

Tourism Destination Image (TDI) on the Fringe

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Abstract: *Fringe tourism is an understudied, but growing, segment of the tourism industry and research. This exploratory study seeks to extend Tourism Destination Image (TDI) research to a developing country context. Perceptions of three countries in the South Caucasus region were evaluated by young respondents, who are viewed as ‘most likely’ to engage in fringe tourism, and who also live in nearby developing regions. Analysis of cognitive and affective constructs showed generally lukewarm perceptions for the target countries. Importance-performance (perception) analysis showed strong relationships between optimal and perceived TDI, which is critical in attracting tourists, with the target countries’ performance scores most often lower than the importance of the same attributes. The findings suggest the need for more research on fringe destinations (especially those in developing countries), and point to joint cross-country campaigns toward culturally-near regions as possible strategies for the target countries to improve their TDI.*

Keywords: *tourism destination image, fringe tourism, South Caucasus, developing countries*

1. INTRODUCTION

As a rapidly expanding driving force behind developmental growth, both leisure and business tourism, whether national-, regional-, or city-focused, have been receiving an ever increasing cross-section of research interest. As tourism is very much an image-driven industry, consumer perceptions of various destinations influence the destination selection process and play a significant role in travel behaviour. Global statistical tracking indicates that only 10 countries account for about 70% of international arrivals (WTO, 2010), which creates problems of congestion for the top destinations, coupled with marginalization for emerging destinations that try to compete for the remaining 30% of the market. As a result, there has been a push toward ‘off the path’ research interest (e.g., Pike, 2002). What the literature has not yet systematically examined, however, and what this study seeks to address, is image perceptions of destinations in developing countries, or ‘fringe’ destinations. The study design captures perceptual ratings for three emerging destinations and contrasts them against importance ratings for the same attributes and familiarity toward the target areas. The analysis helps to develop an understanding of Tourism Destination Image (TDI) in the context of fringe destinations, contributing new insight to TDI theory.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

TDI is generally viewed as the set of impressions and beliefs that one has about a particular destination (e.g., Agapito *et al.*, 2010) and/or perceptions about a region (Jenkins, 1999). Naturally, image does not necessarily represent reality (Gartner, 1989) and tourists evaluate destinations through attributes that best suit their interests (Mayo, 1975). Researchers have consistently found that image impacts travel behaviour, and consider it an important construct when investigating the destination selection process (e.g., Byron and Zhang, 2010).

Literature related to fringe tourism, and in particular to TDI in emerging countries, is limited but growing as such countries seek to claim their ‘part’ of tourism revenue. Fringe tourism research originally focused on areas outside metropolitan centres (e.g., Smith, 1987). Currently, this notion is being extended to ‘off the track’ tourism experiences in emerging countries. Hsu *et al.* (2004) suggest that current images have a greater impact on a tourist’s travel choices in fringe destinations than factual information.

Image formation may be guided by combining various different place attributes and characteristics in ways that best suit the intended target market (Tasci and Gartner, 2007). One of the ways for emerging destinations to compete with

traditional mass tourism is to segment potential consumers by socio-demographic characteristics and to further narrow down segmentation by identifying smaller sub-cultures within broader segments (Sirakaya *et al.* 2001).

3. METHODOLOGY

Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, in the South Caucasus region that links Europe to Asia, represent a unique opportunity for fringe destination research. Each country has recently been attempting to raise its tourism profile through global media after decades of relative obscurity, in line with Lee (2009) and Mechinda *et al.*'s (2009) findings that destination familiarity is an important influencer of tourist behaviour. The more familiar one is with a destination, typically, the more positive one's TDI of the destination.

An exploratory study of the images of the three countries was undertaken, using fourteen cognitive and four affective attributes to measure TDI with 5-point Likert scales based on the work of Baloglu and McCleary (1999). The sample included respondents from South-Eastern Europe (SEE, n=49), Ukraine and Moldova (U-M, n=13), and Georgia (n=45), for a total of 107 usable questionnaires. The image of Georgia was also included as a target for control and comparison. Traveller profile information was collected based on the work of Sirakaya *et al.* (2001), and respondents were between the ages of 18 and 32 and had advanced knowledge of English. The overall respondent profile was specifically sought given their developing nation status, geographic proximity to the target region, and an age level that best matches most likely "first targets" for tourism in the region since younger consumers are considered more likely than others to engage in fringe tourism (Cini *et al.* 2012).

4. FINDINGS

Table 1 summarizes the mean perceptual scores and suggests similar image problems for all three target countries by each of the samples. Despite their near-equal distance from the region, U-M respondents had a more positive view of the South Caucasus countries than those from SEE, which may be explained by their shared Soviet Union past. Familiarity with the target countries was low throughout, ranging from 2.24 (SEE for Azerbaijan) to 3.38 (U-M also for Azerbaijan) on the 5-point scale (except for the Georgian respondents concerning their own country, at 4.53).

