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Dream Destination: A concept of perception of leisure travellers

BO (Wendy) GAO
wendy.gao@polyu.edu.hk

Hanqin Qiu Zhang
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, hmhanqin@polyu.edu.hk

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GAO, BO (Wendy)
PhD candidate

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
School of Hotel and Tourism Management
Hong Kong, China
Email: wendy.gao@polyu.edu.hk

ZHANG, Qiu Hanqin
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
School of Hospitality and Tourism
Email: hmhanqin@polyu.edu.hk

ABSTRACT:

This exploratory study adopted grounded theory approach to investigate the concept of dream destination and its perception by travellers. The data were collected through three methods: Online travel forum, in-depth interview and focus group. Triangulation of data collected from the above three methods were used to prove that whether several independent sources converge on them, or at least do not oppose them. Based on the iteration of data analysis, the dream destination was classified into six categories and the conceptual framework of dream destination was generated.

KEY WORDS: Dream destination, Perception

INTRODUCTION

Dream destination is a term frequently appearing at destination marketing promotions. A number of books and travel magazines list the top 10 or 100 dream places around the world which must be seen during one's life, with titles such as *Life Dream Destinations: 100 of the World's Best Vacations*; *Life Heaven on Earth: 100 Places to See in Your Lifetime (Life)*; *1001 National Wonders: You Must See Before You Die*.

In addition, many marketers claim that their destinations provide dream honeymoons or dream vacations for visitors. In order to set a dreamlike image for tourists, they promote elements, such as beach, sunrise and sunset with a romantic atmosphere as evidence of dream destination. Yet, do these elements represent the full meaning of dream destination?

In academia, a number of researchers have investigated the concepts of destination image formation and perception. However, the issue of dream destination has been rarely considered with few previous studies mentioning it in destination image research. The term "dream" denotes a vague and abstract concept that lends itself to subjective interpretation. Despite this difficulty, it is important to study the phenomenon as motivations of present day travelers become increasingly complex and are often spurred by perceptions that have little to do with any notion of objective reality. To explore the concept of dream destination and how leisure travellers perceive it, a qualitative research was conducted with following objectives:

- 1) To identify the concept of dream destination
- 2) To examine the perceptions of dream destination from viewpoint of leisure travellers
- 3) To explore the emerging dimensions of dream destination

PERCEPTIONS OF TOURIST DESTINATION

In marketing and tourism context, perception is considered as a major influential predictor in directing decision making and consumer behaviour (Richardson & Crompton, 1988; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). Each individual selects, organizes and interprets received information in a unique way. This image depends on both a specific stimuli which are related to the environment and the individual's own characteristics and situations (Beerli & Martin, 2004). Destination perception accumulates from destination attributes, both physical and mythical (Correia, do Valle, & Moco, 2007). Tourists pre-experience a particular destination through various sources about the destination attributes.

Destination attributes are commonly used in empirical research to measure tourists' perception of a destination (Turner & Reisinger, 1999). Tourist destinations consist of a number of attributes that differentiate them from each other. These are listed by Reisinger and Mavondo (2002) as accessibility, amenities, accommodation, attractions, and activities. There are also psychological aspects to the tourist experience. Tourists take into consideration most or all of those attributes when making their decision to visit or revisit a particular destination. Potential travellers make comparisons of the attributes of different destinations before they make their choice and decide on the destination that offers those attributes that they deem important (Turner & Reisinger, 1999). At the same time, different market segments place different levels of importance on different attributes, resulting in different destination choices (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2002; Scott, Schewl, & Frederick, 1978).

Of the empirical studies of destination perception, most studies have examined the perceptions of particular places, such as countries or cities. Issues of measurement have been of great interest to tourism researchers and practitioners (Driscoll, Lawson, & Niven, 1994; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). Those that criticize the process assert that it is not possible to fully understand the cognitive process because objective outside observers cannot look inside the mind of the subjects. All they can do is to observe the outcomes of the cognitive process. Therefore, the investigation needs to rely on the subjects' explanation of their own behaviour to understand how they react to their perception of the environmental situation and/or changes in the environment.

Echtner and Ritchie (2003) found two common approaches in their review of techniques used in the measurement of product image perception: Structured approach and unstructured approach. Echtner et al. (2003) and Pike (2002) concluded that the majority of destination image studies have employed structured methodologies to measure destination image. Nearly all the researchers have used either semantic differential or Likert type scales in the measurement of destination image.

