Baseline and Enhanced Image:
The Effect of Online Information Search

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Introduction

Tourist destination image has drawn extensive research attention since Hunt (1971) first introduced the concept to tourism literature. Marketing and communication science scholars have long used the concept of image to describe people’s perception of a product, store, or corporate entity. Tourism researchers applied this concept to destination contexts, and expanded its definition to “include the perceptions or impressions a person has of a place” (McClinchey 1999, p. 9). To date, many researchers follow a two-dimensional conceptualization of destination image, which suggests that destination image reflects both one’s ideas about the physical properties of a place (cognitive image), and his or her feeling and evaluation on the destination (affective image) (Baloglu and Brinberg 1997; Echtner and Ritchie 1991; Walmsley and Young 1998).

In regard to the image formation process, Gunn (1972) suggested that potential tourists’ image of a destination could be categorized as “organic” and “induced” images. Organic image relies on noncommercial sources of information, while induced image is image derived from commercial tourism information. The organic-induced image typology has been widely cited in the tourism literature (Tasci and Gartner 2007), although empirical support on it is still lacking. Further, most extant studies have focused on the role of actual visitation on the formation of a post-trip image, while the formation of image before tourists’ on-site visitation (i.e., what Gunn termed as “organic” and “induced” image) is still largely unknown. Nevertheless, the development of pre-trip image seems to be more fundamentally relevant to tourists’ destination choice, and hence more critical to destination marketers’ primary interests.

Theoretically, putting Gunn’s (1972) seminal idea into current market environment, one might question the practical relevance of this 35-year-old typology. Gunn (1972) proposed that information coming from noncommercial sources will lead to tourists’ organic image, while that from commercial sources and deliberate destination marketing efforts will lead to induced image. However, when today’s consumers look for travel information, they are most likely to search and evaluate both types of information. The Internet has made it neither necessary nor possible to distinguish the two types of information. Put differently, in today’s market and technology environment, there can hardly be any “organic” image constructed purely from noncommercial sources.

Further, the key difference of organic and induced images is destination marketers’ level of control and deliberation: the former is by definition not controllable, while the latter is. This clearly illustrates a supply-driven mentality. From tourists’ perspective, a more relevant typology of image may be based on their own type and level of information search effort. This paper hence proposes to use the term “baseline image” to refer to (potential) tourists’ destination image stemming from passive or ongoing information gathering, whereas “enhanced image” is their image built from active and intentional information search.

Based on the foregoing discussion, a model was proposed (Figure 1). In this model, tourists’ destination image was conceptualized as comprising of cognitive and affective dimensions. It is postulated that active information search will change the baseline image
into enhanced image. This study focuses mainly on the effect of online information search, and is hence guided by two research questions:

RQ1: Does online information search influence subjects’ destination image? Put simply, will subjects’ “baseline image” and “enhanced image” be different as a result of subjects’ active information search?;

RQ2: How does online information search process influence subjects’ destination image?

Methods

To answer the research questions, a mixed method study was conducted, with 34 undergraduate students who had only limited knowledge about China being asked to develop an itinerary for a one-week vacation to China. A combination of quantitative (i.e., pre- and post-exercise surveys) and qualitative (i.e., think-aloud protocol, a process tracing method, and log analysis) approaches were used. The respondents were asked to fill out an online survey first. The goal of this pre-exercise survey was to collect each subject’s individual characteristics, including their travel experience, and their baseline image of China. In order to familiarize the respondents with the think-aloud method, prior to their search task, a training session was performed to coach the respondents to talk about their thoughts (Pan and Fesenmaier 2006; Ramney and Boren 2001). After this, a travel planning exercise to China was conducted; lastly, the subject filled out a post-exercise survey regarding their image of China after the search and their levels of satisfaction toward their travel information search and trip planning process. The total session lasted less than one hour.

After the interviews, a transcription of proceedings was developed which incorporated both the think-aloud protocol combined and process tracing method. Further, participants’ on screen actions and verbalization explaining those actions were coded. The data was then coded through the open-coding process as described by Strauss (1987).

