

Factors Influencing Tourist's Perception of Destination Image - A Study of Ladakh

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ABSTRACT

The issue of 'destination image' has attracted wide attention and sincere concern of tourism scholars since past decade. Image of the destination amongst its actual and potential target market is crucial and can be a significant attribute of the destination to gain a competitive and distinct position and recognition in the market. Hence, the image of the destination is being used widely as an effective tool for the strategic management and development of tourism. Consequently, it helps to promote tourism at the destination and gain associated benefits such as foreign exchange, employment, revenue and many more. In this context, visitor's perception of destination image is vital. Voluminous research work is produced to investigate the diverse perspectives of visitor's perception and its major constituents. However, there has still been lack of research in less-developed regions. The paper presents a study devoted to assess the factors which contribute significantly to perceive the image of Ladakh, India. The proposed approach is based on the elements derived from socio-demographic characteristic and travel behaviour of the visitors and examined through factors analysis and multiple regressions. Findings suggests that the socio-demographic attributes (age, gender, occupation) and travel pattern/behaviour (length of stay, food preference, travel arrangement and activities during the visit) significantly associated with the perception of visitors about the image of Ladakh.

KEYWORDS: *Destination Image, Perception, Ladakh, Tourist Satisfaction*

Theoretical Context

A valuable image represents a fundamental requisite for a destination. The significance of tourist's perception of the destination image and its extended association with the overall tour satisfaction is discussed widely in tourism literature. It is vital for destination image developers to identify the perception of tourist about the destination image to formulate effective strategic plans to build-up successful destination image. Destination developers throughout the world are striving hard to build a strong, positive and favourable image of the destination for attracting tourist flows and gain the consequent benefits such as foreign exchange, employment, revenue and many more (Asli, 2007, Ramseok-Munhurrin, 2015, Som et. al. 2012). Hence, determining tourist's perception regarding destination image is essential. Further, it is also necessary to investigate and understand the key determinants of visitor's perception. In this context research probes are conducted to suggest the factors that 'define, modify, and strengthen destination image' (Tasci,

2007, p. 23). The wide range of components/factors influential on building tourist's perception of the destination image are recognized and can be categorized broadly as a cognitive and affective component few of which are related to the perceiver's attributes such as (socio-demographic, behaviour) and of destination (promotional material). A number of studies suggested that the destination image directly affects perceived value and satisfaction which lead towards the visitors loyalty for the destination (Bigné et al., 2001; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Chi & Qu, 2008; Prayag & Ryan, 2012, Lee et al., 2007; He & Song, 2008; Bradley & Sparks, 2012, Zhang et al. 2014) which is a crucial goal in the 'consumer marketing' (Ramseook, et al. 2015 p. 253) and to develop a competitive position of the destination.

Tourism literature concentrated on investigating the destination image and influential attributes suggest that the visitor's socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, household status, education, income, and residence/geographic distance to the study destination play a decisive role in determining the perception of visitors about the destination image.

The key variables used to assess the perceived image of the destination are primarily derived from socio-demographic characteristics of the visitors such as age (Alhemoud & Armstrong 1996; Baloglu 2001; MacKay & Fesenmaier 1997; Smith & MacKay 2001) race (Tasci 2007; Chen & Kerstetter 1999; Hunt 1975; MacKay & Fesenmaier 1997) gender (Chen & Kerstetter 1999; MacKay & Fesenmaier 1997)) income (MacKay & Fesenmaier 1997). Various other perspectives have also been explored. As Gartner (1986) observed a temporal variation in visitor's perception about destination image and postulated that the seasonality or a particular period of year may influence the research findings and consequent observations related to visitor's perception. Several studies ascertained the influence of past travel experience on constituting visitors perception. Further, the amount of previous visitation (Baloglu 2001; Fakeye & Crompton 1991; Rittichainuwat, Qu & Brown 2001; Schroeder 1996; Vogt & Andereck 2003) and length of stay at the destination (Fakeye & Crompton 1991; Schroeder 1996; Vogt & Andereck 2003) were found significant.

