

Depicting Image of China as a Tourism Destination: A Travel Blog Approach

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine international tourists' destination image of China as represented in travel blog discourse. Data were obtained from blog entries relating to trips to China posted on major travel blog sites. Content analysis facilitated by Atlas.ti 6.0 was performed on a total of eighty-nine China-related travel blogs. The study identified the most frequently discussed aspects of tourists' experiences in China. The results also indicated that the blog authors had mixed images of China, which was consistent with the conclusion of paradoxical images of China drawn by Xiao and Mair (2006). Marketing implications for China's tourism development based on the results were discussed.

Keywords: destination image, travel blog, China

INTRODUCTION

Destination image has become one of the most popular topics in tourism research (Pike, 2002). An understanding of images would assist destination marketers to develop effective promotional strategies and differentiate products from competing destinations. Research indicates that tourists are more likely to choose destinations with favorable images in their travel decision process (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Woodside and Lysonski, 1989). However, most image studies have focused on destinations in developed countries, while developing and less developed countries have received less attention (Sönmez and Sirakaya, 2002). Many developing countries view tourism as a viable opportunity for sustainable development and are interested in positioning themselves in the international arena. Despite various potential in developing tourism, developing countries lack concrete conception in the minds of consumers (Tasci and Kozak, 2006). On one hand, people have limited or no knowledge about developing countries. On the other hand, the economic, political and social problems associated with developing countries always provoke unfavorable or negative images (Grosspietsch, 2006).

China is a large country with beautiful scenery, abundant heritage resources and distinctive cultures. The important role played by China in international tourism has been well recognized. The World Tourism Organization (2000) estimates that by 2020 China will be the largest destination and the fourth largest tourism source of outbound travelers in the world. Although China has emerged as one of the top tourist destinations in the world, few studies

relating to China can be found in tourism literature (Ryan and Gu, 2007). The literature review of destination image for the period of 1973-2000 by Pike (2002) produced the same evidence. Among 142 articles dealing with destination image, only three articles measured the image of China as a tourism destination. None of the studies captured views of actual visitors. It is crucial to know what visitors think about the destination when making marketing efforts (Tasci and Gartner, 2007).

Blogs are gaining popularity among many Internet users. It is reported that the most popular online activity tourists conduct during the trip planning process is reading travel blogs and other tourist comments (Gretzel, Yoo, and Purifoy, 2007). In travel blogs, tourists usually publish their personal travel stories and recommendations in the form of diaries or product reviews (Schmallegger and Carson, 2008). Therefore, a travel blog reveals every aspect of a tourist's experience at a specific destination and can be used as a tool to understand a tourist's perception.

The purpose of this study is to examine China's image as perceived by international tourists. It is accomplished by analyzing the content of China-related travel blogs. To be specific, three research questions were addressed in this analysis: (1) What are the most frequent words or phrases tourists use in their blogs to describe China? (2) What are the positive and negative aspects of China's image as indicated in major travel blogs? (3) What implications can be made from the identified images for China's international tourism?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Destination image

There have been numerous studies on destination image (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Castro, Armario, and Ruiz, 2007; Echtner and Ritchie, 1993; Milman and Pizam, 1995; Woodside and Lysonski, 1989). Researchers agree that destination image refers to a tourist-based image (perceived image) rather than a marketer-based image (projected image) (Li and Vogelsohn, 2006). The destination image in the minds of consumers might not be consistent with the image that is projected by destination marketers. Destination image has two interrelated components: the cognitive component referring to an individual's belief or knowledge about destination attributes, and the affective component referring to an individual's feelings towards the destination (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Beerli and Martin, 2004; Gartner, 1993; Li and Vogelsohn, 2006). Moreover, the affective component is formed based on a function of the cognitive component. The combination of the two components results in an overall image which is related to positive or negative evaluation of a destination (Beerli and Martin, 2004). Echtner and Ritchie (1993) developed a three dimensional continuum of destination image: attribute-holistic, functional-psychological, and common-unique. In the attribute-holistic continuum, a destination image is composed of perceptions of individual features and overall impressions. In the functional-psychological continuum, destination image can be identified as the elements of the image which are directly observable or measurable and those which are non-observable or non-measurable. In the common-unique continuum, both common characteristics and unique features of destination image can be recognized.

The formation of image was defined by Tasci and Gartner (2007) as “a construction of a mental representation of a destination on the basis of information cues delivered by the image formation agents and selected by a person”(p. 414). Tourists acquire destination image in many ways, including advertising and promotion, news accounts, magazine stories, conversation with acquaintances, and past visits (Gartner and Hunt, 1987). Based on previous literature, Tasci and Gartner (2007) categorized sources of image formation agents as (1) supply-side or destination, (2) independent or autonomous, (3) demand-side or image receivers. It is noted that the destination-projected image might not be always the same as the received image, and the perceivers can also form images through personal experience. In addition, information transmission between suppliers, intermediaries and receivers has become more complicated since the arrival of the Internet (Choi, Lehto, and Morrison, 2007).