Table 1. Summary of Perceived Image By Target Destination

| Destination: Sample: | Armenia | | | Azerbaijan | | | Georgia | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| | GE | SEE | U-M | GE | SEE | U-M | GE* | SEE | U-M |
| Cognitive Variables | | | | | | | | | |
| Historical attractions | 4.0 | 4.0 | 4.1 | 3.7 | 3.7 | 4.0 | 4.7 ^a | 3.9 ^a | 4.5 |
| Appealing cuisine | 3.8 | 3.9 | 4.2 | 3.6 | 3.7 | 4.2 | 4.8 ^a | 4.0 ^{ab} | 4.6 ^b |
| Interesting culture attraction | 3.6 ^a | 4.1 ^a | 4.0 | 3.7 | 3.9 | 3.9 | 4.7 ^a | 3.9 ^{ab} | 4.5 ^b |
| Interesting people | 3.5 | 3.9 | 4.1 | 3.7 | 3.8 | 4.0 | 4.7 ^a | 4.1 ^a | 4.3 |
| Good climate | 3.4 ^a | 3.8 ^a | 3.9 | 3.2 ^{ab} | 3.8 ^a | 3.9 ^b | 4.4 ^a | 3.9 ^a | 4.2 |
| Suitable accommodations | 3.4 | 3.5 | 3.4 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 4.0 | 3.6 | 3.8 |
| Hygiene & cleanliness | 3.3 | 3.5 | 3.3 | 3.4 | 3.4 | 3.2 | 3.8 | 3.7 | 3.5 |
| Beautiful scenery / nature | 3.2 ^{ab} | 4.0 ^a | 4.0 ^b | 3.4 ^{ab} | 3.8 ^a | 4.1 ^b | 4.8 ^a | 4.2 ^{ab} | 4.7 ^b |
| Personal safety | 3.1 | 3.2 | 3.1 | 3.2 | 3.2 | 3.2 | 3.9 ^a | 3.1 ^{ab} | 3.9 ^b |
| Good nightlife & entertain | 3.0 | 3.3 | 3.3 | 3.1 | 3.3 | 3.0 | 3.7 | 3.4 | 3.5 |
| Quality of infrastructure | 3.0 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 3.5 ^a | 3.0 ^a | 3.2 | 3.6 | 3.2 | 3.3 |
| Good value for money | 3.0 ^a | 3.5 ^a | 3.6 | 3.2 | 3.4 | 3.6 | 3.5 | 3.7 | 4.1 |
| Unspoiled environment | 3.1 | 3.5 | 3.2 | 3.1 | 3.5 | 3.2 | 3.4 | 3.6 | 3.1 |
| Great beaches/water sports | 2.0 ^{ab} | 3.0 ^a | 3.5 ^b | 2.7 ^a | 3.2 | 3.7 ^a | 3.8 ^a | 3.2 ^{ab} | 4.2 ^b |
| Affective Variables | | | | | | | | | |
| Pleasant | 3.5 | 3.7 | 4.0 | 3.6 | 3.6 | 3.9 | 4.4 ^{ab} | 3.8 ^a | 3.9 ^b |
| Exciting | 3.3 | 3.7 | 3.5 | 3.4 ^a | 3.8 ^a | 3.3 | 4.1 | 3.9 | 3.5 |
| Relaxing | 3.4 | 3.5 | 3.7 | 3.3 | 3.6 | 3.5 | 3.9 | 3.6 | 3.8 |
| Arousing | 3.4 | 3.5 | 3.3 | 3.3 | 3.4 | 3.3 | 3.8 | 3.5 | 3.3 |

* Georgians rating Georgia.

Means sharing the same superscript character are significantly different at $\alpha < .05$.

Importance-perception analysis (not shown here due to lack of space) of the main respondent groups (SEE and U-M) revealed eight attributes as the most important in travel decisions: safety, hygiene, cultural, scenery, and historical attractions, value for money, interesting/friendly people, and unspoiled environment. These attributes are commonly identified as important in research, suggesting that travellers generally seek certain features regardless of destination. It appears fringe destinations are no exception. Past TDI research indicates that the general environment and infrastructure of a destination influences overall perceptions of quality and value (Murphy *et al.* 2000). In this study, the performance ratings (perception scores) were lower than the importance ratings for almost all attributes (16 of 18 for Armenia and Azerbaijan; 13 of 18 for Georgia), and in only one case for one attribute, that of Georgia's cuisine, was a performance rating statistically significantly higher than importance.

The results suggest the existence of a common mental picture or stereotype, which for these emerging destinations is unfortunately more negative than positive and has great influence across cognitive and affective destination image perceptions.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings suggest a number of interesting insights, even though the small sample size of this exploratory study clearly means that they must be interpreted with caution.

While the perceived images were found to be significantly different across the three countries on most attributes, it is interesting to note that those attributes that are rated most similarly are the non-infrastructure, culturally-based features of historical attractions, interesting/friendly people, as well as cultural attractions. This suggests that these countries might consider promoting their common attractions jointly on a regional basis to help enhance their TDI both collectively and individually. The finding that U-M respondents had a more positive view of the target countries than those from SEE, perhaps explained by their shared past, also suggests that promotions to culturally-near markets may have the greatest impact (Martin and del Bosque, 2008).

In summary, the overall weak performance ratings paint a less than favourable picture of the current TDI of the South Caucasus countries, especially since they come from respondents in developmentally and geographically near regions. The results are, however, realistic given the developmental stage of these fringe destinations. Logically, the findings indicate the importance of cognitive attributes to overall image, such as hygienic conditions and personal safety. Emerging destinations must address these basics and it is clear that the target countries still have a way to go until they become competitive. As competitive intensity in tourism increases, such countries will have to seriously consider their image in comparison to not only their major mainstream competitors but also their other 'fringe' counterparts. Focusing on a destination's most distinctive feature (e.g., Georgia's cuisine, Azerbaijan's culture, Armenia's history), and beginning with markets that are culturally closest, presents itself as a reasonable direction for fringe destinations wanting to improve their TDI. It is hoped that additional TDI studies in the context of emerging markets will support theory and development of tourism beyond the mainstream.

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