritchie (2003) have proposed a three dimensional continuum of destination image, where, in the attribute-holistic continuum, a destination image is composed of perceptions of independent or not features and overall impressions; in the functional-psychological continuum, destination image is identified as the elements of the image which are directly observable/measurable or not; and in the common-unique continuum both common characteristics and unique features of destination image are recognized. Hence images reflect the impressions, imagination and emotional thoughts associated with a destination.

Research also states that destination images keep changing and are never static. As for timing of image formation, a destination image can be formed, before, during and after leaving a destination. Image is also equated with fiction as part of the mental image corresponding to an idea created in the consumer's mind, which may differ from the actual image. Only personal experience can lead to differentiating between fictional and real image and result in the creation of the most authentic image. While destination branding significantly effects the creation of the fictional/mental image (Aaker, 1996; Carmen, Stuart and Ritchie, 2005; Hall, 2002; Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Morgan, Pritchard and Pride, 2002), the actual image is eventually conceived or modified, based on real vacation experience (Gunn, 1988). The mental image corresponds with Phelp’s (1986) ‘secondary image’ built before the visit while the actual image corresponds with the ‘primary image’ built after the visit to the destination. The primary image is more comprehensive and genuinely formed as a result of accumulation and evaluation of on-site experiences and interaction at a destination (Bucsa, Gaceu and Ola, 2010). In view of the importance of destination image in attracting tourism to a destination and the lack of research on assessment of tourists’ destination image of India this paper attempts to answer the following research questions (RQ).

RQ1. What are the positive and negative perceived images of India?

RQ2. What is the overall perceived image of India?

RQ3. Is the perceived image congruent with the projected image of India?

Methodology

Research indicates that while assessing the image of a destination, very few studies have used consumers as the primary source for generating destination attributes (Selby and Morgan 1996; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). Adopting a qualitative approach, this study used the existent primary consumer generated data available online on the travel blog Virtualtourist (virtualtouris.com), to allow for free spontaneous emergence of attributes related to the destination. Searching
through several top travel blogs, VirtualTourist.com blog was selected as the most appropriate data source as it provided views of tourists clearly classified under head of ‘Pros’, ‘Cons’ and ‘In a Nutshell’ comments/images of the destination country. 100 comment postings under each head were collected in reverse order, saved on independent MS Word files and thereafter analyzed on their linguistic component to identify the attributes and themes that emerged from mentioned frequency of words and phrases describing the perceived positive, negative and nutshell image of India. This image as generated through consumer content was later assessed in light of the Ministry of Tourism India’s projected image on the Incredible India website (www.incredibleindia.org) to examine if there was congruency between the tourists’ perceived image and the destination marketing organization’s projected image.

Findings and Discussion

Positive Image of India

The positive image attributes that have emerged from the ‘Pro’ category of comments on India and the words most frequently used to describe each attribute are highlighted in table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Pro’ Attribute</th>
<th>Indicator words explaining attribute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culture and History</td>
<td>Culture, culturally rich, history, architecture, temples, Taj Mahal, living history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity and Vastness</td>
<td>Multicultural, mini world, very varied, breathtaking variety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Beauty</td>
<td>Scenery, beaches, mountains, beautiful landscape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>People, friendly people, warm people, lovely, nice people, good people, great people, charming people, wit, ingenuity, good hearted, helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intense</td>
<td>Experience, romantic, inspiring, spirituality, funny, chaos, fascinating, mystical, magical, unfathomable, exotic, interesting, mentality, philosophy, yoga, meditation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inexpensive</td>
<td>Cheap cost, cheap, cheap destination, shopping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuisine</td>
<td>Food, great food, excellent curries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alive</td>
<td>Color, pulse, rhythm, sounds, vibrant, Bollywood, entertaining, chaos, festivals, flurry of activity, spirit, and life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique</td>
<td>Very different, another planet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The comments stated by tourists after their post visitation to India indicate that history and culture are the most attractive attributes of the country. The country, deep rooted in civilization, history and culture, is said to offer a “wonderful array of culture and antiquity,” iconic monuments, and a variety of architectural styles. Tourists are fascinated by the rich history of the country, which shaped through different dynasties, rulers and religions have left traces of unique heritage in the country. The “Taj Mahal” is reported as the iconic identity of India. It is the main monument identified with the country by both actual and prospective tourists. India, the huge subcontinent is also bestowed with a large variety of topography and landforms, including mountain peaks, deserts, coastal areas, forest cover and vast plains, rich in all kinds of flora and fauna. The country abounds in the most striking variety of natural landscapes. The natural beauty is described by tourists through words as “stunning vistas” that give the feeling of “walking into National Geographic.” A population of more than 1.22 billion that comprises people from all religions, diverse communities, races and ethnicity contributes to a rich “multicultural” diversity offered in this “mini world.” It is reported that one visit is not enough to see the sub-continent as there are “so many things to see, hear taste and experience” that the country would require a lifetime to explore. To add to her attractions, India has the image of a very hospitable “welcome country” with “kind, friendly, happy, smiling, laughing people” rightly suggesting that locals are guided by the philosophy of Atithi Devo Bhavah i.e. “Guest is God”. The tourists express satisfaction that “most people speak English” implying that language/communication for foreigners with locals is not regarded as a problem. The intensity of the country can be well summarized in a comment that states “India shakes your whole entity, your state of mind, all your senses.” This is substantiated by another remark that the country is “more mystic than Arabian nights.” As a tourist destination, a favorable image of the country is identified in terms of being an inexpensive destination, rightly described as “very cheap to visit once the air fare is taken care of.” “The food” holds another major appeal for tourists. Indian pancakes (chapati) and curries are no doubt world famous and though spicy for the taste buds of many western tourists, they are tempting gastronomical delights. All the diversity, sights, sounds and tastes that make India pulsating, lively and “colorful” in spirit can be summed up in comments that say, there is “never a dull moment” and a “surprise around every corner.” What further makes the country unique is described in the words “no other place in the world like this”. India is recommended in a comment as a “must visit” destination.

