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Ukraine's destination image as perceived by U.S. college students

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The present study is an exploration of Ukraine's destination image as viewed by U.S. college students. Student market is a rapidly growing one and presents opportunities for emerging destinations like Ukraine. A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches was utilized to investigate the image of Ukraine and build a three-dimensional destination image model. Respondents were asked to answer three open-ended questions and rate the level of their agreement with pre-developed statements that pertain to Ukraine. Concepts conveyed by both methods were distributed along three continuums that comprise the destination image model. Implications for promotional and marketing efforts were suggested.

Keywords: destination image, Ukraine, student market, re-imaging

INTRODUCTION

Ukraine, the largest of the European countries and one of its oldest nations, boasts a variety of cultural, natural, and heritage assets. But compared to similarly historically rich countries of Western Europe, Ukraine also offers inexpensive budget travel. The combination of heritage and affordability turns it into a perfect destination for students, who often travel 'on a shoestring'. After the fall of 'iron curtain' Eastern European countries experienced growth in tourist arrivals and revenues (Johnson & Iunius, 1999). In 2005, Ukraine was one of the three Eastern European countries included in the UNWTO Worlds' Top 25 Tourism Destinations List (UNWTO, 2005). With the increased competition, Ukraine faces the challenge of diversifying its tourism product and attracting niche markets. There have been a few studies forecasting the future of tourism in Eastern Europe (Hall, 1999; Johnson & Iunius, 1999); however, it is essential to know country-specific data to be able to develop a multi-faceted destination image and make any predictions about attracting certain market segments, such as student travelers.

Students have become an increasingly active force in international travel, and constitute almost 20% of all international travelers (FIYTO, 2003). It is a lucrative market for many emerging destinations, including Ukraine. Virtually no research has been conducted examining Ukraine's destination image in general, or from the student perspective in particular. No previous studies have investigated the perceptions western students have of Ukraine, and their willingness to visit the country. To attain Ukraine's strategic goal of establishing a recognizable destination image and attracting lucrative student travel market, it is crucial to understand how Ukraine is perceived by western students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Destination image and image formation

Destination image concept is one of the foci in tourism promotion, but no agreement exists on its definition. Difficulty in definition and measurement are causes why a solid destination image framework was not developed (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Gallarza *et al.* 2002; Pike, 2002). Despite the confusion, destination image perceptions proved to be good predictors of consumer decision making patterns (Chen & Kerstetter, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003).

Formation of a travel destination image is a continuous process undergoing several stages. Echtner and Ritchie (2003) envisioned destination image with attribute-based and holistic components. They contain functional (tangible) and psychological (abstract) characteristics, ranging from those based on 'common' traits to unique-based. A suggested three-dimensional framework has continuums representing attribute-holistic, functional-psychological, and common-unique aspects of image. 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.

The 21st century market requires a reevaluation of the classic image formation process and rethinking of the role of information agents (Choi *et al.*, 2007). It is imperative to see how images are perceived within different demographic and societal groups, and create targeted marketing and promotion campaigns to tap into interests and preferences of these varied groups.

Student travel market

Student travel market is increasingly recognized as growing in importance by researchers and practitioners (Kim, Oh, & Jogaratnam, 2007). This recognition is supported by the statistic provided through Federation of International Travel Organizations: it estimates students to constitute 20% of international travelers, (FIYTO, 2003). Evans *et al.* (2008) argued a growing market to be more attractive than a static one, giving opportunities for entities to expand in line with the market growth. Thus, a growing market of student travel is of great interest to Ukraine as it presents opportunities for country's tourism industry. Kim *et al.* (2007) found students to be motivated by push factors: knowledge, sports, and adventure. Ukraine offers these, having an opportunity of capturing the students by triggering the push motives important for students.

METHODOLOGY

The conceptual framework used to investigate Ukraine's image is the three-dimensional model developed by Echtner and Ritchie (1993), consisting of intersected continuums: 1) attribute-holistic; 2) functional-psychological; 3) common-unique. Students of five universities in different geographic regions of the U.S. were selected into the study population, and subjects were surveyed through a combined qualitative/quantitative web-based questionnaire was. The questionnaire was comprised of three sections: 1) demographic information, 2) open-ended questions (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993), conveying functional holistic, psychological holistic, and unique components image, 3) scale items (modified from Echtner and Ritchie (1993), scale of 28 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale). Responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed with CATPAC software, determining key words and themes. The scale statements were analyzed

with principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation. Factor loadings were utilized to ascribe a name to each factor.

