



Apprehending The Tour Operators Destination Brand Knowledge

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Abstract

The present study aims to understand and assess the tour operators destination brand knowledge of an Indian heritage tourism circuit the 'Golden Triangle'. The concept has been measured utilizing Keller's conceptual framework of the brand knowledge. The brand nodes in the framework are analysed in detail with reference to the tourist destination mainly the circuit as a tourism product. The viewpoints of tourists has also been considered from the lens of tour operators. Findings are contrasting for foreign tourists and their domestic counterparts. It was found that tour operators had adequate levels of brand knowledge about the tourism circuit that can be utilized in framing competitive strategies for the 'Golden Triangle' as a destination brand.

Keywords: Destination, brand, tour operator, knowledge, Image, India

Introduction

Tour operators exercise greater control over the destination brand (Andriotis, 2003; Bastakis et al. 2004; Hornby et al. 2008; Erskine and Meyer, 2011; Novelli and Hellwig, 2014; Tomigova et al. 2015; Silva et al. 2018) as they have influence on demand patterns because of their expertise knowledge about the destination (Carey et al. 1997). They are crucial for destination sustainability (Carey et al. 1997; Schwatz et al. 2009; Xin & Chan, 2014; Cavagnaro et al. 2015; Chan, 2016; Lucrezi and Saayman, 2017; Goffi et al. 2018). Tour operators significantly influences the pricing strategy of the destination stakeholders (Alegre and Sard, 2017; Picazo and Gill, 2018) and leads to poverty reduction at a destination (Briedenham, 2011; Erskine and Meyer, 2011) because of which they constitutes an important part of destination marketing system and their cooperation is essentially required by a destination marketer (Hornby et al. 2008). Hence, the present study sought to apprehend the destination brand knowledge of the tour operators about the 'Golden Triangle', which is a popular heritage tourism circuit route of India.

Previous research studies measuring tour operators perspective are centred around the issues of their influence (Klemm and Parkinson, 2000; Assaf et al. 2011; Andriotis 2003; Bastakis et al. 2004; Hornby et al. 2008; Novelli and Hellwig, 2014; Buckley and Mosaz, 2016; Tomigova et al. 2016), sustainability (Carey et al. 1997; Xin & Chan, 2014; Cavagnaro et al. 2015; Chan, 2016; Lucrezi and Saayman, 2017; Goffi et al. 2018) and functionalities like pricing (Alegre and Sard, 2017; Picazo and Gill, 2018) and quality management (Mak, 2010; Mak, 2015). The two studies by Silva et al. (2018) and Mulec and Wise (2012) measured brand image and brand knowledge for Brazil and Vojvodina-a region in Serbia from the tour operators' perspective. However, a research study measuring destination brand knowledge of a heritage tourism circuit in an Indian context from the tour operators' perspective is not evident in the literature, which this study intends to measure, thus filling a gap in knowledge



Literature Review

Tour operators and their influence on the destination

Anticipating the future of package tour operators, Evans and Stabler (1995) predicted that tour operators will face more challenges as the customer would be more affluent and sophisticated in the 21st century. However, their need would be satisfied by the small and medium size tour operators. Taking the example of Namibia, Novelli and Hellwig (2014) considered the role of tour operators as being very important to meet the UN Millennium Development Goals of poverty and hunger eradication. Considering the role of small tour operators, Briedenhann (2011) expressed that they also have a significant role for local communities through pro-poor tourism. Erskine and Meyer (2012) also stated that tour operators have an equivalent role of poverty reduction as structured institutions. The tour operators participation in the destination marketing systems is required to support destination marketers for destination marketing (Hornby et al. 2008).