Blog as an information source

The rapid development of information technology, particularly the Internet, has created a new type of information source (Jang, 2005). According to Pan and Fesenmaier (2006), the Internet has become one of the most effective means for tourists to seek travel-related information. With Web 2.0 application, the Internet offers new ways for tourists to learn about tourism products and services directly from other consumers. Tourists can post blogs, respond to comments and feedback, and participate in communities on the Internet. Online tourist information search can result in sufficient information, multiple comparisons of products, services, prices and availability, and optimal decisions (Jang, 2005). Hence, the Internet has great potential to influence consumers’ perceived image.

Consumers become ‘the media’ themselves in the era of the Internet (Thevenot, 2007). The web creates new forms of word-of-mouth communication through electronic media, such as online discussion forums, newsgroups, electronic bulletin board systems, blogs, and other social networking sites (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006). Travel blog is defined by Puhlinger and Taylor (2008) as “forums and individual entries which relate to planned, current or past travel.” Reading travel blogs is one of the most popular online activities (Gretzel et al., 2007). From the current real story of travel experience on blogs, consumers can gain insights on various aspects of a destination. Recently researchers suggested that travel blogs provide a new way of understanding consumers’ perceptions of a destination, its products and services (Choi et al., 2007; Pan, MacLaurin, and Crotts, 2007; Wenger, 2008). Travel blogs reflect more genuine attitudes and opinions of tourists and help destination organizations and enterprises identify unsuspected features (Akehurst, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

Data collection

Text data collected from travel blogs were analyzed by word frequency and content analysis. The sample of websites was identified on February 28, 2009 through Google’s PageRank system, which ranks websites based on their popularity (Pan et al., 2007). Three blog websites were given the highest values of 7 and regarded as the most popular sites. They were www.tripadvisor.com, www.travelpod.com and www.virtualtourist.com. All three websites have

a hierarchical directory of blogs about destinations based on continents, countries, states and cities. After entering each website, the researchers located the page for travel blog entries specifically talking about China. Within blogs, pages are arranged in reverse chronological order by the date they were posted. All the blogs posted between February 8, 2008 (six months before the 2008 Olympics Games) and February 7, 2009 (six months after the 2008 Olympics Games) were downloaded. Blog entries that were not relevant to a specific travel experience in China were eliminated. A total of 89 blog entries in English were collected, including 58 from travelpod.com, 23 from tripadvisor.com and 8 from vitaltourist.com. The valid blog entries with their titles and posting dates were saved into separate Word files.

Data analysis

The text from the collected blogs was analyzed using Atlas.ti 6.0 and content analysis. Several “smoothing out” procedures were performed on the data before the analysis to deal with misspellings, synonyms, and multi-word concepts (Stepchenkova, Kirilenko, and Morrison, 2009). Afterwards, the Atlas.ti. program was run to get a list of the frequency of the words. Words such as “way,” “place,” “minute,” “room” and other similar words were excluded from the list, since they were frequently used in travel-related text, but contributed little to a meaningful interpretation. The final result is a list of interpretable keywords. The most frequently used words or phrases revealed many aspects of travel experience in China, including transportation, attractions, accommodations, dining, entertainment, etc. However, when tourists wrote about a place or an activity, even food, they might express their opinions or attitudes. The most frequently used words or phrases can not indicate whether tourists like it or not. Therefore, content analysis was then performed on the travel blogs.

Content analysis is a research method for the subjective interpretation of textual data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). According to Stepchenkova et al. (2009), content analysis is often used in tourism-related studies and destination-image research to analyze textual and pictorial materials from media sources and the Internet. In this study, the content of the blogs was manually coded and analyzed for common themes by two researchers. It should be mentioned that qualitative analysis software was considered. However, in order to better understand and interpret the complex blog data, researchers manually analyzed the data and generated categories by using the outline feature in Microsoft Word.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Seventy-six people contributed to a total of 89 blogs. All blogs were written during their visits to China. About 75 percent of blogs were diary-style travel stories documenting tourists’ activities at a specific destination. Twenty-two out of eighty-nine blogs were opinion related, where tourists expressed their feelings or attitudes towards China. The most popular months for posting blogs were May, June and July, which are also peak seasons for international tourists to visit China. Nearly half (47 percent) of all blogs were posted in these months, followed by February/March. The least popular months were November/December with only 3 percent of blog posting.

Frequency analysis

The most frequently used words or phrases that appeared more than three times were grouped into eleven categories, namely travel/transportation, accommodation/restaurant/food, cities/attraction/other places, entertainment/activities, price/quality, infrastructure, people/life, policies/regulations, history/culture, environment/safety, and descriptors (adjective and adverb). “China” and “Chinese” were the most frequently used words, since all the blogs were from the directory of China in each travel blog website and were China-related. “Tour” is the most discussed aspect of trips because three quarters of bloggers kept details on where they went and what they did every day.

