

## Building a Strong Brand Image of Kashmir Valley as a Tourist Destination: An Empirical Analysis

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SHEEBA HAMID\* and UROOJ FATIMA\*\*

\* Sheeba Hamid, Professor, Department of Commerce, AMU,

\*\* Urooj Fatima, Research Scholar, Department of Commerce, AMU,

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### ABSTRACT

A destination needs branding through different promotional tools and needs to engage all stakeholders of tourism. When the promotion is operative and stakeholders are impulsive to their roles, it helps to create brand image. It is important that stakeholders' impulsiveness and promotional effectiveness both must be balanced and move in the same direction. The aim of the study is to build positive perception about Kashmir in the minds of both domestic and international tourists, to estimate the relationship between brand image and tourist destination, to analyze the tourism components which have major impact for building strong positive brand image of Kashmir and to identify different attributes of tourism that can be used to build brand image. Building a strong brand image of a destination is the process of earning reputation for a destination by exploiting its resources and opportunities, which are original, attractive and inspiring to the outer world. The study is based on primary as well as secondary data, multiple regression analysis and correlation was used to analyze different image attributes. The findings of the study are expected to contribute to the existing literature. From the study, we can conclude that there is significant relationship between image attribute and overall image of tourists towards Kashmir as a tourist destination and there exists a positive correlation between destination overall brand image and tourists' loyalty.

**KEYWORDS:** *Tourism, Destination, Branding, Kashmir, Image attributes.*

### Introduction

Tourism is considered as a highly decentralized industry consisting of various enterprises different in sizes, types of organizations, location, functions, providing range of services and number of methods to market and sell them. Tourism marketing is facing a great challenge because the customer purchases a chain of services, but is left with a very little significant value at the completion of his trip. A key challenge is to assure potential tourists that the services they are buying provide good value for the price, and that the services will be as depicted and expected (Suchitra, 2015). Tourism is one of the most important and leading sources of economic activity in the world as it can be seen that economic activity generated by travel and tourism industry represents 12% of total global GDP (UNWTO, 2006). The importance of tourism and the emergence of many new destinations into the market have forced all to contend with and compete in the battle at an international level (Riege et al., 2001) to win many tourist markets (Konecnik, 2002). This extreme global competition in the tourism industry forces

destinations to develop advanced, strong, unique, and competitive destination brands. With the increase in the availability of choices of destination, there is an immense need of an effective destination 'positioning' strategy. One of the significant components of this positioning process is the establishment and management of a distinctive and attractive destination image. Moreover, a significant amount of time and money is spent in establishing a positive image to influence tourist decision-making. In a more competitive tourism marketplace, destinations are increasingly adopting branding procedures to expertise an identity which highlights the uniqueness of their product. To market travel destinations, just like marketing other consumer products, one has to look at the branding to differentiate their '*product*' and to convey a strong message that will motivate the tourists' (Ekinci, 2003). The concept of branding a tourist destination is not well known in Kashmir. This research aims to shed light on the importance of branding for tourist destinations like Kashmir and also to find out the attributes on which the overall image of destination depends.