However, the implication of these findings is not examined yet in the context of peripheral regions. A peripheral region bears several distinctness in term of socio-cultural settings, economic stage and environmental vulnerability owing to its location. Consequently, the nature and pattern of tourism development, visitor's profile, tourist activities and resultant impacts vary from the urban tourist centers. Ladakh is one of the steeply growing tourist destinations of India, located on the frontiers of India and china. As a reason of its geographical characteristics such as high altitude, mountainous terrain, extreme climate and socio-cultural attributes such as ethnic community, ancient customs the visitors hold a distinct image of Ladakh. The present study proposes an examination of the perception of visitors about Ladakh and assessment of the factors which contributes significantly in constitution of their perception about Ladakh.

Destination Image

A destination image is defined diversely and extensively by various scholars. There exists diverse opinion on what constitute a destination image. The constituents of destination image can be external or internal elements of the destination (Dimanche, 2003). It is a sum of experiences, beliefs, ideas, recollections

and impressions that a person has of a destination (Crompton, 1979; Reilly, 1990). It is the overall perception of the groups of people about the destination which is formed by processing information from various sources over time". (Jenkins, 1999, Tapachai & Waryszak, 2000).

A destination image is "the expression of all objective knowledge, impressions, prejudice, imaginations, and emotional thoughts an individual or group might have of a particular place" (Lawson & Baud-Bovey, 1977).

The concept of destination image is complex, dynamic and a cognitive process. Dimanche (2003) refers the image of a destination as the sum of all perceptions tourists and potential visitors hold of that destination which evolves with time and events that are controlled, or not, by the destination". Micera (2007) defines the concept as "the whole of beliefs, ideas and impressions a destination can generate in potential and actual tourists' minds". Milman and Pizam (1995) suggested that a destination image consists of three principal components: the product or the attraction, the behaviour and the attitude of the host community and the environment/ weather/scenery, and facilities available at the destination.

There is a general agreement that destination image is a complex multi-faceted, composite construct, which consists of interrelated cognitive and affective evaluation woven into overall impression (Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2006, Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Walmsley, 1998 & Baloglu, 2001).

Research Area

Profile of Ladakh

Ladakh, known as the '*land of high passes*' is the easternmost region of Jammu & Kashmir state of India. Elevated at the range of 2300 to 5000 meter the region is a high altitude 'cold desert' (Rizvi, 1984). The general aspect of Ladakh is extreme barrenness. Topographically, the whole of the district is mountainous with three parallel ranges of the Himalayas, the Zaskar, the Ladakh and the Karakoram. Between these ranges, the Shayok, Indus and Zaskar rivers flow and most of the population lives in valleys of these rivers.

The region is divided into two districts Leh and Kargil. Spreading over a vast area of 45110 square kilometers Leh is the largest district and capital city of the region with the population of 1,17,637. Ladakh occupies a strategic location on the political map of Central Asia and in ancient time it was a major international midpoint to link Tibet, China, Afghanistan, Turkistan, Kashmir and rest part of India with each other and hence facilitating the major trade, cultural and religious exchange amongst these countries. The land was traverse by the various races and ethnic groups at different period of time, owing their origin from the neighboring territories. Now the demographic composition of Ladakh represents an interesting amalgamation of different ethnic groups. Ladakh is highly rich in terms of cultural and natural tourism resources and offers pristine attractions for nature-based tourism, ethnic tourism and adventure tourism. In recent years tourism has become the major economic activity and support to the local economy of the region. The multi-fold growth of tourist arrival indicates the popularity of the destination.

Methodology

A self-administered survey questionnaire was developed to identify factors influencing visitor's perception. The target population of this study was international tourists. The survey instrument was mainly aimed at identifying the

underlying dimensions of visitors' perception. A convenience sampling approach was employed to collect data in April 2011 at Leh, the gateway to Ladakh Valley. Among 250 self-administered questionnaires distributed, a total of 200 usable questionnaires were obtained representing 80% of response rate. A three-part questionnaire was focused on demographic variables, travel characteristics and satisfaction level of the respondents. The first part questions are focused on demographic profiles of respondents which include age, gender and occupation. In the second part respondents were asked to indicate their travel motivation and major activities undertaken during their stay. In the third part questions are posed on travel characteristics including purpose of visits, length of stay, places visited, tour arrangement, food preference and nature of interaction with host community.