**Negative Image of India**

The apparent images of India across most comments in “Cons” are of poverty, pollution, population and touts (table 2).
Table 2: Negative Perceptions of India.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'Con' Attribute</th>
<th>Words explaining attribute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>Beggars, heartbreaking poverty, illness, shocking reality, baksheesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirt and Pollution</td>
<td>Serious pollution, dirty, mosquitos, smell, public urination, noisy, overpopulated, crowds, littering, traffic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheating</td>
<td>Touts, cons, con artists, conniving people, tips, pick pocketers, high entrance fee, dishonest people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>Dangerous transport, inefficient transport, bad roads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Concerns</td>
<td>Hygiene, spicy food, water, Delhi belly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Heat, extreme climate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimidating</td>
<td>Chaos, maddening, hassles, overwhelming, unsafe, unstable surroundings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Poverty is found by tourists as deeply infest in the country and it is disturbing for tourists to see "poor people everywhere" along with persistently being "chased by children and beggars." Dirt, filth and pollution of all forms are found equally appalling by tourists. For concerns of hygiene and health, many tourists have apprehensions about visiting India. It is realized by tourists that there is not much civic sense amongst people and the problems are further exacerbated by "overpopulation" and "traffic" in the country. As reported in comments, traveling within the country is found cumbersome and irksome due to "bad roads" with "wild bus rides" coupled with inefficient transport that can necessitate "long stay at train stations." Some places are reported by tourists as "still very backward." In view of several tourists, the infrastructure and hygiene are not up to most "foreigners’ standards." Another problem faced and reported in comments is cheating of tourists by touts who in the words of a tourist "wish to rip off every penny" of the unsuspecting and naïve travelers in a foreign land. One comment mentions that there are "100s of millions of middlemen earning their share of you" and "you are a walking wallet!" A comment goes further to send out a warning signal on the blog saying "watch those touts and your pocket!" What is more angrily voiced in a few remarks is that at certain attractions there is the "Government-sanctioned dual-pricing for tourists - theft!" This reflects the disappointment of tourists on differential pricing, especially that is higher price for foreign tourists at every attraction. In terms of food, though Indian Cuisine is otherwise a major appeal to the foreign palates, some comments sound a word of caution to watch out for "hygiene" at eating places and advise consumption of "bottled water" alone, to avoid "health
risks.” In ‘con’ remarks, some tourists complain about the heat and extreme weather conditions suggesting that the country is ideally “open May to October only,” discouraging prospective tourists to visit in other months. For foreign female tourists especially there are words of caution, as women may be regarded “easy targets” by anti social elements and need to be very careful while travelling in the country due to safety concerns. It is remarked in a statement that India is “never safe for a girl/woman on her own.” Another strong negative perception is that India can be “intimidating” as the country is described to be full of “chaos” with “no rules” and where “everyone does as they please.” A comment that prepares future tourists states that the country is not for the “faint of heart” but for “seasoned travelers only.” Hence, regardless of abundant attractions, the negative images that have conjured in the minds of the tourists based on their experiences, send out indications for the tourism authorities and government that there is an imperative need to address the several concerns of providing proper tourism infrastructure, safety, hygienic clean environment and of imparting moral and ethical education, especially to the stakeholders and local people, to work on building a safe, comfortable and friendly tourism destination that can contribute to formation of a strong positive image.