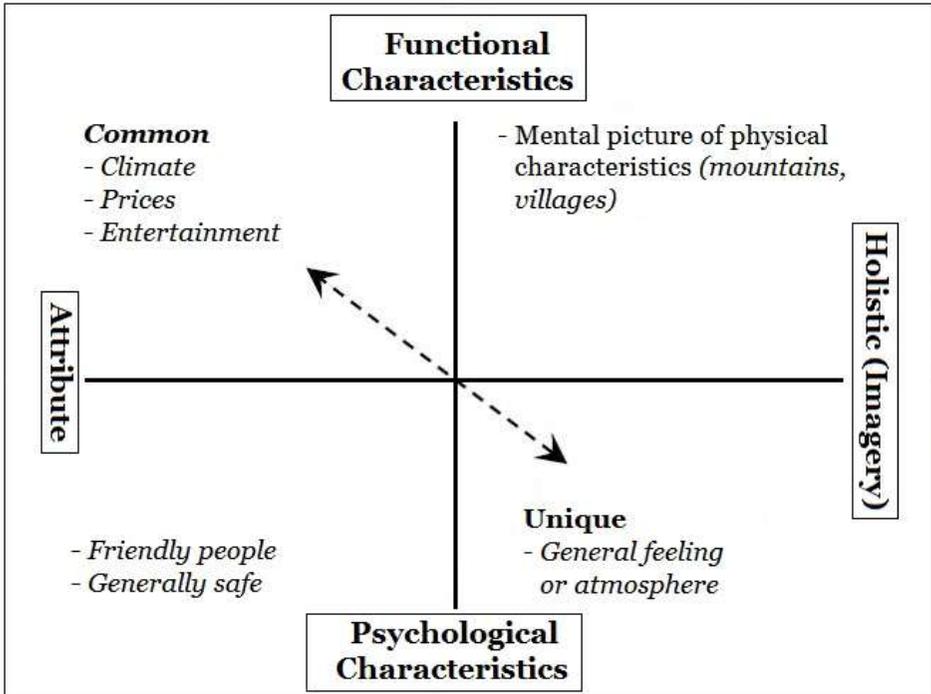
Kashmir is known for its excellence and natural landscape all around the world. It's high snow-clad mountains, picturesque spots, delightful valleys, waterways with super cold water, alluring lakes and springs and evergreen fields, thick timberlands and wonderful wellbeing resorts upgrade its loftiness and are a wellspring of incredible fascination for voyagers. It is likewise broadly known for its various types of farming items, natural product, vegetables, saffron, herbs, minerals, valuable stones, and crafted works like woollen floor coverings, shawls and finest kind of cloth embroideries. During summer, one can enjoy the natural beauty, fishing, game hunting, etc. During winters climbing mountain peaks and sports like skating and skiing on snow-clad slopes are commonly enjoyed. In addition to this, the pilgrimage to famous religious shrines of the Hindus and the Muslims make Kashmir as an incredible tourist spot. Sheikh Sadi, great Persian poet has said about Kashmir that, "If there is any heaven on earth, it is here and in Kashmir" (Raina, 2002).

### **Literature Review**

During the last decade, there has been a growing interest in tourism literature (and in practice as well) in the view of the destination branding. It cannot be denied that for a destination as well as for a firm; price is a vital element of competitiveness. However, since the early 1990s the tourism sector and tourism scholars have been aware that besides comparative advantages and price, many other variables that determine the competitiveness of a tourism firm or destination (Vanhove, 2011) branding of destination can be one of them. A recognized brand is a promise to tourists who know what to expect from the particular brand and the trust that their expectations will be met. Viewed within the context of hospitality, travelers are likely to expect a very high-quality facilities and customer service at an established internationally recognized chain (brand) of hotels. At the same time, visitors can also expect to pay a premium for this assurance of quality and reduction of perceived risk. A recognized, well-differentiated and consistent destination image is central to the success of destination branding. Destination logos, according to DMOs, exist to accurately represent the destination image and its attributes (Blain et.al, n.d.). Image creation and destination differentiation, are integral elements in building a strong destination brand. (Kotler, 2002) has defined a place or destination's image as the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that people have

regarding that place. Moreover, the components of destination image can be arranged on a continuum ranging from traits which can be common to compare all destinations to those which are unique to every destination (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003).

**Figure 2: The Components of Destination Image**



**Source:** Echtner and Ritchie (2003, p.43)

Figure 2 depicts the perception given by Echtner and Ritchie (2003) stating that destination image comprises of attribute, psychological, common, holistic, functional and unique components. It attracts distinctive qualities and features like climates, hotels and service also encompassing functional characteristics concerning price levels, transportation, infrastructure, accommodation and so on.