The Data were analyzed using SPSS version 16.0 in three steps.

First, the descriptive description is given about the socio-demographic and travel characteristics of visitors and major travel motivations and activities are indicated through bar diagram. Second, a factor analysis using principal component method with Varimax rotation was run to identify underlying dimensions of 09 items including socio-demographic and travel attributes. This methodological approach has been described in tourism literature as standard procedure to explore motives from survey data (Kim et al., 2008; Park & Yoon, 2009). To calculate the PCA, the estimation method was determined by varimax rotation, and the following criteria were used: (a) factor loadings 0.40 (b) eigenvalues ≥ 1.0 and (c) results of the factor analysis explaining at least 59% of the total variance. Also, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated as reliability parameter to indicate the internal consistency of the items with each motivational dimension that was extracted by the factor analysis.

Research Findings

Respondent's Demographic Characteristics

The findings indicate that majority of the respondents are male 56.5% and female respondents are 43.5%. The age group between 30-40 represents 43% of total population of respondents. 20-30 age group constitutes 40%, 10.5% belong to the age group of 40-50. 29.5% respondents were students, 28% professionals and 14.5% were government employees. 18.5% respondents belong to either business or other areas

Table No. 1 : Demographic description of the respondents (n=200)

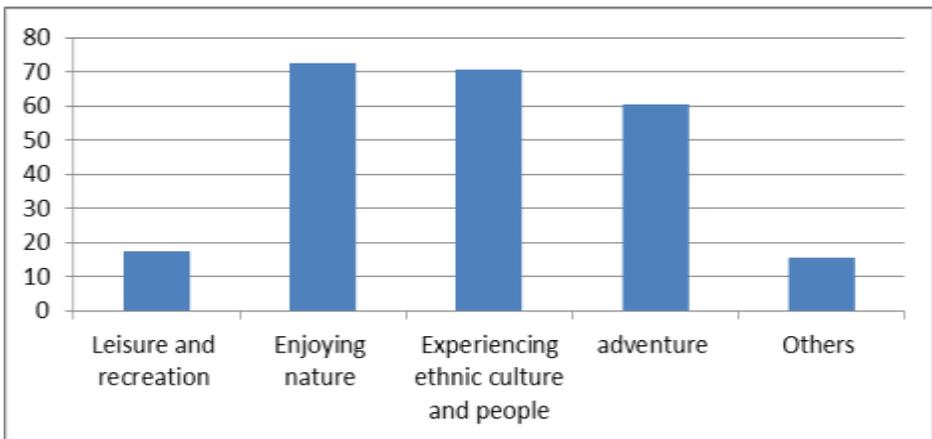
Variables	Description	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	113 (56.5)
	Female	87 (43.5)
Age	20-30	81 (40.5)
	30-40	87 (43.5)
	40-50	21 (10.5)
	50-60	11 (5.5)
Occupation	Govt. Employee	29 (14.5)
	Self Employed	19 (9.5)
	Professional	56 (28)
	Student	59 (29.5)
	Others	37 (18.5)

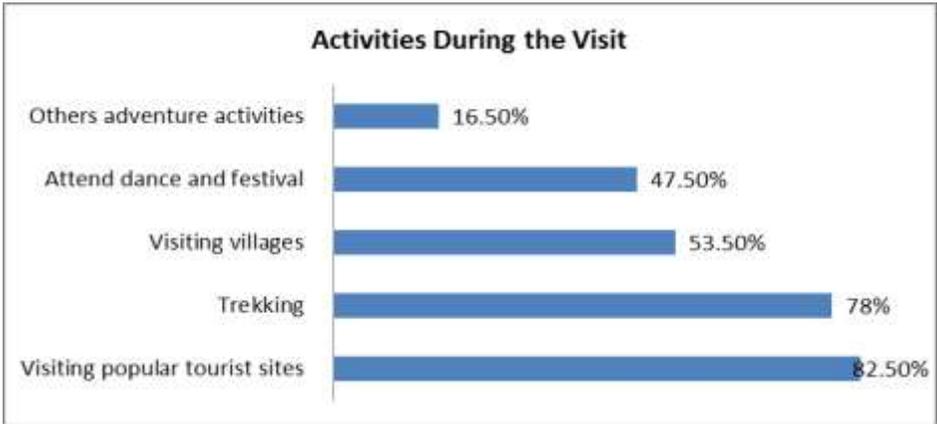
Table No. 2 : Travel Motivation and Activities undertaken during the visit