“City” was the fifth most frequently used word, displaying that cities were major stopovers for international tourists. While traveling in China, it is a common practice that international tourists first arrive in major cities and then visit different attractions around the cities (Li and Ma, 2003). These cities represent China as a destination from different perspectives. Most blog authors (69%) wrote about only one city in China, and the rest reported multiple cities. The most popular combinations of destinations for international tourists visiting several cities were Beijing-Xi’an-Shanghai, Guilin-Yangshuo-Longsheng-Shenzhen-Hong Kong, and Lijiang-Zhongdian-Jinghong.

Bus and train are the most popular form of transport within China. Blog authors traveled between cities by trains. Within a city, buses are a common mode of transport. For most blog authors, taking trains in China is regarded as part of their traveling experience. The most commonly visited attractions in China were the Great Wall, Tiananmen Square, Terra Cotta and some natural features, such as rivers and mountains. Moreover, the word “Olympics” ranked high because China hosted the XXIX Olympic Games in 2008. International tourists could feel the “Olympic” atmosphere everywhere in China. In addition, tourists also wrote about a range of aspects related to Chinese life and society. Some of them may affect tourists’ travel experience. For instance, several bloggers wrote about unpleasant experiences of being stared at by Chinese. Other bloggers raised the issue of pollution and considered China’s economic development as achieved at the cost of serious pollution. Further, a number of descriptive words, such as “good,” “large,” “new,” etc. were also found in the list of the most frequently used words or phrases, indicating the impression of specific tourism products and services or China in general.

Content analysis

Image attributes developed by Echtner and Ritchie (1993) were adopted as a categorization frame. Their original study included 35 attribute-based components of image, ranging from functional to psychological. With a comprehensive and convenient format for visual representation of image attributes, the structured scale is capable of representing such a large and diverse country as China in a better sense. However, it failed to capture the unique and holistic image aspects (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993). Therefore, a new category of “general feeling/overall impression” was added, since some blog authors talked about their overall feelings towards China. Further, all the positive and negative comments were put into relevant categories by researchers independently. Upon completing categorization, two researchers compared and finalized the results together. The content of blogs was finally coded through two

dimensions: the image attributes identified by Echtner and Ritchie (1993) and the positive and negative aspects of the attributes.

Content analysis identified a total of 787 sentences describing various aspects of China, including 405 positive and 382 negative sentences. In general, international tourists had mixed perceptions on China as a tourism destination, which corresponds with the conclusion drawn by Xiao and Mair (2006). They called their results “a paradox of images” indicating China was perceived with contrasting images. Moreover, the results showed that international tourists had positive perceptions on scenery/natural attractions, fairs/exhibits/festivals, hospitality/friendliness/receptiveness and historic sites/museums. In contrast, negative comments were spotted on crowdedness and local infrastructure/ transportation, demonstrating major problems in China’s tourism industry.

Since the XXIX Olympic Games were held in China in 2008, blog authors showed their interest in the Olympics. However, most of their comments were pessimistic. For instance, some bloggers complained about the difficulties of getting and renewing a visa during the Olympics because of the tightened security. Moreover, visiting Tibet was limited due to political reasons. Other bloggers were dissatisfied with the increased price, especially hotel price when the Olympics were around corner. In addition, blog authors were concerned about China’s great climate change experiment during the Olympics.

Although international tourists had mixed perceptions on various aspects of China’s image, their overall impressions tended to be more positive (twenty out of twenty eight). Since China started its tourism activities in 1978, the tourism industry has developed tremendously with annual growth of 15.9% in international arrivals and 19.1% in foreign exchange earnings (CNTA, 2009). The success of the tourism industry proves the attractiveness of China as a tourism destination.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the current study was to measure the destination image of China by content analysis of travel blogs. Travel blogs reflected various aspects of tourists’ experiences in China, from traveling between destinations, visiting attractions and eating food to overall impressions. Blog authors had a mixed image of China as a destination. China was perceived positively in terms of scenery/natural attractions, fairs/exhibits/festivals, hospitality/friendliness/receptiveness and historic sites/museums. International tourists gaze primarily upon China’s cultural attractions, historical sites and natural sceneries (Xiao and Mair, 2006). Therefore, these positive dimensions should be used to promote China’s image. In comparison, dimensions associated with negative words were crowdedness and local infrastructure/transportation, indicating the major weaknesses of China’s tourism industry. Considering the speed of online word-of-mouth, the Chinese government should address these issues as soon as possible.

This study was not immune to limitations. Content analysis relies on subjective judgment, which involved potential bias. In addition, the generalizability of this study was limited for several reasons. First, the travel blogs used in this study were not collected from a random

sample of all the blogs about China. Instead, they were collected from searching major travel blog sites. Secondly, only blogs written in English were analyzed. Therefore, the images depicted in this study can not fully represent the overall destination image of China; rather, the image was based on tourists from English-speaking countries. In the future, researchers can apply the same procedure to travel blogs written in other languages, such as Japanese, Chinese, etc., to obtain a complete understanding of China's image. Further, the demographic information of bloggers is unknown. Consequently, their viewpoints may not fully represent the opinion of all tourists. Future study could focus on blog hosting sites where the demographic information is provided or can be inferred. Analysis of travel blogs could be divided based on different market segments. Thereby, the results will be more meaningful for destination marketers.

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