An attractiveness of a tourist destination can be viewed as consisting of unique local features, cultural attributes, natural resources, infrastructure, services and others (Kim, 1998). The tourism product can be analyzed regarding attraction, facilities and accessibility (McIntosh & Goeldner, 1990) for the purpose of finding out its attractiveness. The aim of destination branding is to emphasize the peculiarity of a tourism brand and present a positive image of the mentioned brand to a target market, and so the marketing communications have become important for destinations to promote their brand identity and brand image to target audiences (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). Destination branding is a process that allows a destination to be identified and differentiated from other alternative destinations, through the construction of a message, which tries to attract tourists and consumption (Cai, 2002). (Ana, 2011) believes that, in the context of increasing competition on the international tourism market, the valuation of destination image

has become a major research subject for both managers and academic researchers aiming to develop destination positioning and Consumers perceive good brand image when brand associations are applied to suggest benefits of purchasing the specific brand. This creates positive feelings toward the brand and differentiates it from alternatives with its unique image. A positive and strong image of a destination gives competitive advantage from the competitors. Researchers do agree that in today's competitive tourism market, an effective destination branding strategy can play an important role in building a strong image of regions like Kashmir where tourism can be the main driver of economy.

### **Objectives**

This study makes an attempt to examine the factors which have a significant impact on building a strong and positive brand image of Kashmir as a tourist destination, and to build positive perception about Kashmir in the mind of both domestic as well as international tourists. This study also examines the relation between Kashmir's overall image and tourists' loyalty.

### **Hypothesis of the Study**

**H1: Ho:** There is no significant difference between Image Attribute and Overall Image of tourists towards Kashmir as a tourist destination.

**H2: Ho:** There exists no significant relationship between Destination Overall Image and Tourists' Loyalty.

### **Methodology of the Study**

#### **The questionnaire**

The data (primary in nature) for this study was collected from 129 personal interviews based on a structured questionnaire carried out from the month of June 2015 to July 2015 and secondary data were collected from relevant research report, publications, books, newspapers, journals, and websites. The survey questionnaire consisted of four major parts. The first part included questions relating to the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, and the items included age, profession and gender of the respondents. The second part comprised of the questions related to the travel behavior of the individuals and the items included the purpose of visit; a preferred season for visiting and nature of money spending. The third part was developed to know the respondents' perception of the overall image towards Kashmir as a tourist destination. Ten items connecting to the overall image were selected, and respondents were asked to rate Kashmir as a tourist destination on each of these ten attributes on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = Strongly Unsatisfied; 2 = Unsatisfied; 3 = Neither Satisfied nor Unsatisfied; 4 = Satisfied, and 5 = Strongly Satisfied. The assessed attribute, which represented the attributes of the destination included: accommodation, hospitality, transportation, favorable climate, political stability, shopping sites, landscapes, leisure areas, road connectivity and cleanliness. The fourth part was developed to measure the overall tourism experience in Kashmir by asking respondents about the overall contentment with the journey, intention to visit again, recommendation intention and whether the expectations that the tourists want from the journey were met or not.

**Sample:** Purposeful maximum variation sampling was used because the sample which the study considers are tourists from different nationalities, regions (in case domestic) professional background, cultures, work experience and the like. In all, 150 tourists were approached from different regions, but only 129 completed

questionnaires were collected yielding 86% of response rate. The majority of them was males and fell into the age group of 36-50 (40.3%). Table 1 shows the complete demographic profile of the respondents. The respondents were assessed regarding the academic point of the study, and the con-fidelity of the report was ensured.

**Table 1: Purposeful Maximum Variation Sample**

	Frequency	Valid percent
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	87	67.4
Female	42	32.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Profession</b>		
Students	13	10.0
Government services	52	40.3
Business	28	21.8
Hotel associates	21	16.3
Others	15	11.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Age segment</b>		
Below 20	19	14.8
21-35	31	24.0
36-50	52	40.3
Above 50	27	20.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Source:** Field Survey

### Data analysis

Tools were applied by using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 22.0, to analyze the available data. The first research hypothesis was tested using multiple regression to find the cause and effect relationship between variables that are dependent and independent variables. The multiple correlation coefficients (R), the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) to predict the goodness-of-fit of the regression model and F ratio were also studied. The second hypothesis was tested using Pearson's correlation. Before applying statistical tools, the reliability of the research instruments was measured using Cronbach's alpha scale of measurement. In Table 2, it was that the association between the score obtained from different attributes of the scale is above 0.77. This meant that each of the variables exceeded the minimum standard of reliability and hence can be relied on (Nunnally, 1978).