Factors	frequency (%)	Preference ranking
Purpose of Visit* (multiple choice)		
Leisure and recreation	17.5	4
Enjoying nature	72.5	1
Experiencing Ethnic culture & people	70.5	2
Adventure	60.5	3
Others	15.5	5
Major Activities Undertaken During Tour* (multiple choice)		
Visiting popular tourist sites	82.5	1
Trekking	78.0	2
Visiting villages	53.5	3
Attend dance and festival	47.5	4
Other adventure activities	16.5	5

The majority of international tourists (72.5%) are visiting Ladakh for its astonishing natural beauty, tranquil surrounding, unique landscape and unspoiled natural environment. Almost equal amount of visitors (70.5%) selected that gaining a experience of distinct ethnic people and culture of Ladakh is one of their prime motivation of travel.

Visitors informed that the small ethnic communities are in general residing in interior villages of Ladakh which also offer pure and untainted natural surroundings and thus search for ethnic culture and enjoying nature should not be measure separately. A considerable number of international tourists (60.5%) visit Ladakh for adventure activities like trekking, mountaineering and river rafting. Here also they regard enjoying nature is an integral part of their tour experience. Small number of tourist 17.5% reported that they came to Ladakh for leisure and recreation.





Findings exhibits in chat no. shows that a majority of tourist 82.5% visited popular tourist sites of the region. Additionally a considerable number of visitors do trekking varies in length and trekking routes. A good number of tourists 53.5% visit interior villages of Ladakh in search of novelty, ethnic culture and people. 47.5% tourists reported that during their visit to Ladakh they attained dance and festivals of Ladakh, primarily during the monastic ceremonies held in various monasteries of Ladakh.

Table No. 3 : Travel Characteristics

Variables	Description	Frequency (%)
Length of stay	Below a week	2.5
	A week	14.5
	A week or more	83
Various places visited during the trip	(only)Leh	19
	Leh & Zanskar	48
	Leh and Nubra	33
Tour Arrangement (Assistance)	Tour package	09.5
	Self-arrangement	55
	Took help from travel agent	35.5
Food preference (local)	Always	19
	Often	48
	Sometimes	28.4
	Never	04.5
Nature of interaction with host community	Very short	23
	Formal	35
	Informal	28.5
	Close and meaningful	13.5
Perceived image of Ladakh	A Land of Exotic Culture	34
	A Land of Real Adventure	20
	A peaceful and unspoiled destination	46

Findings shown in table no. exhibits that maximum of respondents (83%) stay for more than a week during their visit, while 14.5% tourist spend one week time in Ladakh. Only 2.5% respondents reported to stay less than a week in the region majority of the respondents visit Zanzkar (48%), 33% also visited Nubra Valley and 19% visited only Leh.

Data indicates that most of the visitors (55%) made their tour arrangements by their own. While 35.5% visitors take the help of tour operators for making travel arrangements like booking room, tour guide, local transportation etc. only 9.5% tourists informed that they purchased package tour of Ladakh from overseas.

Food choice of visitors indicates that 48% respondents preferred local food quite often, 28% sometimes, and 19% residents always. As the fast food option is not available in the interior areas, the visitors have to adjust with the local food available.

Majority of the international tourist (35%) experienced formal interaction with host community and 28.5% tourists established informal interaction with host community. Most of their interaction took place while tourism related services are provided and the nature of interaction tends to be very brief. Limited visitors told that they experienced a very close and meaningful interaction with host community.

