The Role of Destination Image in Tourism: A Review and Discussion

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1. Introduction

The goal of a behavior analysis approach to travel studies is to understand the psychological forces that motivate an individual traveler, that influence the various travel-related decisions the individual makes, and that impact the level of satisfaction with a destination region (Chon, 1989). A number of tourism and recreation researchers have investigated the reasons why people travel; studied the traveler’s travel purchase behavior; and emphasized the image of a tourist destination and the tourist’s perception of an attitude toward a tourist destination.

The purpose of this article is two-fold. First, this article will attempt to provide a review of studies related to the role of a destination image in tourism. Second, based on a review of studies related to the role of a destination image in tourism as well as the relevant consumer behavior literature, a traveler satisfaction and dissatisfaction model proposed by this author (Chon, 1989) will be treated in more theoretical depth and further refined.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Role of Destination Image

As stated earlier, a number of tourism and recreation researchers have studied the topic of the role of a destination image in tourism. Those studies which are frequently cited in the travel and tourism literature have been reviewed and are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics Covered</th>
<th>Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship of Destination Image And Traveler Satisfaction With Travel</td>
<td>1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship of Destination Image And Traveler Buying Decision Making</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship of Destination Image Formation/Change Through Cross National And Cross Cultural Contacts</td>
<td>1, 2, 11, 19, 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destination Image Change</td>
<td>2, 6, 7, 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destination Image Formation</td>
<td>3, 10, 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destination Image Assessment And Measures</td>
<td>4, 8, 9, 20, 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destination Image And Environmental Psychology</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destination Image And Tourism Development</td>
<td>10, 12, 15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Literature refers to the following studies cited throughout this article.

10: Gunn (1979)  22: Pool (1965)
12: Hunt (1975)

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The topics which have been most frequently researched in the study of a destination image include: (1) the influence of a destination image in traveler satisfaction; (2) the role of a destination image in traveler buying behavior, i.e., his travel related decision making; (3) the change of destination image; (4) the formation and modification of a destination image through cross-national and cross-cultural contacts; (5) destination image assessment and measures; and (6) the role of a destination image and tourism development.

The central postulates of the destination image studies are that a destination image has a crucial role in an individual's travel purchase related decision making and that the individual traveler's satisfaction/dissatisfaction with a travel purchase largely depends on a comparison of his expectation about the destination, or a previously held destination image, and his perceived performance of the destination. It is theorized that this occurs because the consumer often has very limited personal experiences concerning the destination he is considering: a decision maker acts upon his image of the destination rather than objective reality [4]. Thus, it is argued in many of these studies that in order to effectively market a travel destination area, it is essential for a marketer in travel and tourism to identify the images associated with his respective destination area.

2.2 Destination Image and Traveler Buying Behavior

The role of a destination image in tourism has a greater significance in marketing when viewed through the framework of the traveler's buying behavior. In the area of consumer behavior research, many researchers have theorized that a consumer's buying process is multi-staged and that a consumer's motivation to purchase a good or service is triggered by an expectation that the object of purchase will satisfy his felt needs. The basic position of these multi-stage models of consumer decision making is that a consumer, in making a purchase decision, goes through the stages of need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, choice of product or service, and post-purchase evaluation (Berkman and Gilson, 1986).

Need recognition is the antecedent condition for a purchase. According to one popular model of consumer behavior (Howard and Ostlund, 1973), the need for a purchase is dictated by motives derived from biogenic or psychogenic needs, wants, or desires of the buyer that are related to consuming a product. The presence of motives creates a state of arousal; and a high state of arousal prompts overt search for information that will help the consumer gratify his/her particular motives.

Relative to the other stages of a consumer buying process, researchers in the area of tourism and recreation have made similar observations to the consumer behavior researchers and have theorized that a traveler's travel purchase process is not a single stage process but is multi-phased (Clawson and Knetch, 1966; Gunn, 1989). This position is well conceptualized by a recreation behavior model presented by Clawson and Knetch. Their model suggests that an individual's travel behavior can be explained through a five-phase activity:

1. Anticipation: planning and thinking about the trip.
2. Travel to the site: getting to the destination.
3. On-site behavior: behavior on site or destination region.
4. Return travel: travel home.
5. Recollection: recall, reflection, and memory of trip.

