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Perceptions of International Tourism Destinations

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INTRODUCTION

A major barrier for tourism development in emerging countries is the misperception that a destination is unsafe to visit. Other barriers include that an area is unclean, lacks attractions, accommodations are of poor quality or that the local people are not welcoming to tourists. While reeducating people about the reality of a destination can help create a more accurate picture of the location, it is not an easy task. This is because the public may not have information provided to them for many destinations or it is of a negative event that has captured the interest of a broadcast station. Even conflicts or events of a small scale can have a considerable impact on the image of a destination because of ease of communication and broadcasting. The media has the ability to magnify negative events, and in turn, give them their own meaning and interpretation (Hall, 2002). There are many variables that may be skewed in the eyes of the tourists and therefore it is difficult to determine which factors are the most distorted. Developing countries in general are seen to have commonly accepted risks, such as being poor, insecure, and underdeveloped, which creates a negative image of them (Martinez and Alvarez, 2010). In addition, when there is animosity towards a country from a previous event, the destination image is formed through affective components, not cognitive (Alvarez and Campo, 2014). This means that perceptions are formed based on emotions or feelings associated with the destination, instead of tangible or physical characteristics. Determining which factors are most commonly misperceived is imperative to correcting this situation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study can help advance theoretical implications for the formation of perceptions toward tourism destinations and have a better understanding of the decision making process. Practical implications of this study include assisting researchers in finding effective ways to improve marketing campaigns to attract a larger number of visitors to developing countries, which have more difficulties attracting tourists since they tend to be associated with more negative images compared to developed countries. This can be done by identifying which factors of the location tourists perceive as being negative and which characteristics are the strongest factors in changing the perception of a potential visitor. This would give tourism the opportunity to grow in developing countries, allowing for more jobs to become available and the economy to improve. Perceptions of tourism destinations has been researched for many years to help vacation areas improve their image in order to attract more tourists (del Bosque and Martin, 2008; Reisinger and Mavondo, 2005; Beerli and Martin, 2004; Sonmez and Sirakaya, 2002; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Um and Crompton, 1990; Maser and Weiermair, 1998; Van Raaij and Francken, 1984; Myers and Moncrief, 1978). However, these studies have not compared multiple countries, moved past destination image to destination choice, or combine tourist typology with destination image.

Previous studies on the perception of tourist destinations have found multiple outcomes related to this research. The threat to safety is a strong deterrent to taking a vacation, but this can change from one geographical region to another (Kozak et al., 2007; Lepp and Gibson, 2008; Jonas et al., 2011). While the perception of risk is of high importance in the choice process, previous travel experience also has a strong influence on choosing a vacation destination (Sonmez and Graefe, 1998). These factors are important to build upon in continuing research and this study will combine multiple ideas that have been separately tested in past research.

The purpose of this pre-experimental survey study is to test the theory of decision making and tourist typology to analyze the perception of a country and its impact to influence

international tourists' destination choice. The independent variable, which is the image of the countries, will be defined as the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has, whether it is real or perception (Crompton, 1979). The specific independent variables of perception will include safety, attractions, infrastructure, levels of congestion, climate, affordability, hospitality, cultural difference, and geographic beauty. The dependent variable, destination choice, will be defined as an ultimate decision made among alternative vacation locations. Research will be conducted by surveying American residents to examine the relationship between perceptions of three countries in three different continents, Nicaragua in South American, Malaysia in Asia, and Botswana in Africa, and how this influences the desire to travel to these destinations. This study will examine the most influential factors that cause a positive perception of these three countries.

RESEARCH METHODS

Data will be collected by having a participant fill out a questionnaire regarding their perception of one of the three countries. Then a short marketing video of the three destinations will be shown and the participant will then take another questionnaire about the perception of the countries after the video. The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of what factors American residents perceive as positive or negative in these three countries as a vacation destination in order to attract more tourists to these destinations.

