Beyond Tourism Destination Image: Mapping country image from a psychological perspective

Statia Elliot PhD
School of Hospitality & Tourism Management, University of Guelph

Nicolas Papadopoulos
Sprott School of Business, Carleton University

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Dr. Statia Elliot
School of Hospitality & Tourism Management
University of Guelph

and

Dr. Nicolas Papadopoulos
Sprott School of Business
Carleton University

ABSTRACT

To explore the structure of place image, this study maps consumer respondents' mental schemata of place-related associations. An Integrated Schema of Place Image is developed through a process of categorizing and coding verbatim responses collected through a survey of Canadian consumers, to capture their Tourism Destination Image (TDI) and General Country Image (GCI) of the U.S. In the respondent's mind, the U.S. image is most strongly associated with Country Characteristics (30% of responses), notably place names (e.g. New York). Canadians tend to associate country characteristics strongly with TDI, and also moderately with GCI. This suggests that change of the perceived overall characteristics of the U.S. could significantly influence both its GCI and TDI.

Keywords: *Tourism Destination Image, General Country Image, Schema Mapping*

INTRODUCTION

The application of marketing and branding techniques in the country (or other level of "place") context can be a powerful force for global wealth distribution and cultural as well as economic development (Anholt, 2002). Interest in the marketing of countries has grown substantially in the past decade among researchers, policymakers, and business practitioners internationally. One aspect of place marketing that has received particular attention in tourism research is the study of Tourism Destination Image (TDI), defined as the effects of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination. Since tourism is image-driven, it is not surprising that TDI has been a major focus of tourism research for over 40 years. However, the relationship between a consumer's TDI and their broader General Country Image (GCI) is largely unknown. Theories from psychology suggest that the process of interpreting sensory impressions of a destination can be influenced by associations stored in memory that may reflect a positive or negative GCI. Stated differently, GCI may function as an umbrella concept that influences TDI.

The objective of this study is to capture a broad image of place by mapping consumer respondents' mental schemata of place-related associations, in order to explore the structure of image in a more holistic way. Mapping schema patterns provides a method to visually represent place image. An Integrated Schema of Place Image (ISPI) is developed through an extensive empirical process of categorizing and coding verbatim responses collected through a survey of Canadian consumers, to capture and integrate their TDI and GCI of the United States of America.

BACKGROUND

Several models exist that reflect numerous and varied conceptions of TDI (e.g., Beerli and Martin, 2004; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993) and GCI (Elliot et al., 2011). The research has overwhelmingly favoured quantitative methods and largely neglected qualitative ones. Given the rich, visual nature of place image, and theories of psychology that attempt to explain the complexity of impression processing, the use of qualitative methods has great potential to contribute to this field of study. When applied to image research, psychology provides a new perspective drawing from an understanding of people's mental processing of image associations.
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Images are mental schemata that have a profound effect on buyer behaviour, since they reflect "a complex web of associations" (Hawkins, Best, and Coney, 2001) among concepts, constructs, generalizations, objects, events, and feelings that "form a person's intellectual framework" (DeChenne, 1993) and that typically lead to stereotyping as consumers chunk information to make their environment more manageable (Yarhouse 2000). Hawkins, Best and Coney (2001:343-344) note that elements are stored in an "associative network of nodes" in one's memory. Stereotyping results when dominant associations between existing nodes are applied to all objects, people, or events in a category (Stangor and Lange, 1994) or, when facts are imagined which fit each concept (DeChenne, 1993).

Schema theory (Mowen and Minor, 1998) suggests that image is not a single element, but rather, a mental structure, built by multiple nodes and associations. A schema is a hypothetical cognitive structure that integrates lower level units of information into higher level cohesive and meaningful units called nodes, which, as the fundamental building blocks, form a mental network. Thus, an understanding of the nodes and associations, particularly those most salient, is essential to understanding image – and yet schema theory has received little attention in the TDI literature.

METHODOLOGY

Asking respondents to provide their most salient top-of-mind image associations, rather than responding to structured scale-type questions, can be an effective way to study image more holistically (Grusec et al., 1990; Solso 1995). Applying schema theory to image research begins with the collection of free elicitations from respondents that can them be mapped in order to visually represent the underlying image structure. This paper reports on part of a larger study aimed at consumers who would be sensitized toward, interested in travel to, and knowledgeable about, various tourism destinations – and so an intercept-based approach, with a questionnaire

comprising both scale- and open-ended top-of-mind image questions, was used for a survey of consumers at a major travel show in Toronto, Canada (n=307).