Klemm and Parkinson (2000) elucidated that tour operators have a negative effect over the destination sustainability because of their dominant strategies. There should be a balanced collaboration between them and the other role-players of the tourism industry. The findings were based on the vertical integration of tour operators in the United Kingdom. Andriotis (2003) regarded tour operators as the most powerful and influential factor for the destination and they were tending to manipulate push and pull factors of tourism processes from the commercial end. Bastakis et al. (2004) analysed the tour operators' influence on small size accommodation providers for Corfu-an eastern Mediterranean destination. Corfu was staged as a destination with operational and organizational problems linked from Greek tourism. It was discovered that SMTE's were heavily dependent on the tour operators and got influenced by them on price and negotiations. Tour operators demanded good quality at lower prices, which was difficult for the SMTE's. Tour operators were also not found to be loyal for the destination and displayed an inconsistency of commitment. However, some advantages exist to work with the tour operators for SMTE's. The tour operators share their expertise, and also drive for a better tourism product, and this leads to organizational and operational efficiency and facilitates tourism growth in the region. Bastakis et al., (2004) suggested courtesy, honesty, and limiting the percentages of rooms available to the tour operators and direct selling activities by the accommodation providers. Tomigova et al. (2015) measured the attractiveness of Portugal as a tourist destination from the Czech tour operators' perspective. The study identified that lack of promotion and awareness are the major reasons which make Czech tourists not consider Portugal as a desired tourism destination.

Picazo and Gill (2018) identified that the marketing strategies of the tour operators have a significant impact on the prices of holiday packages (sun and beach) because of their brand, accommodation ownership, segmentation, targeting and promotional strategies adopted by them. Fifteen tourist destination in each of Spain, Turkey and Egypt were considered in the study and holiday brochures were analysed. Alegre and Sard (2017) analysed the pricing strategies adopted by British and German tour operators in Mallorca- a region in Spain. It was found that in the German market a market leader strategy is been followed; however, in the British market, a uniform pricing strategy has been adopted because of an economic crisis.

Mulec and Wise (2012) considered destination image and destination awareness as an important component via which to develop a destination brand. They measured the concept from the tour operators' perspective for Vojvodina- a destination in Serbia. It was found that the destination had low awareness and the respondents could not relate much as far as destination image is concerned because of low awareness This was coupled with the fact that the researchers believed that non-existence of destination image is better than the negative image for an emerging tourist destination. It was concluded that firstly, the tour operators must be aware and have a positive destination image and then -only, can they promote the destination to their clients. Silva et al. (2018) measured overall destination image from the



tour operators' perspective for the Brazilian tourism industry. The overall destination image was composed of a cognitive image, affective image and marketing communications; primarily an induced image. Visitation influence was taken as a mediator between the three components and the destination overall image. Cognitive image and marketing communications were found to be affecting the overall image and visitation influence was moderating the relationship. However, the effect of affective image was found to be contrasting. The research was specific to the Brazilian tourism industry, thus it limits the application to another destinations.

Operations of the Tour Operator

Chand and Katou (2012) determined the factors of partner selection by Indian operator industry. The sample of the study consisted of UK, USA, Canadian and French tour operators. Nationality was found to be the major criterion for partner selection. Other determinants in descending order include alliance performance, efficiency in package formulation, technical and local operational expertise and marketing system and status. Guo and He (2012) examined the partnership problems between the tour operators and accommodation providers in the tourism industry. Tourism hotels were found to be fixing the prices on a wholesale basis for the rooms and tour operators were found to be determining the prices of the tour packages. Quantity discount based revenue sharing led to cooperation between two players in a centralized scenario. In a Russian study, Yevstafyev and Yevstafyev (2015) found that the tour operators with high reputations and having a high geographical concentration of their agents networks, tended to partner with travel agencies in comparison to the tour operators.

Two studies (Mak, 2011& Mak, 2015) are focused on ISO certification in the tour operator industry. Mak (2011) elicited the factors as to why tour operators adopt ISO certification, and what the difficulties are which are experienced by them in implementation of ISO. Brand image building, promotion and standardization were found to be the key reasons to implement ISO, however; high cost, less receptiveness by the staff and reduced efficiency over a long period of time were severe challenges in ISO implementation. Mak (2015) measured the perception of travel agencies in China and Hong Kong and found that the organisations promote ISO certification but its sustenance is a challenge. Buckley and Mossaz (2016) tracked the decision making of specialist luxury travel agents for wildlife tourism. It was found that travel agents sell a product based on their knowledge; their decision is based on their fast-intuitive thinking grounded on their personal experiences as compared to an external information. Potgieter et al. (2013) emphasised that a marketing intelligence system should be adopted by the tour operators for an effective decision making to result.