A pre-experimental survey will be conducted through online questionnaires. This method is used because it allows the researcher to collect sufficient amount of quantitative data fairly quickly to determine if there are patterns associated with the perception of these three countries. Also, online questionnaires allow a marketing video to be shown to the participants to determine if certain variables will change their perception.

Since there have been many studies related to the perceptions of tourist destinations, this quantitative study is meant to build upon the information that has already been discovered and determine its relationship to Nicaragua, Malaysia, and Botswana instead of exploring a new idea through qualitative research. Many researchers that have studied destination image have used a quantitative method for researching the topic using various data collection methods such as Likert scale questionnaires and content analysis of promotional material (Gallarza, Saura and García, 2002). An analysis of these studies showed that the use of an intervention based experimental repeated measures design has not been common in analyzing destination image (Lepp, Gibson and Lane, 2011). An issue with using a questionnaire is that it may miss some of the variables that effect the perception that participants have of an area. Another issue is that there could be multiple variables that the researcher would like to analyze, but the participant does not feel they are important or relevant. This could cause the participant to end the questionnaires early, especially if the questionnaire is interested in looking at multiple variables that cause the questionnaire to be very long. This can limit the overall sample size of the study. Participants will be asked to take the questionnaire by having the survey being posted to Facebook group sites whose participants are interested in traveling.

EXPECTED OUTCOME

This study will be examining these research questions and expecting the following outcomes:

1. What effect does the advertising intervention have on perception, controlling for tourist type, knowledge, and demographics?

Hypotheses:

- a. Advertising intervention creates a positive change toward a destination.
 - b. Tourists that are considered “non-typical” will have more positive change than “typical” tourists. “Typical” tourists are considered organized or individual mass tourists, while “non-typical” tourists are explorers or drifters. These terms are explained further in the literature review where the variables are described.
2. Which of the following variables influence perception? Safety, attractions, infrastructure, levels of congestion, climate, affordability, hospitality, cultural difference, and geographic beauty.

Hypotheses:

 - a) Safety and attractions will have a positive influence.
 - b) Cultural difference will have a negative influence.
 3. What effect do perceptions have on destination choice, controlling for constraints, alternate destinations, and hesitation?
 - a) The positive change in perception improves the chances of the consumer choosing the destination in which they experienced the marketing intervention.
 4. What effect does the increase in knowledge caused by the marketing intervention have on consumer confidence in regards to making a decision about visiting a destination?
 - a) The increase in knowledge improves confidence and decreases hesitation when choosing a destination.

RESULTS

T Test

A total of 256 questionnaires were collected from American residents (Botswana= 90, Malaysia=88, Nicaragua=78). The factors for perception variables were analyzed using t tests for all three countries.

Overall Difference in Perceptions After Intervention (I=yes,

	N	Mean Before	Mean After	Mean Difference	Std. Dev.	p	t
Safe	239	1.51	1.24	0.27	0.50	.000**	8.42
Expensive	238	1.82	1.67	0.15	0.46	.000**	4.95
Friendly	236	1.20	1.03	0.17	0.41	.000**	6.27
Scenic	241	1.10	1.04	0.06	0.31	.004*	2.90
Crowded	238	1.47	1.80	-0.33	0.58	.000**	-8.89
Exotic	241	1.20	1.05	0.15	0.40	.000**	6.04
Authentic	239	1.08	1.04	0.03	0.29	.074	1.80
Exciting	237	1.26	1.08	0.18	0.43	.000**	6.53
Relaxing	239	1.45	1.20	0.25	0.50	.000**	7.70
Clean	236	1.75	1.29	0.46	0.55	.000**	12.83
Attractive	238	1.30	1.10	0.20	0.47	.000**	6.62
Risky	238	1.42	1.68	-0.26	0.56	.000**	-7.11

When analyzing all three countries together only one factor, *authentic*, was found to not be significant, $t(238) = 1.80, p > .05$. The factor *scenic* was found to be significant at the .05 level,

$t(240) = 2.90, p=.004$, and the remaining ten factors were found to be significant at the .001 level. This shows that there was an overall positive change for all three countries in the perception of these destinations after the marketing intervention.