It is not possible to measure specific characteristics of the product through structured methodologies, although they are easy to administer and simple to code and results can be analyzed through sophisticated statistical techniques. This method makes them unsuitable for the measurement of unique characteristics. Unstructured methodologies, on the other hand, lend themselves to the expansion of the unique features of a destination. Unstructured methodologies with extensive qualitative research conducted during the scale construction phase, is crucial in studies that aim to examine the destination image (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Jenkins, 1999; Pike, 2002).

THE IMAGE FORMATION OF TOURIST DESTINATION

Some scholars argue that destination is not simply a series of individual products, but one that combines those with experience that derive from both the physical setting and various travel services (Cohen, 1979; Hu & Ritchie, 1993; Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987; Mayo & Jarvis, 1981; Ross, 1998). Tourism is a dynamic force, premised on and sustained by difference over space. It takes myths and dreams and inscribes them on to physical places. Tourism destinations are thus transformed from ordinary geographic spaces through the perspective of visitors and continuous invention of landscapes of symbolic consumption (Young, 1999)

Tourists' images of the place are built more on their perceptions than reality because tourists are not able to pre-test the tourism product prior to actual experience (Gartner, 1993). The destination image is a result of the process of these perceptions. Models of image perception process help us understand the preceding factors that influence image formation process. Gartner (1993) proposes that image formation process as a continuum from over-induced to autonomous and organic. By over-induced, he refers to conventional forms of advertising. Autonomous image formation agents consist of independently produced reports, documentaries, movies, and news articles. The organic agents refer to information obtained about a destination from experience gained through previous travel to the area. Only the autonomous agent has significant impact on individual and societal beliefs because people are likely to consider the information as relatively unbiased when compared to traditional advertising (Kim & Richardson, 2003).

Fakeye and Crompton (1991) proposed a third stage of image formation with the complex image. They asserted that, 'upon visiting ... selected destinations, a tourist will develop a more complex image resulting from actual contact with the area' (p. 11). Other factors that affect destination image include previous experience, degree of familiarity with the destination, cultural background, geographic origin, and expectation of the destination. Baloglu and McCleary (1999) found that perceptions of the countries are different between visitors and non-visitors.

Non-visitors formed their perceptions based on an organic image, which is a result of exposure to newspaper, magazine, movies and TV reports while visitors unify the image directly from the destination they visit.

The destination is, therefore, framed ideologically by marketers and tourists that arrive with a set of preconceived ideas, which Urry (2002) calls 'the tourist gaze' including 'romantic' and 'collective'. 'Romantic gaze' refers to the gaze by better educated visitors that have the cultural capital to construct meaning from places and events. 'Collective gaze' belongs to those that are less informed and therefore less discerning and more in need of similar gazers to verify the point of gazing in the first place.

METHODOLOGY

Supported by qualitative research method, this exploratory study adopted grounded theory approach to investigate the concept of dream destination and its perception of leisure travellers. Grounded theory method is suitable to study when the objectives of research are in constant interaction with the research contexts. It enables researcher to generate a theory by an iterative process involving the continual sampling and analysis of qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method is recognized as a systematic and strict research tool in qualitative study because of its credibility of data collection and analysis procedures (Riley & Love, 2000).

The population of this study consisted of leisure tourists who are well-travelled. Tourists with a range of travelling experiences were focused on because these tourists can tell rich stories about their travel experiences. The data were collected through three methods: Online travel forum, semi-structured in-depth interview and focus group. The in-depth interview and focus group are supportive qualitative methods to explore deeply the respondents' viewpoints, feelings and perspectives of the concepts. Researcher can pick up nonverbal cues that show discomfort, stress, or problems from the respondents and clarify doubts that the respondents have by repeating or rephrasing the questions. The usage of the Internet for tourism survey and data collection has been studied a decade ago and is quite common nowadays (Schonland & Williams, 1996). Particularly, the Internet has become a major medium for potential travellers to search tourist destination information and travel blogs and forums have become a channel for tourists to share individual travel experiences and opinions.