Assaf et al. (2011) presented a scenario of Portuguese tour operator survival in a tough environment. It was argued that because of changed market conditions tour operators finds it difficult to achieve growth and economies of scale until they are a larger organization or a part of one. Raikonen and Honkanen (2013) argued that tour operators provides a package tour, however, satisfaction from the package and tourist experience, depends on the services provided by other stakeholders including tour operators. Hence, the role of tour operator is confined in tourist satisfaction.

Tour Operators and Sustainability

Carey et al. (1997) analysed the role of tour operators for destination sustainability. They discussed that tour operators directly and indirectly have economic, socio-cultural and natural impacts on a destination. They argued that sustainable tourism significantly depends on tour operators' strategies and the strategy of the other stakeholders in the tourism industry. Cavagnaro et al. (2015) measured the Kenyan's tour operator opinion towards sustainable tourism in Kenya. It was found that tour operators know what sustainable tourism is and they know their role in sustainable tourism development, despite feeling lack of institutional pressure for it. Chan and Tay (2016) had a similar to that of Cavagnaro et al. (2015) as they considered that the tour operators follow responsible tourism practices (specific to Kinabalu National Park-Sabah) for sustainability, subject to market environment-opportunities and



challenges. Organizational benefit was the prime push motive for the tour operators to follow responsible tourism. In another study by Goffi et al. (2018) a worldwide survey of the tour operators was conducted and it was found that tour operators are highly oriented towards sustainability and they are sustainably engaged. The significant difference was found to be according to different geographies as African and Asian tour operators were more oriented towards sustainability when compared to UK tour operators.

Lucrezi and Saayman (2017) measured the dive operators' perspective towards sustainable scuba diving tourism in Mozambique and Italy. It was found that respondents had positive attitude towards sustainable tourism; however, sustainable tourism practices were not adopted for scuba diving. The study was specifically undertaken for scuba diving tourism. Schwartz et al. (2008) provided a six step supply chain management framework. The steps are; first, "engage your business" ; second, "integrate your policy into your business"; third, "conduct a baseline assessment of suppliers"; fourth, "prepare and implement an action plan; and fifth, "monitor and report on progress made". The implementation of the framework depends on the size of the tour operator.

Mc Nicol and Rettie (2018) measured tour operators perspectives towards the environmental supply of guided tours in Canadian national parks. They considered environmental supply as a concept, which integrates commercial goals with environmental management goals that lead to sustainability in natural areas. That A study was unique in nature and made a significant contribution to existing literature.

Circuitous Tourism

The literature review witness only a single study by Zheng (2015) on the concept of circuit tourism. It was mentioned that suggested destinations near a mainframe destination based on the recommendation by others (tour guides or local people) develops a kind of map for the entire trip, which gives rise to the development of a tourism circuit.

Research Gaps Identified

The review of literature closely examined various studies, which are focused on the tour operators' perspective. The different fields of study emerging from the review include tour operators and their influence on the destination; their operations; their impact on sustainability and circuitous tourism represented by an individual study. However, a study measuring the destination brand knowledge from the perspective of tour operators in an Indian context for a heritage tourism circuit does not appear in the literature. This is an apparently huge gap, on which,- this study has been conducted. Hence, this study aimed to capture the tour operators' destination brand knowledge of a heritage tourism circuit - the 'Golden Triangle' in India.