Overall Difference in Perceptions After Intervention

	N	Mean Before	Mean After	Mean Difference	Std. Dev.	p	t
Good value of money	236	3.49	3.56	0.06	0.75	.261	1.13
Beautiful scenery and natural attractions	240	3.82	4.36	0.53	0.82	.000**	9.96
Interesting cultural attractions	237	3.76	4.18	0.43	0.81	.000**	8.07
Suitable accommodations	237	3.32	3.57	0.25	0.89	.000**	4.25
Appealing local food	237	3.45	3.77	0.30	0.84	.000**	5.43
Great beaches and water sports	236	3.38	3.77	0.38	1.02	.000**	5.69
Quality infrastructure	237	2.72	3.16	0.44	0.85	.000**	8.07
High personal safety	236	2.65	3.10	0.46	0.83	.000**	8.58
Interesting historical attractions	237	3.47	3.78	0.35	0.88	.000**	6.11
Unpolluted and clean environment	236	2.85	3.63	0.80	0.97	.000**	12.64
Good nightlife and entertainment	236	3.01	3.34	0.31	0.87	.000**	5.55
Standard hygiene and cleanliness	235	2.72	3.33	0.60	0.92	.000**	9.96
Interesting and friendly people	236	3.69	4.06	0.36	0.68	.000**	8.06
Congested and heavy traffic	236	3.13	2.65	-0.50	1.04	.000**	-7.43
Pleasurable climate	237	3.62	3.98	0.38	0.80	.000**	7.26
Welcoming atmosphere	236	3.42	4.08	0.65	0.77	.000**	13.01

When analyzing all of the countries together, all of the factors were shown to be significant at the .001 level, except for *good value of money* which was shown not to be significant, $t(235) = 1.13, p>.05$.

Factor Analysis

Perception of Countries Overall Factor Analysis

	Tourism Characteristics	General Infrastructure
Beautiful scenery and attractions	.843	
Interesting cultural attractions	.746	
Pleasurable climate	.724	
Interesting and friendly people	.722	
Good value of money	.693	
Welcoming atmosphere	.657	
Appealing local food	.578	

Interesting historical attractions	.551	
Great beaches and water sports	.479	
Standard hygiene and cleanliness		.849
High personal safety		.819
Quality infrastructure		.744
Unpolluted and clean environment		.538
Eigenvalues	5.471	1.985
Variance Explained	42.087	15.267

A factor analysis with promax rotation was performed and the perceptions of the countries were placed into two categories, *tourist infrastructure* and *general infrastructure*. The items were from a 5 point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, which was adapted from the scales used by Baloglu and Mangalglu (2001) to study destination image from the perspective of US based tour operators comparing four Mediterranean destinations. The variables *congested and heavy traffic*, *good nightlife and entertainment*, and *suitable accommodations* were double loaded or scored less than .3 and removed from the analysis.

The factor analysis on the variables that tourists perceive of the destination conflict with the categories created by Beerli and Martin (2004). While the factor analysis for this study found *standard hygiene and cleanliness*, *high personal safety*, *quality infrastructure*, and *unpolluted and clean environment* fit into the category *general infrastructure*, these variables were placed in separate categories in Beerli and Martin's (2004) study. While the variables were labeled slightly differently, for the most part they are studying the same factors. The three main categories they used were *natural resources*, *general infrastructure*, and *tourist infrastructure*, with sub categories within the main. For their study they placed *unpolluted and clean environment* under *natural resources*, *quality infrastructure* under *general infrastructure*, *high personal safety* under *tourist infrastructure*, and *standard hygiene and cleanliness* was not listed in their analysis of variables.

Overall, this study shows that the marketing intervention does create a positive change in the perception of the destinations. Marketing companies should focus on making sure that the promotions are authentic and promote a good value of money because these factors did not improve significantly after the participants watch the commercial. Researchers studying destination image should also be consistent with the factors that they are categorizing in their research to help the overall advancement of this field.

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