**Table 2 : Reliability Statistics**

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.770	.751	14

### Regression Analysis

**H1: Ho:** There is no significant difference between Image Attributes and Overall Image of tourists towards Kashmir as a tourist destination.

The main objective of using this technique is to predict the variability of the dependent variable based on its covariance with other independent variables. In

this case, regression was applied to find out whether the independent variables have a significant effect on dependent variable or not. The five independent variables accommodation facilities, transportation facilities, hospitality, favorable climate and political stability were expressed regarding the standardized factor scores (beta coefficients). The dependent variable in this case tourists' overall image was used as a proxy indicator of tourist's evaluation of the Tourist's destination. The regression equation now can be expressed as follows:

$$Y_s = \beta_0 + B_1X_1 + B_2X_2 + B_3X_3 + B_4X_4 + B_5X_5 + \epsilon_i$$

$Y_s$  = Overall image of tourists' towards Kashmir as a destination

$\beta_0$  = constant (coefficient of intercept)

$X_1$  = accommodation facilities

$X_2$  = hospitality

$X_3$  = political stability

$X_4$  = transportation facilities

$X_5$  = favourable climate

$\epsilon_i$  = Disturbance term/error term

$B_1... B_5$  = regression coefficient of factor 1 to factor 5.

Table 4 showed the results of the regression analysis. Vavra (1995) and Johnston (1995) hypothesized that the importance of image attribute can be gained by a multiple linear regression of the single image statements of the attribute against the overall image score. To predict the goodness-of-fit of the regression model, the multiple correlation coefficients (R), the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) and F ratio are examined. The R of the independent variables (five factors,  $X_1$  to  $X_5$ ) and the dependent variable (overall image) is 0.333, which indicates that the tourists' had positive and moderate correlations of an overall image with the five image attribute. The  $R^2$  is 0.111, suggesting that five factors could explain more than 11% of the variation of tourists' overall image. The p-value is 0.012, which is considered as significant. The F ratio is found out to be 3.071. The regression model achieved a level of goodness-of-fit of about 11% in predicting the variance of tourists' overall image of Kashmir as a destination about the five factors, as measured by the above-mentioned: R,  $R^2$ , and F ratio. In other words, at least, two of the five factors are important in contributing to developing an overall image of Kashmir as tourists' destination.

#### Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.333 <sup>a</sup>	.111	.075	1.048

#### ANOVA<sup>a</sup>

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	16.850	5	3.370	3.071	.012 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	134.964	123	1.097		
	<b>Total</b>	<b>151.814</b>	<b>128</b>			

a. Dependent Variable: Overall Image

b. Predictors: (Constant), Political Stability, Hospitality, Accommodation, Transportation, Favourable Climate

**Table 4: Regression results of Overall Image**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	1.473	.785		1.876	.063
Accommodation	.046	.084	.049	.543	.588
Hospitality	-.054	.102	-.050	-.532	.595
Favorable Climate	.304	.104	.283	2.923	.004
Transportation	-.003	.139	-.002	-.023	.982
Political Stability	.292	.097	.261	3.005	.003

a. Dependent Variable: Overall Image

To elaborate the relative importance of each of the five attributes that have been taken in this study, in contributing to the modification in tourists' overall image (dependent variable) the beta coefficient of the regression can be used. As far as the relative importance of the five attribute is concerned, favorable climate (beta: 0.283,  $p=0.004$ ) has the highest contribution and carries the heaviest weight for tourists' overall image building attribute followed by political stability (beta=0.261,  $p=0.003$ ).