This study followed Li and Vogelsong (2006), and examined the image change in two ways: 1) quantitatively comparing same subjects’ pre- and post-exercise image ratings, and 2) having them report their image change. Method 1 measured subjects’ cognitive, affective, and overall image in both pre- and post-exercise surveys. Specifically, cognitive image was measured by 6 sets of 7-point bipolar adjectives adopted from Ong and Horbunluekit (1997), and affective image measured by Russel’s (1980) 4 bipolar affective items. Further, the respondents were asked to rate their overall images of China, by selecting on a semantic differential scale from 1 (highly unfavorable) to 10 (highly favorable). Method 2, on the other hand, asked the subjects in the post-exercise survey, “Did your image about China change after your online trip planning?” and then if changed, “please describe how.”

Findings

Four subjects’ data were excluded either as they have been to China before, or due to computer glitches. Among the rest 30 subjects, there are 13 males and 17 females. The subjects were relatively experienced in traveling and online information searching, although their overall knowledge of China was limited.

RQ1 focuses on whether the information search process may lead to any changes in subjects’ destination image. To test the relationship between pre- and post-exercise image
attributes, a pair-wise $t$-test was performed on the 10 image attributes. It was found subjects’ post-exercise overall images were significantly more positive than their pre-exercise overall images ($p<0.001$). In the same vein, statistically significant changes ($p<0.05$) took place in all four affective image attributes. In contrast, no statistically significant different changes occurred on the six cognitive image attributes, although three of them observed marginally significant differences ($p<0.1$). Further, 20 subjects, or 66.7 percent of the subjects reported that their image did change after the information search exercise.

To answer RQ2, the authors delved into the qualitative data generated, and first reviewed subjects answer to the question “If your image about China changed after trip planning, please describe how.” Among the 20 subjects who claimed to have experienced an image change, the majority of (17) subjects reported changes regarding their cognitive beliefs. Most reported that their image change was due to knowing more about China. Six subjects’ self-reported changes were regarding their affective image, or contained an affective component.

After reviewing participants’ answers on how their image changed, the authors further delve into the videos, weblog data, and transcription of their information search exercise. Several themes emerged from the data. Interestingly, some subjects brought their baseline image into the information search. Their information search process was hence more about confirming established images, rather than exploring new information.

**Application of Results & Conclusions**

The present study suggests that it is the level and type of information search that may distinguish the different stages of image development in tourists’ mind. The baseline image and enhanced image are proposed to describe image formation during the pre-trip stage. The mixed method study provided empirical support to the proposed model. Interestingly, significant and positive changes occurred on all affective image measures, but not on any of the cognitive image items. Nevertheless, when asked to describe their image changes, most subjects reported changes on their cognitive beliefs about China. Further, the qualitative data generated during subjects’ information search process evidenced that, their destination image could be confirmed, strengthened, and to less extent, corrected by information search. Moreover, subjects’ information search process was also influenced by their baseline image.

From the practitioners’ perspective, an interesting finding of this study is that although the cognitive aspect of destination image is easier to manipulate, it is not that susceptible to change in tourists’ mind. Affective image, on the other hand, can be a driver to increased involvement and engagement in travel products. In this study, subjects had to become excited about a product before they were willing to spend the time and effort to go more into depth about making it happen. Website design, as a result, needs to be designed in a manner in which the client can develop an emotional attachment to the product. Those websites did a good job in this typically include lots of photos, the descriptors on the web site were targeted verbs, and most these sites contain positive reviews and other WOM related concepts. If a high level of engagement can be achieved, the likelihood of the search going to a more intensive cognitive based level is increased. As a cognitive based search becomes more engaged, the likelihood of choosing the destination is also increased.

Essentially, marketers have to capture consumers’ heart before they capture their head.
References


Figure 1. The Conceptual Model

**Baseline Image**  
(Before Active Information Search)

- Cognitive Image
- Affective Image

**Enhanced Image**  
(After Active Information Search)

- Cognitive Image
- Affective Image

**Overall Image**

**Active Information Search**