To minimize the subjectivity of the qualitative research often found in such studies, triangulation of data collected from the above three methods were used to establish the trustworthiness of the study. Triangulation received increasing attention in qualitative research in recent years as it strengthens qualitative findings by showing that several independent sources converge on them, or at least do not oppose them (Decrop, 1999). It was thought that using multiple data collection methods would not only provide rich and valuable information about the investigated phenomena, but also test one source of information against another and scrutinize alternative explanations by bringing different forms of evidence from different management levels (Mehmetoglu & Altinay, 2006). Furthermore, the data was analyzed by two authors independently and then discussed together, in order to enhance the credibility of the emerged categories. At the initial stage, the data was analysed line by line to extract the most frequently identified the dream destinations, travel motivations and the attributes of the dream destinations. On the base of the frequency lists, the selective coding was employed and the categories were emerged by using constant comparative data analysis within and among the each source of data, and previous literatures.

DATA COLLECTION

The data were collected from the travel forum on the www.travelblog.com, which is a popular travel related website (Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007). The questions were raised at travelblog forum in December 2006 and April 2008:

- What is your top 5 destinations in the world, and why? and
- This question has nothing to do with 'best places to visit. It is a more subjective question: is there one country you have always dreamed of visiting?'

The respondents for these two questions were 26 and 15 respectively. Those experienced travellers consist of 19 males, 14 females and 9 ambiguous respondents, whose age range from 20 to 60. After data analysis of online travel forum discussion, the semi-structured in-depth interview was conducted at Shangri-La, Yunnan, China in July 2008, because this place has been promoted as the "earth paradise". In total, 12 travellers were interviewed. Among these 12 interviewees, there were five males and seven females from Europe and North America, the age range from 20 to 55 years old. The interviews lasted from 30 to 45 minutes. All the contents of interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

The third method, focus group interview, invited six participants, including four females and two males, from 22 to 29 years old. One came from Britain, one was from Hong Kong, and the rest were mainland Chinese. They were all fond of travelling and have been to three or more countries. The focus group discussion lasted 80 minutes and was moderated by one of the authors. The contents of the discussion were digitally recorded. The record was transcribed and sent back to the participants for data checking. After receiving the participants' responses, two authors analyzed data separately, and then cooperated to determine the final categories.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

According to grounded theory method guidelines, the data collection and analysis were done jointly. Online forum discussions were collected and analyzed first. The results (see table 1) obtained through the online forum discussion show that if destinations could provide these elements to tourists, they have the potential of becoming top destinations. These results provided general conceptualisation of dream destination. When considering the top destinations, visitors also highlighted the expenditures and convenience. To further examine the how respondents perceive dream destinations without constraints such as money, time, physical problems, the in-depth interview questions were prepared:

- If you had unlimited money and time, where would the dream places be in the world and why?
- How would you like to describe your dream place?"

Table 1: Results of online forum discussion

Respondents	Countries		Reasons	
41	Total	67	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mysterious history and culture • unique landscape/natural scenery • friendly people • unbeatable food • shopping • diversity attractions and activities • friend/family relationship • novelty/adventure • amazing/exiting/romantic atmosphere 	
	2-4 times	27		
	5-12 times	USA (12)		
		Italy (9)		
		Egypt and France (8)		
		Australia, British, Spain (6)		
		India (5)		

Table 2: results of in-depth interview

Countries		Reasons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Africa • Antarctica • Argentina • Australia • Bhutan • Cambodia • China (Tibet) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Galapagos Island • India • Italy • Mauritius • South America • Turkey (Istanbul) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • history and culture • unique landscape/natural scenery • mingle with local people • unbeatable food • shopping • diversity attractions and activities • family relationship and love • diverse • relaxing • enjoyable architecture

Through the analysis of travel forum and in-depth interview (see table 2), the attributes of “dream destinations” became clear, while the definition of “dream destinations” still remains in the shadow. In the focus group interview, the study sought a definition for the dream destination using questions below and results show at table 3.

1. In your opinion, what is the dream destination?
 - 1) Give 3-5 key words to describe your dream destination?
2. Image that you're free to travel anywhere you like, where would you like to go?
 - 1) Why do you choose those places?

- 2) Do they have something similar to your Dream Destination?
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3. Please tell me some destinations you have visited?
 - 1) Among them, which one is closest to your dream destination?
 - 2) Could you give some description of that destination?
 4. What tourist destinations, according to your understanding, would be perceived by tourists as a dream destination?

