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Destination Image Representation Online: Content Analysis of Ukraine Travel Related Websites

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ABSTRACT

The multitude of travel destinations and competition between them put additional emphasis on destination image as an effective instrument of differentiation. In the case of Ukraine, an emerging destination in Eastern Europe, this is a new phenomenon and an important area to explore. Current study utilizes CATPAC software to content analyze Ukraine travel related websites. The set of keywords produced within nine topical subcategories gives tourism promoters an understanding of Ukraine's destination image as projected online to the English-speaking market. Dominance of information about country's capital, links to a Russian theme, and lack of practical travel information are primary highlights determined as a result of analysis. This research will further assist practitioners in creating a recognizable destination image and attracting international tourists.

Keywords: *destination, image, Ukraine, website, CATPAC.*

INTRODUCTION

After opening the borders to the Western World in 1991, Eastern European countries have experienced steady growth in tourist arrivals and revenues (Johnson & Iunius, 1999). In 2005, three East European countries, Poland, Croatia, and Ukraine, were included in the United Nations World Tourism Organizations Worlds' Top 25 Tourism Destinations List (UNWTO, 2005). Ukraine, being the largest of these countries and one of the oldest nations in Europe, is positioned well for tourism. With the growth of tourism in Eastern Europe, Ukraine faces the challenge of attracting more international tourists.

A limited number of studies have been conducted forecasting the future of tourism in Eastern Europe (Hall, 1999; Johnson & Iunius, 1999); however, it is essential to know country-specific data in order to develop a multi-faceted destination image. Virtually no research has been conducted examining Ukraine's projected destination image and no previous studies have investigated the online tourism image of Ukraine with respect to English-speaking market. To attain Ukraine's strategic goal of establishing a recognizable destination image, it is crucial to understand how Ukraine is represented online.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Destination image and image formation

The concept of destination image has been a focus in tourism promotion, however little agreement exists with regard to its definition. Difficulty in definition and measurement may be factors in why a solid conceptual framework for destination image has not been developed yet (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Gallarza, Saura, & García, 2002; Pike, 2002). Despite this, destination image perceptions have proven to be good predictors of consumer decision making patterns (Chen & Kerstetter, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). Applying a number of data collection and analysis techniques, researchers assessed how tourists perceive the destination (Brown, 1998; Chaudhary, 2000), what factors influence their perceptions and how they are formed (Boo & Busser, 2005; Sirgy & Su, 2000), and how they impact destination choice (Bonn, Joseph, & Dai, 2005).

Image concept is rooted in the psychological theory of imagery, defined as “an experience of perception in absence of corresponding physical stimulus” (Sack et al., 2005) or “a way of processing multisensory information in working memory” (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). Image and positioning were first applied in retailing to differentiate consumer goods and stores. McDougall and Fry (1975) defined image as the personality of the store, which was comprised by all meanings and relations that characterize the store to people.

The concept of image found wide application in the fields of destination marketing and positioning. Being a multifaceted notion, image encompasses a number of components. Boo and Busser (2005) argued that image structure is reflected by the manner individual attributes are synthesized to become the image of an entity. They suggested that cognitive images (perceptual/cognitive evaluations), affective images (affective response) and overall images are blended in consumers’ minds to form the complete image of a destination. The idea that destination image is comprised of cognitive, affective, and conative images was supported by number of other researchers.

Formation of a travel destination image undergoes several stages. Reynolds (1965) described development of image as a construction of a mental picture based on few impressions chosen from a flood of information. Echtner and Ritchie (2003) presented Gunn’s (1988) model of the seven phases of travel experience: a) accumulating mental images; b) receiving further information and modifying images; c) deciding to travel to the destination; d) taking a vacation trip; e) participating in different experiences while at the destination; f) returning home; g) modifying images based on the vacation experience.

Govers, Go, and Kumar (2007) created the 3-gap tourism destination image formation model, which takes into account cognitive, affective, and conative images. Two models of destination image formation were developed by Baloglu and McCleary (1999): The General Framework of Destination Image Formation and The Path Model of the Determinants of Tourism Destination Image shows. Gallarza et al. (2002) took into account two approaches to the destination image formation process: static and dynamic.