The results showed that one unit increase in an attribute with the favorable climate would lead to a 0.283 unit increase in the overall image of Kashmir as tourists' destination when other variables are being held constant Similarly one unit increase in an attribute with the political stability would lead to a 0.261 unit increase in the overall image of Kashmir as tourist destination when other variables are being held constant. In conclusion, the entire attributes are not equally significant. Thus, the results of multiple regression analysis reject hypothesis 1; that there is no difference between Image attribute and overall image of tourists towards Kashmir as a destination. hence, hypothesis 1 has been rejected.

**H<sub>2</sub>: Ho:** There exists no significant relationship between Destination Overall Image and Tourists' Loyalty.

**Table 5: Correlations**

		Overall image	Tourist Loyalty
Overall image	Pearson Correlation	1	.699**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	129	129
Tourist Loyalty	Pearson Correlation	.699**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	129	129

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5 shows the correlation between the Overall Image and Tourists' loyalty and the value .699 indicates a positive and significant correlation between destination overall brand image and tourist's loyalty. Hence, hypothesis 2 is accepted

**Table 6: Summary of the result**

No.	Hypothesis	Result
<b>H<sub>1</sub>:</b> <b>H<sub>0</sub></b>	There is no significant difference between Image Attributes and Overall Image of tourists towards Kashmir as a tourist destination	<b>Rejected</b>
<b>H<sub>2</sub>:</b> <b>H<sub>0</sub></b>	There exists no significant relationship between Destination Overall Image and Tourists' Loyalty	<b>Accepted</b>

### **Conclusion and Recommendations:**

In order to make a destination attractive, branding can be one of the finest weapons that can be used. The present study is exploratory as well as descriptive in nature, because different methods of both types of research have been used. This study integrates the main stream of previous research on destination branding; this study also proposes a cause and effect relationship between different Image Attributes and Overall Image of Kashmir as a tourist destination. However, besides these things, the paper also aims to identify how observed variables of the latent constructs are related to overall image so that future research can identify different segments of tourists based on these relations.

The study emphasizes on different attributes of Kashmir as a tourist destination which can help to build positive brand image of Kashmir as a tourist destination. Different statistical methods were also used to identify the significant attribute. From this study, it is found that for building strong brand image of Kashmir political stability and favorable climate are most significant. The results of this study validate that overall image of destination is a contributing factor to tourists loyalty intention. This means that if the overall Image of Kashmir will improve positively, tourists will be willing to revisit as well as recommending intentions will also improve that will ensure the sustainability of the region.

The results of this study have significant suggestions for marketers, managers and all the stakeholders of Kashmir as a travel destination. In specifically, there is a need to improve the perceived quality of the tourist attraction, which is the basis of tourist satisfaction (Bigné et al., 2001).

Most of the attributes of destination services may be controlled and improved by tourism suppliers. Different promotional measures for example advertisement, social media etc. should be used in order to promote the region globally. The significant incentives will be employment opportunity for host community, improved quality of service, increase in income also the ultimate receivers of benefits will be the stakeholders of the destination. So they need to play significant role in creating brand image through ensuring quality and availability of the tourism components.

In order to build a strong brand image of Kashmir the state and central government should effectively formulate strategies so that everyone including locals and tourists should get benefited and ensure proper infrastructural development for different types of tourism like adventure tourism, pilgrimage tourism, rural tourism etc. and places like Gulmarg, Pahalgam etc. should be promoted as special brands so that the tourists take special recognize these spots because a recognized, well-differentiated and consistent destination image is central to the success of destination branding.

### Limitations of the Study and Future Direction:

Due to time constraint of research findings ARE based on small selected sample of tourists who visited Kashmir. The future research can make use of bigger sample size for better understanding of determinants of branding.

People may read differently into each question and therefore reply based on their own interpretation of the question - i.e. what is 'good' to someone may be 'poor' to someone else, Therefore there is a level of subjectivity that is not acknowledged. Since this study was constrained by the use of self-report technique while collecting data because of which social desirability biases turn into a reason for consideration. Future studies can employ OTHER qualitative techniques. Alternative causal explanations are not considered.

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