In a similar observation, Gunn (1989), in the context of a vacation travel, lists seven phases of the travel experiences:

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

The first three phases in Gunn's Model are related to the anticipation stage in Clawson and Knetch's five phase model. Gunn suggests that the seven steps of tourism participation involve a constant building and modification of images. He suggests that the first three phases of his model, which encompass the process of image accumulation and image modification and which further influence the individual traveler's decision to take a trip, are most important in one's travel purchasing process. Gunn rationalizes that this is because "man's image is generally very resistant to change" once it is constructed. Clawson and Knetch also suggest that the anticipation phase is the most important in travel and tourism marketing promotion. The researchers argue that this is because the potential tourist, when making a travel purchase decision, relies on his mental images about the destination which is a sum of his previously accumulated images and modified images obtained through
further information search (Mayo, 1973).

Hunt (1975) further argues that the images, beliefs, and perceptions which individuals in the market have about a destination may have as much to do with an area's tourist development success as the more tangible recreation and tourist resources. He rationalizes that this occurs because the decision maker, having very limited personal experience with the destination, acts upon his image, beliefs and perceptions of the destination rather than objective reality. Mayo and Jarvis (1981) also state that as a traveler is deciding a travel destination among alternative choices, the subjective judgment he/she makes about the alternatives available to him/her depends on a number of factors, among which the most important of these is the image about each alternative and its perceived ability to satisfy his needs.

Mercer (1981) asserts that the recollection phase of the travel experiences has as much to do with a tourist destination image as the anticipation phase. In discussing Clawson and Knetch's five-phase model, Mercer notes that the "image" presented by a site or region is the "signal" or "symbol" presented to the individual by the site and that the recollection phase of the travel experience in many ways is important to image:

[In the recollection phase of experience,] the whole experience is reviewed and assessed and is likely to be repeated to the extent that it gave "satisfaction" to the individuals involved ...... whatever the evaluation of the experience, the feedback into future decisions is inevitable (Mercer, 1981).

Similarly, Pizam et al. (1978) assert that tourist satisfaction is the result of the interaction between a tourist's experience at the destination area and the expectations he had about the destination:

When the weighted total sum of experiences compared to the expectations results in feelings of gratification, the tourist is satisfied; when the tourist's actual experiences compared with his expectations result in feelings of distance, he is dissatisfied (Pizam et al., 1978).

Fridgen (1984) reviews the five stages of Clawson and Knetch's recreation behavior model from the perspectives of environmental psychology. Fridgen argues that tourism and the environment are inseparable because an individual's travel activity is nothing but a constant interface between the traveler and the environment. Fridgen asserts that:

The study of tourism is not complete without an understanding of how the physical and social environment influence the tourist and host alike. A complex interrelationship between the social situation, the physical environment, and human behavior makes up the core of travel, vacation planning, and tourism (Fridgen, 1984).

In general, researchers agree that although image formation and modification occur throughout an individual traveler's entire travel experience, the anticipation and recollection phases of the traveler behavior model have most significant marketing implication. This is rationalized because an individual traveler's satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the travel experience is a function of a comparison between his accumulated image of and his actual experience at the destination, wherein the resultant image change arising from satisfaction and dissatisfaction would have a lot to do with a further modification of a destination image.

2.3 Destination Image Formation Process

If a traveler's decision to travel to a particular destination is linked to the destination image held by that traveler, then an examination of the image formation process may help understand how a tourism promotion organization can influence the change of an individual's perception of a destination.

An image is the set of meanings by which an object is known and through which people describe, remember and relate to it. That is, an image is the net result of the interaction of a person's beliefs, ideas, feelings, expectations and impressions about an object. In the travel and tourism context, Crompton (1978) defines a destination image as the aggregate sum of beliefs, ideas, impressions, and expectations that a tourist has about a tourist destination area. Gunn argues that a destination image evolves at two levels – an organic image and an induced image. An organic image, in Gunn's terms, is one which for each person derives from a long history of nontouristic-directed communication (Gunn, 1989). Geographic events may have resulted in strong touristic implications but were not overtly intended this way. Gunn further states that much of this assimilation comes from written (and broadcasted) discourse: reports of world events in newspapers and periodicals, geography books, fiction and nonfiction. The second level of regional image of tourism is an induced image, derived from a conscious effort of development, promotion, advertising, and publicity.

Gunn argues that, in most cases, a destination can do
little about changing its organic image but can influence the change of an induced image to a large extent through promotional and publicity efforts. Therefore, Gunn suggests that the end goal of "image building" should aim at promoting the modification of an induced image. This view of destination image change has been empirically supported by subsequent empirical studies (Chon, 1987; Gartner, 1986; Gartner and Hunt, 1987; Phelps, 1986).