The 21st century market requires a reevaluation of the classic image formation process and rethinking of the role of information agents in molding destination images (Choi et al., 2007). The study of impact online digital information has on image formation is gaining importance in the tourism field (Govers & Go, 2004).

Content analyses of destination image

The evolution of online information sources allowed researchers to access tourism-related information available worldwide. Analysis of travel websites through content analysis gives a valuable insight on images projected by a variety of destinations. Content analysis has been

defined as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing large amounts of textual information into fewer content categories (Riffe et al., 2009). Understanding the importance of Western countries as tourism demand donors, researchers focused on analyzing projected images with regard to English-speaking markets.

Davidson and Yu (2005) conducted analysis of Taiwan's tourism websites from the perspective of Western tourists and found there is still a gap between potential and practical application of Internet resources. Govers & Go (2005) content-analyzed twenty Dubai-based websites to identify the differences of images projected by public sector organizations and government-affiliated destination marketing organization. Douglas and Mills (2006) used brand personality framework as a guide in analyzing Middle Eastern and North African destinations to discover excitement and ruggedness as main attributes. Choi et al., (2007) investigated differences of online destination image representation within four subcategories of websites: travel trade, travel guides, travel magazines, and travel blogs. Similar studies have been conducted for counties of Easter Europe as well. Stepchenkova and Morrison (2007) analyzed 212 websites to reveal differences of images of Russia projected by companies operating in the US, Russia-based websites on travel to this country, and partnership companies.

METHODOLOGY

The sample was selected through a comprehensive search of websites through Google, a search engine known for producing highly relevant results (Davidson & Yu, 2005). Data was collected from December 9, 2009 to December 11, 2009. The search was conducted within nine subcategories that were created by combining word "Ukraine" with help words "attractions", "culture", "food", "history", "hotels/accommodations", "shopping", "tourism", "travel", and "travel information", (Davidson & Yu, 2005). The top 10 websites from the search results in each subcategory were chosen for analysis, resulting in a sample of 90 websites. Some of the websites were coming up during searches within two or more categories. After elimination of redundancies and unusable websites, a sample of 64 websites was created. The textual data from these travel-related websites was collected and stored in separate Word files (.doc) and further converted into .txt files for content analysis. For the purpose of collecting textual data, researchers went no more than two links deep on each website.

Several operations of data cleaning were performed to gain interpretable results. Stop words were eliminated as they would produce the highest frequencies. Plurals were substituted with singulars and past tense was substituted with present tense. Since many of the categories contained descriptions of unique attractions, consistent spelling of proper names of these attractions was ensured (Choi et al., 2007).

The textual data from the sample was content-analyzed using CATPAC, "a self-organizing artificial neural network that identifies the most important words in a text and determines patterns" (Woelfel, 1998, p.11). A separate .txt file was created for each topical category and content-analyzed separately. Thus, a set of keywords was produced for each of the subcategories which allowed for more in-depth analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The list of 25 keywords was produced by CATPAC for each of nine subcategories and ranked according to frequency of occurrence in the text. Due to the difference in text file sizes, the total keyword frequencies varied from 148 in "shopping" subcategory to 2842 in "history" subcategory. Total keyword frequencies were noticeably lower for categories related to practical

travel information (e.g. hotels/accommodations, travel information) than related to general information on country's background (e.g. history, culture, food). The total keyword frequencies for each subcategory are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Total Keyword Frequencies

Subcategory	Total keyword frequency
Attractions	833
Culture	1187
Food	524
History	2842
Hotels/ accommodations	400
Shopping	148
Tourism	712
Travel	961
Travel Information	819

The lists produced by CATPAC reflected most frequent words and themes pertinent to the given topic. The top seven keywords for “attractions” subcategory are “Kyiv”, “city”, “church”, “century”, “cathedral”, “Soviet”, and “monastery”. These results suggest that the highest concentration of attractions is in the capital. A strong religious aspect is present with words “cathedral”, “monastery” and “orthodox” also being in top 25. Numerous churches and shrines of Ukraine are centers of active pilgrimage, especially the tree Lavras – big church and monastery complexes. Many of the attractions date to many centuries ago, while some are specific to the Soviet era of Ukrainian history.