Echtner and Ritchie (1993) suggested separating the components of the three-dimensional destination image model into a series of two-dimensional diagrams. Intersection of the continuums within every two-dimensional model creates four quadrants. The twelve quadrants were filled with items of Ukraine's destination image. Keywords and factors were coded by the researcher according to the quadrants of the destination image model that they belonged to. An inter-coder measure was utilized to ensure reliability and consistency. Two researchers were asked to code attributes of destination image according to the quadrants they belonged to.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After data collection 200 usable surveys was obtained and analyzed. CATPAC analysis was conducted for each of the open-ended questions. The most frequent keywords for images that come to mind when one hears about Ukraine were: cold (20.0%), Russia (8.3%), mountains (7.1%), Europe (5.8%), people (4.6%), buildings (4.2%), culture (3.8%), poor (3.8%), snow (3.8%). For the description of the atmosphere expected in the country, the most frequent keywords were: cold (9.4%), friendly (6.5%), fun (5.3%), happy (4.5%), different (4.1%). While asked to name distinct tourist attractions, respondents mostly mentioned Kyiv (13.2%), church (8.8%), St. Sophia Cathedral (5.9%), city (4.4%), St. Michael Golden Domed Cathedral (4.4%).

Analysis of the scale items resulted in a six-factor solution. Factor 1 was named *comfort/security* and consisted of eight items related to the level of comfort and security a visitor would feel while at the destination. Factor 2, *cultural distance*, emphasized unique aspects of Ukraine's culture and its difference from other cultures; and it contained five items. Five items in Factor 3, *landscape*, were related to aspects of both natural and cultural landscape. Factor 4 *attractions* contained four items which were associated with attractions and places of interest tourists can visit in Ukraine. Factor 5 *atmosphere* is comprised of three items describing different features of the atmosphere in Ukraine. Three items comprising Factor 6 *accessibility* pertain to the country's physical accessibility: transport, prices, climate.

The destination image model of Ukraine was created by distributing items produced by responses to open-ended questions as well as scale items along the destination image continuums and in the appropriate quadrants. The resulting models are presented in Figures 1a-1c.

Figure 1a

Functional/Psychological and Attribute-Based/Holistic Continuums of Ukraine's Image