2.4 Toward an Integration of Evaluative Congruity Theory

The topics of product image, consumer perception, consumer motivation, and consumer satisfaction have been widely researched in the area of consumer behavior. In the area of consumer behavior research, the concept of perception, motivation and satisfaction is very important because it explains the way stimuli are interpreted and integrated by the consumer. There exist numerous psychological theories which attempt to explain individual consumer's satisfaction from the consumer cognition perspective (Greene, 1972; Sirgy and Tyagi, 1986). The central postulate of these theories is that satisfaction is a post-transactional emotional reaction directly related to motivation and performance. Expectancy-valence theory is one of the cognitive theories which attempts to explain an individual's attitude, motivation, performance and satisfaction and is considered highly valid in explaining and predicting a consumer's cognition of a product image. The expectancy-valence theory states that the direction and intensity of behavior is a function of the expectation that certain actions will lead to the goal and the incentive of the goal object.

Sirgy and Tyagi (1986), based on a review of major cognitive theories of performance and satisfaction, presented a consumer cognition theory known as evaluative congruity theory. The evaluative congruity theory was built upon earlier works in cognitive and social psychology theories related to psychocybernetics (Sirgy, 1983, Sirgy and Tyagi, 1986; Sirgy, 1987).

The essence of evaluative congruity theory is a comparison between performance expectancy (perceived image of a destination) and performance outcome (perceived reality of the destination). That is, evaluative congruity is the degree of match or mismatch (goodness or badness) between a valence of the performance expectancy (image) and performance outcome (reality). The level of resulting congruity is theorized to be determined by (1) the degree of congruity or incongruity between the perceptual and evoked values; (2) by the strength of the perception and belief involved in the evaluative congruity process; and (3) the importance of the attribute dimension involved (Sirgy, 1983, 1984, 1987; Sirgy and Tyagi, 1986). The outcome of an evaluative congruity is enhancement of attitude (positive image) toward an object or action. Therefore, satisfaction by consumers is a function of one or more congruities between perceptual and evoked referent states: (1) negative congruity is regarded to induce a dissatisfaction state; (2) congruity is regarded to elicit a homeostatic and neutral state; and (3) positive incongruity is regarded to result in satisfaction.

It is postulated in the evaluative congruity theory that attitude enhancement will be greatest in a positive incongruity condition, followed by a positive congruity condition, a negative incongruity condition and a negative congruity condition, respectively. The explaining and predicting power of the evaluative congruity in a consumer behavior context lies in the fact that the resulting attitude change is not only determined by the degree of congruity or incongruity between the perceptual and evoked values, but also by the strength of the perception and belief involved in the evaluative congruity process. Potential application of an evaluative congruity in destination image studies is discussed in the following section.

3. Imagery as a Framework of Understanding Traveler Buying Behavior

Based on an interrelationship of destination image, traveler buying process, traveler satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and the evaluative congruity approach to understanding consumer behavior, an integrated model of destination image and the traveler buying process is presented (Figure 1). It is the central postulate of the proposed model that an individual traveler's travel behavior can be explained through a framework of imagery change throughout his entire travel experience.

3.1 Primary Image Construction

It was reviewed in an earlier article by the current author (Chon, 1989) that tourism motivation is subject to a push/pull tendency. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs function as "push" factors and the environmental cues arising from the attractiveness of a region function as "pull" factors. The two forces operating together function as antecedent events for an individual's travel motivation. It is argued that a primary image of the destination is constructed at the point when the push and pull factors co-exist. It is further
argued that the individual traveler's initial decision to travel to the destination, which is a sum of two components: the individual traveler's perception of the attractiveness of outcomes related to his/her travel objectives; and the perceived beliefs and likelihood of accomplishing his/her needs and wants.

3.2 "Anticipation" to "Decision to Travel"

Our hypothetical traveler further modifies his/her accumulated images of the destination through an information search process. The flow of new information can come from reading books and articles about the travel destination, from reading advertising, from being exposed to news media items dealing with the destination area, or from a discussion of travel experiences with friends and relatives. The goodness and badness (or match and mismatch) of the modified image of a destination will help determine his/her performance expectancy of the destination. The performance expectancy can be positive or negative.
depending on the strength of the images accumulated and modified. A negative performance expectancy could abort the initial decision to take a trip to the destination; however, it is hypothesized that a negative performance expectancy of the destination will not necessarily abort the individual traveler's decision to travel. This is because the traveler's destination choice can be constrained in time, value, and other limits such as availability of an alternative destination.