Top seven keywords in subcategory “culture” are “Soviet”, “Ukrainians”, “century”, “Russian”, “Western”, “language”, “national”. Interestingly, although Ukraine has many unique authentic elements to its culture, the Russian/ Soviet aspect is so pronounced. Ukraine was a part of Russian Empire and Soviet Union for extended periods of time, thus Ukrainian culture experienced notable influences of both. Some references to Western culture are present as well, and language is identified as one of the primary carriers of culture.

Top seven keywords in subcategory “food” are “bread”, “cabbage”, “meat”, “dough”, “flour”, “wheat”, “cheese”. These are the primary products consumed by Ukrainians and also ingredient used for traditional foods. Ukrainian cuisine is known to be rich in meat dishes and bakery, and a loaf of homemade bread is a part of many traditional family rituals.

The top seven keywords in subcategory “history” are “Poland”, “Cossack”, “Russia”, “century”, “state”, “political”, “war”. Country’s turbulent history is the reason why words like “war” and “army” are on the list.

Top seven keywords in subcategory “hotels” are “Kyiv”, “location”, “center”, “room”, “apartment”, “business”, “city”. Out of five hotels that have five starts four are located in the capital. And the general pattern shows concentration of hotels and accommodations in cities rather than suburban areas.

Top seven keywords in subcategory “shopping” are “shop”, “center”, “open”, “buy”, “card”, “department”, and “cinema”. In attempt to meet the needs of international tourists, Ukrainian stores have started introducing card processing systems. However, most of them still use cash so travelers have to exchange money upon arrival. Interestingly, keywords “Easter” and “Obolon” are on the list as well: traditionally, Easter is the biggest spending time for Ukrainians and “Obolon” is a brand of Ukrainian beer widely known abroad.

In the subcategory “tourism” the top seven keywords are “Kyiv”, “hotel”, “history”, “museum”, “reserve”, “art”, “mountains”. These represent the popular tourism sites of Ukraine. Kyiv remains the top visited city and increasing number of tourists are lured to skiing opportunities and spa treatments in the mountains of Western Ukraine. Numerous museums hold unique art and artifact collections attracting attendees.

Top seven keywords in subcategory “travel” are “Kyiv”, “information”, “country”, “embassy”, “city”, “medical”, and “police”. Top seven keywords in subcategory “travel information” are pretty similar to those in the “travel” category and are: “visa”, “Kyiv”, “embassy”, “citizen”, “consulate”, “American”, “medical”. These results suggest a prevalence of legal information on entry and visa regulations. Overall, the text file sizes and total frequencies for these subtopics are lower than for “culture” and “history” subcategories.

The lists of top seven keywords for each of the subcategories are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Content Analysis Results

Category	Keyword #1	Keyword #2	Keyword #3	Keyword #4	Keyword #5	Keyword #6	Keyword #7
Attractions	Kyiv	city	church	century	cathedral	Soviet	Monastery
Culture	Soviet	Ukrainians	century	Russian	Western	language	national
Food	bread	cabbage	meat	dough	flour	wheat	cheese
History	Poland	Cossack	Russia	century	state	political	war
Hotels	Kyiv	location	center	room	apartment	business	city
Shopping	shop	center	open	buy	card	department	Cinema
Tourism	Kyiv	hotel	history	museum	reserve	art	mountains
Travel	Kyiv	information	country	embassy	city	medical	police
Travel information	visa	Kyiv	embassy	citizen	consulate	American	medical

CONCLUSION

The results indicate a significant dominance of data about the capital city, Kyiv, across all nine subcategories. Since Ukraine is a monocentric country, most industry headquarters, hotels,

and shopping malls are located in the capital. Kyiv has always played a major role in the country's history as well; therefore it is mentioned frequently in "history" and "attractions" subcategories.

A strong presence of Russian/Soviet aspect is also obvious. Histories and cultures of two countries were intertwined for centuries and are oftentimes placed side-by-side in media.

A general pattern clearly shows that there is much more information available on Ukraine's history, culture and food than practical information regarding country's tourist infrastructure. This information deficit is the area destination managers in Ukraine should pay close attention to.

Further analysis with a larger sample may result in more comprehensive results on the subject. Analysis of travel blogs might be considered as well.

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