To address its objectives, this paper focuses on the verbatim response data to two open-ended questions concerning the U.S.: (1) What images or characteristics come to mind when you think of the U.S. as a country in general? (2) What images or characteristics come to mind when you think of the U.S. as a travel destination? Respondents were given three response blanks per question, for a total of 6 potential responses per respondent and 1,842 responses overall. A total of 1,147 blanks were filled, representing a completion rate of 62.3%. Responses were coded using a time and labour-intensive, grounded theory process (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) to classify the verbatims, as acceptable coding systems were not found for GCI nor TDI.

To begin, the data was reviewed for wording consistency; misspellings were corrected, and words standardized. Three coders were involved in the coding process to reach consensus and to strengthen reliability. Similar verbatims were grouped together to form categories and related subcategories. Categories with few responses were deleted or merged with similar counterparts. A final check of the coding scheme was made to ensure all verbatims were properly fitted and coded. The final system is three-leveled, with a main category, further divided into subcategories, and subcategories further broken down into types. For example, the mention of "Grand Canyon" is coded as "Natural Environment-Natural Wonders-Grand Canyon". "Natural Environment" is the main category, "Natural Wonders" is one of the subcategories under "Natural Environment" and "Grand Canyon" is one of the types under "Natural Wonders".
Pivot tables sorted by the different categories were created in Excel, examined for consistency and agreed upon by the coders, resulting in seven main categories.

FINDINGS

Table 1 presents the distribution of the 610 GCI responses and the 537 TDI responses by the seven main image categories. The results show that the responses for GCI and TDI are significantly different across the categories. For GCI, mentions for the U.S. concentrate in Country Characteristics, People and Culture, whereas for TDI, mentions concentrate even more so in Country Characteristics, as well as the Built Environment.

Table 1
GCI and TDI Categories for the U.S.

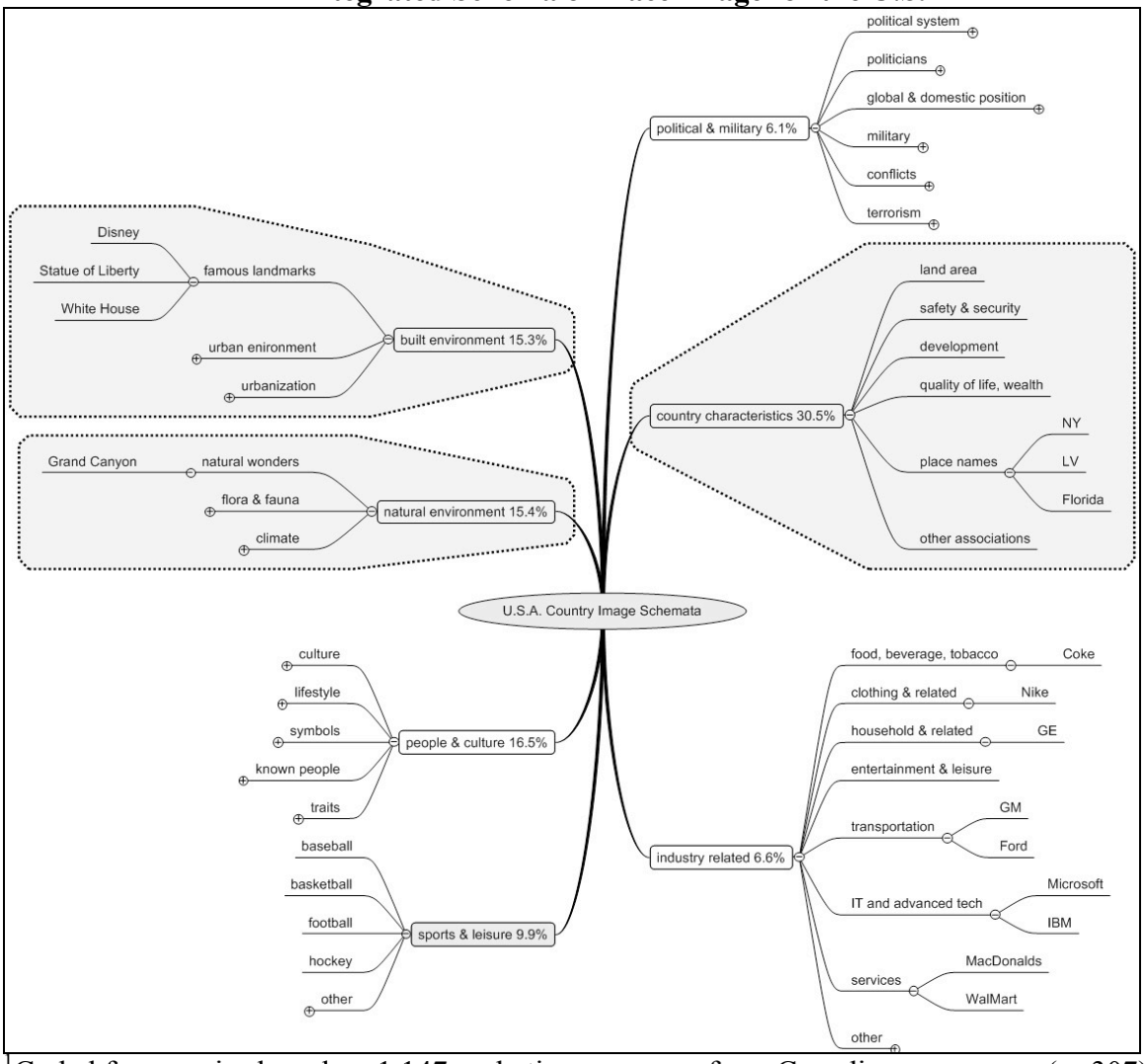
Image Categories[1]	GCI	TDI
Political & Military	11.31%	0.19%
Built Environment	7.38%	24.21%
Country Characteristics	23.93%	37.99%
Natural Environment	10.98%	19.93%
People & Culture	27.87%	3.54%
Industry Related	9.02%	3.91%
Sports & Leisure	9.51%	10.24%
	100.00%	100.00%