Rationale for the Study

In seeking to bridge the gap, the study hand-picked heritage tourism segment because of its importance to Indian tourism industry as the country is the world famous heritage destination for its monuments, culture and traditions. The 'Golden Triangle' which includes three heritage cities; Delhi, Agra and Jaipur was chosen because of its relevance to the Indian tourism industry. The monuments of the circuit are in the top 5 list of the most visited monuments by the domestic tourists and the foreign tourists as well between 2014-16 (Indian Tourism Statistics, 2017). The 'Taj Mahal' topped the ranking in domestic tourist visits as well as foreign tourist visits (Indian Tourism Statistics, 2017). Out of the top 5, 4 monuments (Taj Mahal-Agra, Qutub Minar-Delhi, Red Fort-Delhi, Agra Fort-Agra) are in the 'Golden Triangle' in terms of domestic tourist visits. All the top 5 monuments (Taj Mahal-Agra, Agra Fort-Agra, Qutub Minar-Delhi, Humayun's Tomb-Delhi, Fatehpur Sikri-Agra) were visited by the foreign tourists from 2014-16 belonging to the tourism circuit only. This statistics depicts the significance of the circuit for the tourism growth of the country.



Tour operators have been selected as a unit of analysis because they are an important source of information for the tourists and they can significantly influence their decision regarding holiday destination (Tomigova et al. 2015). Tour operators projects brand identity based on their knowledge about the destination. The concept of destination brand knowledge based on Keller's (1993) framework has not been covered in earlier studies; hence, the present study aims to measure the concept from the lens of the tour operators.

Research Methodology

The research objective of the present study have been formulated based on the research gaps identified from the review of literature and are presented below:

1. To measure the destination brand knowledge of the 'Golden Triangle' from the tour operators' perspectives.

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted as they provide more in-depth information about the subject (Cooper and Schindler, 2003). The data was collected from the tour operator's offices. First, they were approached directly at their offices and requested to participate after ethical aspects were considered, and then the study objective was informed. The branch head of the tour operators' offices was interviewed. Tour operators who were providing the trips to the 'Golden Triangle' were purposefully selected. A small sample of 30 tour operators was chosen as it was difficult to find the tour operators, who were selling the tour of the circuit.

The data obtained was analysed through a deductive content analysis approach. Content analysis is mainly concerned with the identification of themes and categories from the textual analysis.

deductive approach is followed when "the researcher wishes to retest existing data in a new context" (Catanzaro 1988, cited by Elo and Kyngas, 2007). In the present study, the concept of destination brand knowledge has been retested for Indian tourist destinations. The three steps process-preparation, organization and reporting (Elo et al. 2014) has been utilized to synthesize the data. The *Preparation* phase primarily included approaching the tour operators and collecting the data and this has been explained earlier in this section. The *Organization* phase included the categorization, abstraction, interpretation and checking the representativeness of the sample.

The categories were predetermined based on the Keller's framework, thus the responses to each category were reviewed thoroughly and the similar points from all the responses were noted down together. The points of dissimilarity were also noted separately. After extraction, interpretations were made and structure and logical connection of data was checked by the authors separately, which is a part of the *reporting* phase.

Data Analysis

This section captures the tour operators' destination brand knowledge about the 'Golden Triangle' as a destination brand based on Keller's framework, which is provided below:

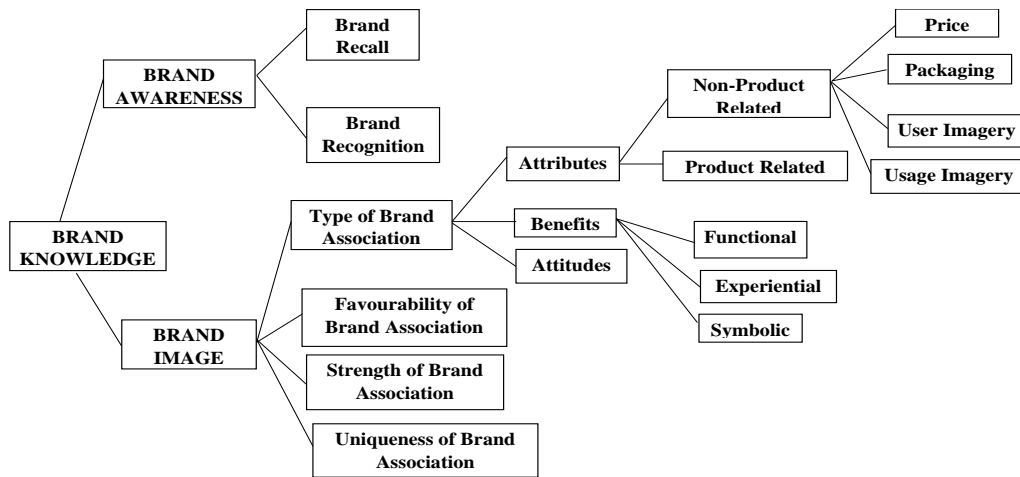


Figure 1: Dimensions of Brand Knowledge

Source: Keller(1993), Dimensions of Brand Knowledge (Full end text reference is provided)

The categories have been adopted from the Keller’s brand knowledge framework. The two major categories are brand awareness and brand image, which have been explored in detail in the present study.

Destination Brand Awareness Of The ‘Golden Triangle’

Under this category, the tour operators knowledge about the brand awareness of the ‘Golden Triangle’ among the tourists was checked. The synthesis of the transcripts suggested that the ‘Golden Triangle’ is highly popular amongst the tourists as it has the world famous destination- the ‘Taj Mahal’, and the tourists also know the name of the circuit. Most of the tour operators mentioned the ‘Taj Mahal’. As one of the tour operator’s said:

“Obviously it is world famous as we have Taj Mahal”.

Tour operators held an opinion that the tourism circuit is high on awareness among the foreign tourists as well as the domestic tourists. Foreign tourists were found to have more inclination to visit the ‘Taj Mahal’ and the domestic tourists had greater interest in visiting Delhi. Hence, it can be safely concluded that the tourism circuit is high in terms of destination brand awareness among the tourists from the tour operators’ perspective. It shows that the tour operators must focus on serving their clients by providing quality experiences and they need to concentrate less on their promotional activities.

Destination Brand Image Of The ‘Golden Triangle’

Brand image has been primarily described through brand association in Keller’s brand knowledge framework. Hence, the destination brand image has been measured through the different brand nodes of brand association which are present in the framework. In this category, the tour operators’ brand association nodes for the circuit have been analysed,

Types of Brand Association

Brand association is manifested in three types mainly attributes, beliefs and attitudes. According to Keller (1993) attributes are the descriptive features or characteristics of the product. In this study, attributes represented the distinguished characteristics of the destination which can be either product related or non-product related.

Attributes

The tour operators regarded monuments and cultural heritage of the circuit as the destination characteristics which can be regarded as the destination related (**product related**) attributes of the ‘Golden Triangle’. The tour operators mentioned “Choki Dhani” a tourist attraction in



Jaipur as being a cultural extravaganza for the foreign tourists. Additionally, participation of tourist in fairs and festivals of the place adds some charm to their experience. In other words, a segment of heritage tourism described the essence of the tourism circuit. Tour operators had adequate information about all the monuments of the three cities as they were able to explain the itineraries in detail. They had a clear idea about the tourist preferences, and the attractions or the monuments where tourists mainly visit. In terms of **non-product** related attributes it was found that the **price** and **package** of the circuit is decided by the tour operators depending on the customization demanded by the tourist. It was identified that the average rate of package ranges between 5000-6000 rupees per person.

To measure user imagery and usage imagery, the questions were framed in simple language to make tour operators understand the questions easier. Tour operators were asked about the demographic details of the tourists so as to measure user imagery. This represents what kind of person uses the product (Keller, 1993). In the present study **user imagery** represents the different types of tourists or people who visits the 'Golden Triangle'. It was found that people of different age groups and of different economic backgrounds, visit the circuit, which signifies that the circuit has something for everyone. **Usage imagery** represent the situation under which a product is used. In this study, two major attributes have been identified by the tour operators, namely that foreign tourists consider their trip to be undertaken for leisure purposes, as they travel overseas for it, while the domestic tourists tend to consider the trip as a getaway from their busy daily life schedules, which enables them to relax and release their stress.