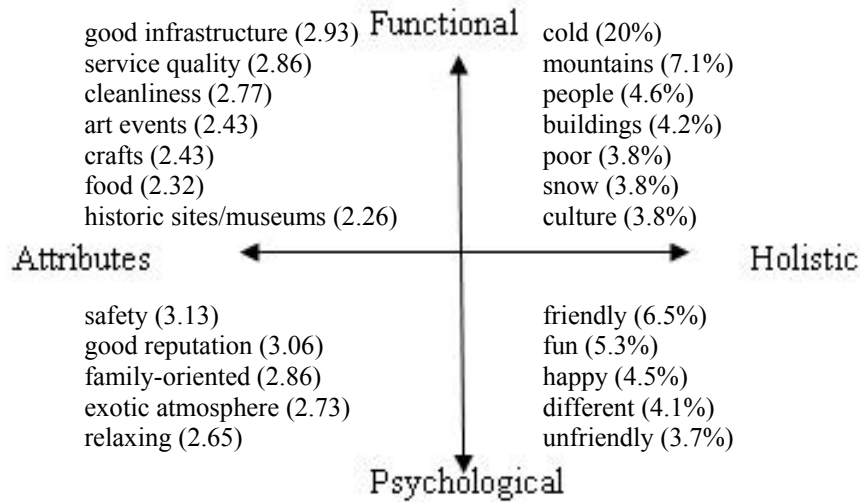


Figure 1b

Functional/Psychological and Common/Unique Continuums of Ukraine's Image

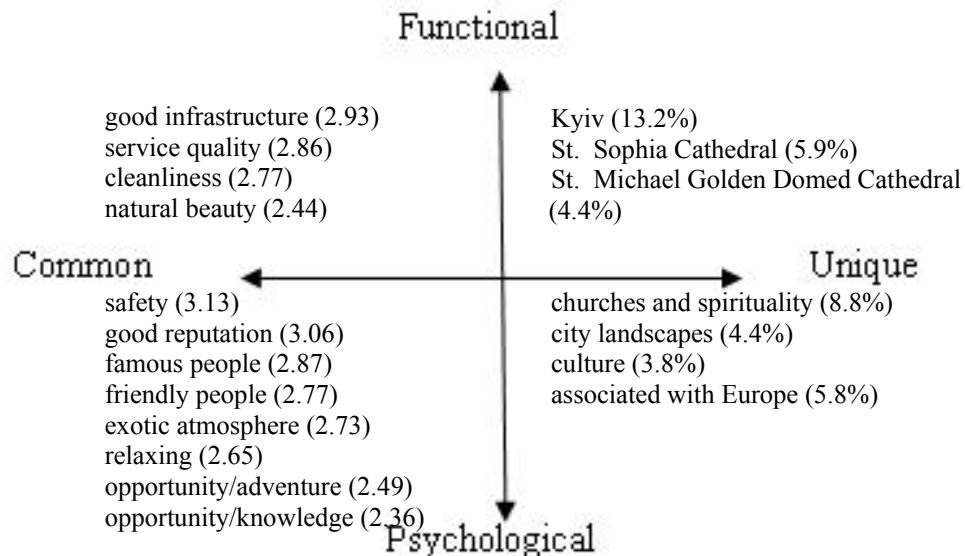
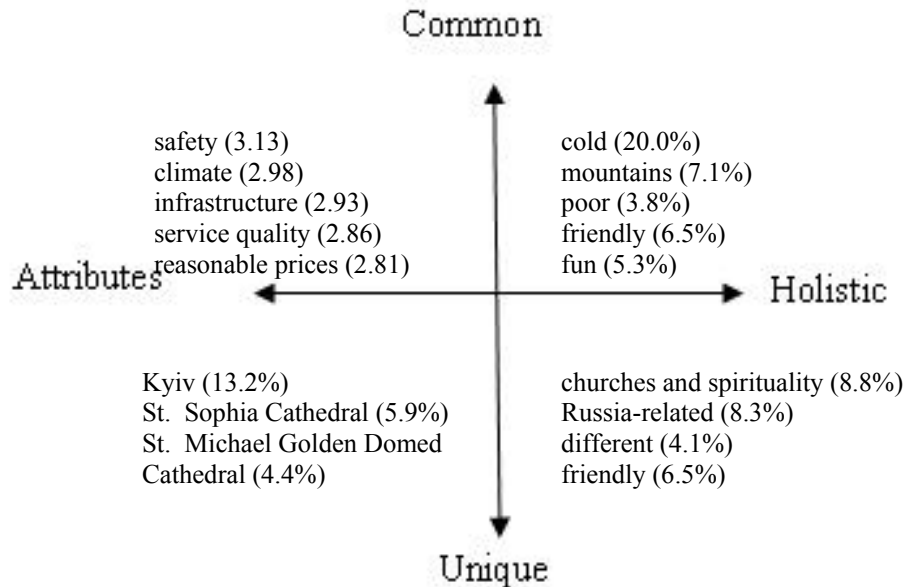


Figure 1c
Common/Unique and Attribute-Based/Holistic Continuums of Ukraine's Image



One of the most prominent features discovered by the current study is significant lack of respondent awareness about tourist characteristics of Ukraine. The level of awareness expressed by the respondents varied between items. Thus, 77.0% of respondents chose “Neutral/Not Sure” when asked whether they believe prices in Ukraine are reasonable, but only 42.0% respondents were unaware if one can see beautiful architecture in there. Some of the negative perceptions expressed show that Ukraine is still strongly associated with Russia, USSR and the communist past among the college student population. Positive images were mostly related to rich culture and traditions. There was a prominent impression of perceived “difference” and “cultural distance” as respondents felt culture in Ukraine is significantly different from home country.

CONCLUSION

The results obtained in the study confirmed the appropriateness of Echtner and Ritchie (1991) destination image model for analyzing images of emerging travel destinations such as Ukraine. The dimensional structure held true, all quadrants of the model were filled with appropriate image items, derived either from free elicitation of scale items. However, due to the low respondent awareness unique dimension of the model was underrepresented. The factor structure based on scale items approximated the one discovered by Echtner and Ritchie (1991) and Stepchenkova and Morrison (2006), and factor naming mirrored ones offered by previous research. Results proved that destination image of Ukraine is multifaceted and reflects all dimensions proposed by the model. However, active promotion is essential for raising awareness and strengthening the unique dimension of the image. Future studies investigating images of emerging destinations would find the given model instrumental in creating an encompassing understanding of tourist perceptions.

SIGNIFICANCE TO INDUSTRY

Ukraine's tourism authorities are under pressure to create a recognizable and versatile destination image and tap into lucrative target markets, such as student travel. Invaluable practical suggestions for destination management and promotion were offered based on the analysis of student responses. Entry interviews will ensure monitoring of student visitor attitudes and constant updates in destination perceptions; suggested steps of destination re-imaging and benchmarking will be instrumental in removing the negative links to Russia and communist past. Active promotion through social media is encouraged: web tools will allow for broad representation among the young population and successfully target college students. Niche tourism and nostalgic tourism will be excellent opportunities to increase visitation and attract varied traveler groups. Finally, customer satisfaction efforts and measures for place planning and design are offered to boost travelers' comfort once they visit Ukraine. Adherence to these recommendations will aid the industry practitioners in pursuing the youth travel market.

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