Overall Image of India

Comments describing India in holistic dimension reflect the overall image of the country (table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'Nutshell' Attribute</th>
<th>Words explaining attribute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Experience, enlightening, soul, values, life changing/profoundly rich experience, intense lifetime experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fascinating</td>
<td>Magical, fascinating awesome, myths and mysteries, monumental, contrasts, diverse, charming, passionate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique</td>
<td>Universe, world, numero uno, truly unique, must see, incredible, character, mini world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>Difficult, bitter moments, mad, not perfect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most striking observation is that India is equated with the synonym, “experience”, which is the most frequently used word to describe the country in a nutshell. In the words of one tourist India provides “an experience that will change you!” Other comments that describe the intensity of the experience are “India gets into your soul” leading to “exploration of personal values.” The country is perceived as a “state of the heart, rather than a place.” Identified also with the word “fascinating” the country is described as “fantastically amazing and frustrating” and a lot “more than beaches and elephants” or “curry and sacred cows.” For travelers
who have been to India, “after India, every place else is dull.” The country is considered unique “like nowhere you’ve been before,” and an “all in one” entity recommended as “a must visit place.” It is strongly remarked in a comment “if one has not been to India, he/she has not traveled at all.” The amazing country however, has a “challenging” dimension as well due to several problems of development and infrastructure. One cannot ignore the difficulties and some harsh ground realities present in the country, but as a comment states, “no country is perfect,” and this is a comforting message that India certainly is worth the visit for any “traveler with an open mind” who can be tolerant of the drawbacks but still willing to travel for availing an enchanting lifetime experience. The best comment sent out by a tourist which can be motivate prospective travelers is “Real travelers certainly don’t skip India!” In essence, the holistic image of destination India is a reflected as a country that offers an “unparalleled travel experience.”

Congruency between Perceived and Projected Image

In light of the blog posts that reflect the tourists’ perceived image of the country, the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India’s “Incredible India” website (www.incredibleindia.org) is examined to explore if there is congruence between the perceived and projected image. It is found that the promotional content on the website contains sufficient information on the country’s rich history, culture and geography that is deeply ingrained in the image of tourists after their travel experience. The people and wide diversity too, find mention to create the induced image. However the website doesn’t seem to promote a strong captivating picture of the country and remains silent about safety tips, or other difficult ground realities and concerns that are invariably faced and voiced by tourists for which they could be mentally prepared for through proper information, before they visit the country. The informational content on the website is more like a descriptive write up than an impressionable message that can cultivate interest and can emotionally appeal to tourists. The pictorial content fails to capture the essence of attractions. Only the slogan of “Incredible India” finds some congruence between the perceived and projected image. Though there is no incongruence identified, it appears that the projected image is understated both in terms of creating a powerful positive induced image or addressing the part of the real India that can be a little unsettling and intimidating for tourists, but yet enchanting and inviting enough to attract them to enjoy the travel experience of a lifetime.

Conclusion

In the Internet Era the use of travel blogs continues to gain immense popularity. The new age educated, aware and discerning tourists, as travel planners, are interested in more than just finding informational content about destinations provided by destination marketing organizations. Hence the techno savvy tourism
consumers are turning to the web media to access travel blogs and forums in order to share and seek reliable feedback and travel advice from ‘real tourists’ who have travelled to and had on-site experience at destinations. While for potential tourists the web platforms provide an authentic information source to learn about travelers’ experiences and images, for experienced tourists the other hand, travel blogs act as a medium of projecting their post visit image perceptions of a destination built as a result of actual visitation. These perceptions may or may not be in congruence with pre visit images, but are crucial to repeat visitation decisions and for influencing travel of potential tourists through credible word of mouth.

This study aimed at assessing the projected and perceived image of India concludes that the projected image of the country on the national destination marketing organization website, ‘Incredible India’ is understated in its content and appears shallow in contrast to the intensity of the perceived image conveyed by experienced tourists on the travel blog virtualtourist.com. The tourists report equally strong positive and negative images of the country. The study concludes that under the word “Experience” the tourists convey the umbrella image of India, which is an ensemble of both positive and negative perceptions. This nutshell identity of India reflected in the word ‘experience’ should be capitalized upon by the destination marketing organization to create a powerful and memorable image and branding for India. It is suggested that in order to embark upon creating any future image of country, the destination marketing organizations should benefit from continuously monitoring the post destination visit images reported and disseminated by tourists (Venkatachalam and Venkateswaran, 2010). For this purpose of image assessment, the online consumer generated content can a wide and good data source to gauge perceptions that can be wisely incorporated in image building (Carmen, Stuart and Ritchie, 2005). The study suggest that perceptions of destinations built upon genuine experience should be used as the key to help conjure a convincing image of the country that aligns with actual tourist experiences and promises credibility.

References