[1]Chi-square differences significant at p = 0.05

To visually represent a holistic picture of the U.S. image, Figure 1 presents the data as an ISPI, merging the GCI and TDI responses in order to highlight combined strengths and weaknesses associated with the U.S. The seven main categories are representative of the major nodes of the U.S. image structure. The subcategories are representative of the associations linked to each node. The numbers included in Figure 1 represent the valid percentages of each verbatim response category, illustrating the strength of some, with relatively high frequencies, and the weakness of others. Second level subcategories are included to illustrate the most common associations encompassed within each main category, and finally, third level verbatims are included in Figure 1 in cases of high-frequency.

Of the seven nodes associated with the U.S., three are most strongly associated with TDI: Country Characteristics, Built Environment, and Natural Environment. Three nodes are more strongly associated with GCI: People & Culture, Industry Related, and Political & Military.

Figure 1
Integrated Schema of Place Image for the U.S.[1]



[1]Coded frequencies based on 1,147 verbatim responses from Canadian consumers (n=307)

In the respondent's mind, the U.S. image is most strongly associated with Country Characteristics (30.5% of responses), notably place names, the top three being New York, Las Vegas, and Florida. The strength of this category reflects the tendency of Canadian consumers to associate country characteristics strongly with TDI, and also moderately with GCI. This suggests that change of the perceived overall characteristics of the U.S. could significantly influence both its GCI and TDI.

The next categories of strength are People & Culture (16.5%), Natural Environment (15.4%), and Built Environment (15.3%). However, within these categories there is more of a distinction between GCI and TDI: consumers tend to think about People & Culture much more frequently as part of GCI, whereas the Natural Environment (e.g. Grand Canyon) and Built Environment (e.g. Disneyland) are more often associated with TDI. Additionally, while Political & Military factors account for 6.1% overall, GCI responses were 11.3% whereas TDI responses were only 0.18%; that is, U.S. political and military behaviors or actions may influence the respondents' view of the U.S. in general, but not its image as a tourist destination.

In terms of industry, Canadian consumers hold a dispersed image of the U.S. Responses, including specific brand mentions, fall into all seven industry subcategories including (top-mentioned brands in parentheses) Transportation (GM, Ford), Clothing (Nike), Services (McDonald's, Walmart), Food & Beverage (Coke), Household & Related (GE), and IT (Micosoft). Only one node, Sports & Leisure, shows no significant difference in the frequency of responses between TDI and GCI, as measured by chi-square significance test. It would seem that, unlike any other node, consumers are equally likely to recall sport-related images of the U.S. whether thinking of the country in general, or of it as a tourism destination. While the frequency of responses in this category is only 10%, it may represent a valuable association to effect a positive image change in both the GCI and TDI of the U.S.

CONCLUSION

The study uses a novel approach, in the form of a mental schema map, which has not been used before in TDI research, to explore the cognitive structures that lie behind consumers' assessments of places. By drawing an ISPI, this study has effectively presented the composition of TDI, GCI and product images of the U.S., so that the "big picture", or holistic image, can be mapped to more fully understand place image from the perspective of the consumers' schema. It is hoped that researchers can benefit from the broader conceptualization of image captured here, and more importantly, from the methodology of using an ISPI to study place image. Additionally, practitioners and governments can benefit from the practical findings for the U.S. For example, based on the strength of associations, it can be suggested that if the U.S. wants to change how it is perceived by Canadian consumers, their focus might be on their Country Characteristics, Sports & Leisure. It is hoped that the ISPI will be applied to other analyzes of place, thereby contributing to the advancement of place image theory.

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