Table 3: results of focus group interview

Countries	Reasons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China (Tibet) • Greece • Nicaragua • New Zealand • USA • “my home town” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • novelty and notably • untouched places • natural environment and scenery • history and culture • friend/family relationship • diversity of attractions and activities • emotions/mood/feeling

DISCUSSION

Online Forum

At the first glance, the top destinations are various. Some prefer modern large cities, such as Paris, Sydney, Melbourne, New York (OF14, 19, 21, 04, 07). Others prefer small, non-touristic places.

I like going to countries that most people don't (OF17)

I like places off the beaten path and just a little it scary (OF23)

After second thought of those reasons, five patterns of dream destinations emerged:

1. Historical and unique cultural significance
Egypt was also my dream, I had tried to learn hieroglyphs and was passionate about ancient stories (OF28)
Bhutan: relatively intact ancient way of life, (OF01)
2. Unique landscapes and sceneries
Indonesia; the volcanoes, nature, sights, beaches (OF26)
Bolivia: interesting cultures, ridiculously tiny distance between glaciers and jungles; Galapagos: fantastic land and sea! (OF01)
3. Diversity attractions and activities
Peru - friendly people, can do desert, mountain and jungle trips all in the one country, Inca ruins (OF02)
Indo – for its pure diversity (OF15)
4. Friend/family kinship
California, USA - visit my Mom and brother again (OF 24)
El Salvador; nature, colonial towns, and specially because i want a visit a friend who lives here (OF26)
5. Local people and unbeatable food are also major reasons for one's dream destination.

Semi-structured In-depth Interview

The dream place was described through concepts of comfort; safety; good balance between nature, locals and tourists; providing fascinating travel experience; hard to be found by people; quiet and peaceful. Specially, interviewee #4 mentioned broad space, and interviewee #2 said that a dream place should be a kind of small village hiding in somewhere and waiting for discovery. On the contrary, there were three interviewees (Int. #5, 6, and 7) said that they did not have any dream destination. Interviewee #6 said: “*I am where I want to be because the only place that I am comfortable with is inside me. Therefore, as long as the people I care for are with me, it doesn't really matter where I am*”.

Compared with the data collected from online forum, the dream destinations mentioned in in-depth interviews were analogous, except Antarctica and moon. Also, the types of destinations derived from two sources were similar. The new message emerged from in-depth interview was good balance between nature, people and

tourists. The interviewees underlined that a dream destination is an ideal place and hard to be found, because the world changes every day.

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Focus Group Interview

Personality and emotion were identified as key factors influencing the dream destinations. The characteristics could be grouped by natural environment and personal feelings. The former includes beautiful sightseeing, no air pollution, outstanding architecture, full of energy, and a place for thinking. The latter consists of tranquil, peaceful, comfortable, romantic, and regenerative. It is not ordinary and not too touristic but should have some available facilities for tourists, and locals should be used to foreigners. In other words, a good balance is necessary for a dream place.

Summary of Results through Triangulation

The comparison of data collected from three methods illustrates a similarity of patterns of dream destination, except emotions/mood/feeling were more emphasized by the participants in focus group interview. Based on the iteration of data analysis, the dream destination was classified into six categories: history, culture and art driven; natural unique scenery and landscape driven; diversity activities driven; atmosphere of the place driven; social relationship driven; and emotions/ mood/feeling driven.

The first four categories are related to the resources of destinations. Visiting unique cultural and natural attractions is the chief motivation of tourists leaving their homes.

I went to the Greece, the broad sea really satisfy my condition. There is no air pollution, remote, the broad ocean, the sky is blue, and the sea is very blue. (FG P1)

My dream place would be Istanbul, Turkey. It is the only place that had not only met my expectations but exceeded them. I have never seen so much history in one city before... (ID 15)

Diverse activities including satisfying services offered by destinations add value to tourists' experiences.

Food is very important; another is shopping mall or place for shopping. (FG P6)

Both attractions and services create an atmosphere of destination for tourists. The atmospheres could be friendly, peaceful, comfortable, mystic, exciting and novel.

One condition is that there must be something new there for me to experience, to explore. (FG P5)

But if you ask me to describe a dream destination, I think I prefer peaceful, tranquil and romantic. . (FG P3)

The last two categories more stem from the feelings of tourists. They consider destinations having a connection with their friends or relatives or destinations visited with their friends or relatives as dream destinations.