Benefits

Keller's (1993) framework defined three benefits which are functional, experiential and symbolic. Functional benefits are related with the product related attribute satisfying the physiological and basic needs. In this regard, tour operators defined the tourist interest was to visit historical monuments of the Mughal era. By visiting local markets and shopping, this adds value to the tourists' experience as they learn more about Indian culture. Experiential benefits represents the feelings with the usage of product. The respondents stated that good levels of basic amenities and other facilities are available in the circuit which leads to good experiences for the tourists. One of the tour operators mentioned that "*Sometimes tourists feels nostalgic when they visit monuments*". Symbolic benefit was found to be mainly associated with the 'Taj Mahal' as tourists feels a sense of pride by visiting one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Attitude

Keller (1993) stated attitude was an overall evaluation of the customer and the favourable feeling for the brand. It was found that tour operators believe that most of the tourist returns to their homes far happier because of their good experience at the 'Golden Triangle'. Tour operators opined that tourists have loyalty for the circuit and they thus repeatedly visit the destination which reflects they have positive attitudes concerning the 'Golden Triangle'.

Favourability of Brand Association

Tour operators combined opinion reflects that the 'Golden Triangle' is the first choice of tourists either foreign or domestic as the desired destination to visit for the heritage tourism segment in India. They stated that it is the most popular heritage tourism circuit of India and many travellers, domestic or foreign to country have high preference for it. The 'Taj Mahal' is the key reason for the high popularity and preference among the tourist for the "Golden Triangle" as it is also amongst the most visited monuments in India for a number of years. Apart from the 'Taj Mahal', tour operators stated that tourists wants to experience Indian royalty heritage through their visit to Jaipur. The forts and palaces of Jaipur are known in the world for their stories and rich Indian history. Some of the palaces been converted into heritage hotels which are the tourists main attraction to visit Jaipur; in addition, they want to see modern India via



Delhi. These findings present the notion that tourists are positive and have favourable brand association for the tourism circuit.

Uniqueness of Brand Association

Uniqueness of brand association represents the recall of existing association and how additional associations can be linked with other nodes in the human memory (Keller, 1993). In this context, tour operators highlighted that tourists also associate monuments and culture with the 'Golden Triangle' and do not focus more on other kinds of tourism available in the circuit like pilgrimage tourism, adventure tourism and event tourism. It means that less unique brand associations exist among the tourists as well as the tour operators for the circuit. Hence, the tour operators should also focus on the other segments of tourism such as for example, ecotourism apart from heritage tourism in the 'Golden Triangle' so as to enhance its value propositions and brand appeal in both the domestic and foreign markets.

Conclusion

This study is based on the conceptual framework of brand knowledge provided by Keller (1993). In this study, the destination brand knowledge of the tour operators about the 'Golden Triangle' as the destination brand has been assessed. The study is based on in-depth interviews of the tour operators and the data is analysed through a deductive content analysis approach. The analysis section is structured according to the different brand nodes in Keller's (1993) framework (see figure 1).

It has been identified that the tourism circuit constitutes a segment of heritage tourism and other forms of tourism are in nascent stages, which need to be further developed. Foreign tourists were found to be inclined towards Agra and Jaipur. Domestic tourists had a liking for the charm of Delhi. For foreign tourists, the trip is leisure travel; while, for domestic tourists it is a travel to escape their daily busy schedules. The data analysis section indicates that tour operators had adequate brand knowledge about the 'Golden Triangle' with special reference to Keller's (1993) brand knowledge framework. It signifies that the tour operators can easily understand their customer's needs based on their knowledge about the destination and can thus cater to them accordingly. It can be safely concluded that the circuit is mainly associated with heritage tourism including culture and monuments and tourists have good experience and develop loyalty for the destination.

However, the study also had a few limitations. The sample size of the study was too small to make generalizations. Another limitation of the study was its qualitative nature; in this regard, quantitative analytics could have strengthened the findings. Any related future research should focus on utilization of tour operators' destination brand knowledge in order to develop effective branding strategies to compete with other destinations.

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