3.3 "Travel To" to "Return Home"

The individual traveler will experience various travel related activities and events throughout the stages of Travel to destination, Participation and Return Travel. New images are accumulated about the destination and the general environment surrounding the entire trip. The experiences obtained will be reflected and evaluated during the travel back home.

3.4 "Recollection" and "Further Image Modification"

The traveler's previous image of the destination will be reconditioned at the recollection stage through the process of evaluating what he has actually experienced at the destination against his/her previous destination image, with end results being congruity or incongruity states. It is hypothesized that this evaluation process can take the following four different sets of comparisons. These hypothesized relationships are presented in Table 2.

First, it can be construed that the individual's previous image of the destination was negative while the destination's reality was perceived to be positive, resulting in a positive incongruity state. Here the traveler may feel elated with the outcome, i.e. the destination is evaluated highly positive. This is because the outcome was perceived better than expected (Chon, 1989).

Second, a positive congruity condition involves a non-significant discrepancy between a positively valued performance outcome (positive reality) and a positively valued expectancy (positive image). Here the traveler may feel satisfied with his/her experience, i.e. the outcome is evaluated moderately positive. His/her satisfaction is hypothesized to be moderately positive because "doing as expected" is thought to produce a less positive evaluation than "doing better than expected".

Third, a negative congruity condition involves a non-significant discrepancy between a negatively valued performance outcome and a negatively valued performance expectancy (negative image and negatively perceived reality). Here the traveler may feel dissatisfied with the outcome, where the outcome is evaluated moderately negative.

Finally, a negative incongruity condition involves a significant discrepancy between a negatively valued performance outcome (perceived reality) and a positively valued performance expectancy (positive image). Here the traveler is hypothesized to feel highly frustrated. This is because the outcome is not only negative, but also highly discrepant from his expectations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Image of Destination</th>
<th>Perceived Reality of Destination</th>
<th>Evaluative Congruity</th>
<th>Degree of Satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Positive Incongruity</td>
<td>High Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Positive Congruity</td>
<td>Moderate Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negative Congruity</td>
<td>Moderate Dissatisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Negative Incongruity</td>
<td>High Dissatisfaction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: S/DS – Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction
The degree of satisfaction and dissatisfaction resultant from the evaluation process may further reinforce his/her general images about the destination. If the traveler experienced a high degree of dissatisfaction with the destination, arising from a positive incongruity between his/her perceived image and perceived reality of the experience, he may even consider not visiting the same destination in the future and consider alternative destinations in future travel purchases. Thus, the formation and modification of a destination image will be repeated through the cycle of an individual traveler's future travel decision making process.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to present a conceptual model of the interrelationship between the role of a destination image and a traveler's travel behavior. Studies related to the role of destination image in traveler buying behavior were reviewed. Relevant theories and studies in tourism, recreation and consumer research were also reviewed, and a cognitive consumer psychology theory called evaluative congruity theory were integrated into a framework for understanding an individual traveler's post travel purchase evaluation behavior. The support for the proposed relationship between a destination image and traveler buying behavior need to be derived from empirical testing.

Some aspects of marketing which are unique in tourism, such as the degree of family involvement, time and budget constraints in decision making, and timing of travel experience, will have to be further integrated into the proposed model. It is hoped that researchers interested in travel motivation, destination images and travel buying behavior will help further expand the proposed model and test it at various conditions.

References


Hunt, John D. (1975), "Images As a Factor in Tourism Development", Journal of Travel Research,
13, Winter, pp. 1–7.


Abstract

The role of a tourist destination's image is reviewed through the framework of an individual traveler's travel buying process. Relevant theories and studies in tourism, recreation/leisure, and consumer behavior are reviewed. Based on the review, it is proposed that a traveler's buying behavior at each level of the travel purchase decision making process can be conceptualized through a framework of a tourist destination's image. A conceptual model of the destination image formation process is presented and key relationships between the traveler buying process and the destination image modification process are discussed.

Résumé

Le rôle de l'image d'une destination touristique est traité dans le contexte du processus de décision du touriste individuel. A ce propos, les théories et études importantes concernant le tourisme, le temps-libre et le comportement des consommateurs sont approchés. Il en ressort qu'à chaque étage de décision l'image de la destination touristique est primordiale. Les relations y touchant sont exposées et les changements discutés.

Zusammenfassung