I think as long as we travel with good friends. Any place can be dream destination. (FG P3)

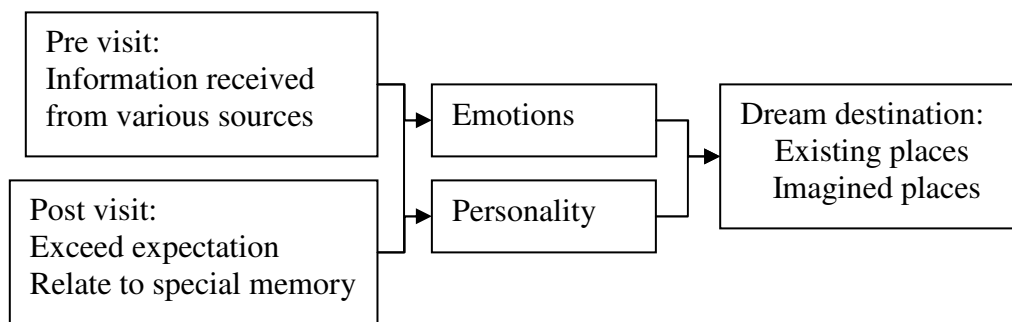
I've been there before, and met my boyfriend there. (ID11)

Finally, tourists' favourite destinations and evaluations of dream destinations are changed constantly with their emotions and moods.

... for girls, we put lots of emphasis on the emotion, so if we have happy memory or happy feeling, we will call it as a dream destination. (FG P4)

On the basis of data analysis, the conceptual framework of dream destination (see figure 1) was generated as a place on the top of one's mind, with desire to visit or just keep in mind to maintain the illusions. These places could be existent and/or imaginary. The perception of dream destination maybe formed before visiting through the information received from various sources, such as advertising, books, movie, friends, even a place appeared in one's dream, as well as after visiting, when a special experience was attached with that place, such as exceeded expectations, and/or a special relationship linking with that place. Personality and emotions also affect the formation of a dream destination. This result is in accordance with the destination image formation model proposed by Baloglu and McCleary (1999), and Beerli and Martin (2004). In these two studies, information sources and personal factors are major factors for perceived destination image.

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A destination is a narrative created by marketing and is never a physical place with clearly drawn boundaries. Rather, it is a place that exists on different geographic levels, structured by processes and experienced by social actions. Each destination is a combination of attractions, facilities and services viewed from a commercial angle. Sociologically, it is a collection of ‘images’ which are experienced by interaction with the tourists (Framke, 2002).

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, a picture of dream destination emerges as related to both emotions of tourists and destination characteristics. Tourists’ emotions include the prevision of dream destination, the experiences in destinations and memory of destinations. Some respondents argued that only after visiting the travellers can judge a destination as a dream destination, and some respondents considered that a dream destination is only a beautiful image which can not be a reality, while a majority of respondents have clear minds about their dream destinations, where they are and what the features destinations have, even the dream destinations may change from time to time, according to different contexts. This pre-perception of dream destinations stems from tourists’ individual preferences and information of destinations delivered by different sources, such as advertisement, word-of-mouth of friends and relatives. Although respondents appreciate numerous features of dream destinations, those characteristics could be concluded into six patterns, which are history, culture and art, natural, diversity activities, atmosphere, relationship, and emotions/mood/feeling. After visiting a destination, if tourists obtain a special memory or experience in that destination, they may recall this destination as a dream destination.

This finding was equivalent to Leiper’s (1990) argument that the two key elements in image formation process are tourists and information of destinations. Information acts as a connection between the tourist and the destination attractions as well as a catalyst for visitation. The site that they ‘create’ ends up becoming more important than the actual site itself (Crang, 2004). The meaning of the destination is decided in the mind of the visitor, rather than by the objects and displays encountered. Based on tourists’ own desires, memories and concerns, they create meanings in their minds that sometimes have little relation to the reality of the attraction they encounter (Campbell, 1990; Voase, 2002). The guiding principles of the experience are shaped before arrival to the destination through the process of daydreaming (Campbell, 1994; Voase, 2002). According to Campbell (1994), the visitor is an artist of the imagination. He/she takes images from memory and rearranges the immediate environment to render it more pleasing.

In sum, the dream destination does have some material attributes. Destinations that have diverse activities and unique cultural or natural resources, such as mysterious heritage, beach and sea, have more chance to be recognized as dream destinations. What is more important, dream destinations are influenced by tourists’ emotions, from prevision to retrospection. Destinations management organization should transmit appropriate images of destinations by suitable channels and highlight the experiences in destinations rather than resources.

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