Factor Analysis

Keeping into mind the objective of the study a principle component factor analysis was carried out to identify the underlying dimensions of socio-demographic, travel behaviour attributes and perception of visitors. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy is .895, exceeding the recommended value of 0.6 (Hair et al., 2005) which, indicates that all variables selected for study are statistically significant. For testing the reliability of the data and internal consistency of each factor, Cronbach's Alpha value of .961, which is above the accepted value of 0.70 may be considered as reliable.

The factor solution was derived from the component matrix with varimax rotation of the nine variables and the factor is labeled as destination choice and tourist perception which contribute for 80.43% of variance.

Items	Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha	KMO and Bartlett's Test	Variance explained
Gender	.863	.961	.895	80.43
Age	.854			
Occupation	.972			
Travel arrangement	.899			
Length of stay	.697			
Places visited	.957			
Food preference	.913			
Nature of interaction	.952			
Perceived image	.933			

Based on the factors identified, efforts have been taken to find out the relationship between the various variables on perceived image of Ladakh by using a multiple regression model. The results of which are presented in table no.

Model	R square	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.906	-.264	.170		-1.547	.124
Gender		.507	.097	.284	5.218	.000
Age		.209	.054	.197	3.872	.000
Travel arrangement		.249	.070	.186	3.583	.000
Length of stay		-.152	.084	-.078	-1.802	.073
Places visited		.641	.083	.554	7.763	.000
Food preference		-.198	.063	-.176	-3.123	.002
Nature of interaction		.024	.069	.027	.356	.722

An examination of T value indicates that gender, age, travel arrangements, length of stay, places visited and food preference contributes significantly to construct the perceived image of Ladakh by International Tourists.

Discussion and Conclusion

Portrayed in mass media as a mysterious high-land with unusual landscape and ethnic cultures, Ladakh has attracted a huge number of tourists fascinated by the uniqueness of the land. High passes, mountainous terrain, rigorous accessibility, and extreme climatic conditions of the destination attracts many of the young adventure travellers who come to Ladakh for trekking, white water rafting, mountain biking, camping, etc. The findings of the present study reveals that the international tourists are coming to Ladakh primarily for enjoying unspoiled and tranquil surroundings, trekking and other adventure activities and to experiencing cultural distinctness of the region. Majority of the international visitors belong to age group of 20-30 and many were students.

Majority of international visitors made their travel related arrangement either by their own or taking partial help from the travel agents to arrange certain facilities. These novelty seekers were more explorative in their nature and tend to be least dependent on the intermediaries. Very small proportion of visitors purchased packaged tour. Only a small number of visitors travelled with family whereas majority of them were accompanied by friends or travelling alone. In many cases the single traveller joined other tourists or groups after reaching at Ladakh. Major activities undertaken during the trip were visiting tourist sites, trekking, visiting interior villages and attaining cultural dance and festivals. A considerable number of international visitors stayed for two weeks or more which may be for the reason as along with visiting various sites they undertook other activities also such as trekking and visit to interior villages which consume more time. Very less international visitors confined to Leh only. Majority of them visited Zaskar valley which has difficult accessibility (which further consume more time) and renowned for remote trekking routes and water-rafting.

Since international tourists are curious about the Ladakhi people and their cultural attributes and seek to learn through close interaction and firsthand

experience, a high proportion of International tourists informed to have informal and close interaction with host community which generally take place during their visit and stay in interior villages with the host community (in homestay). Additionally, they hire local trekking guide which helps in facilitating their interaction with local people. Majority of tourists accepted that the behavior and attitude of host community was positive and friendly towards them. Local food is often preferred by the international visitors.

There has found to be a strong image of Ladakh as a land of unspoiled natural beauty and exotic culture amongst the tourists. The prime purpose of their visit represents a blend of cultural and nature-based adventure activities. It is observed from the findings and direct interaction with the tourists that the purpose of their visit is so much scrambled and mixed that it becomes very difficult to draw a discriminating line between various purposes of travel. Both group of visitors accepted that their motivation for travel is not limited to one attraction only and many of them prefer a combination of natural and cultural resources in a tourist destination in order to have diverse experiences. Enjoying the natural beauty, experiencing ethnic people and society, distinct cultural elements, and adventure activities are the integrated part of their overall tour experience. Hence, it can be inferred that the visitor are a mixture of recreational and nature-based adventure tourists, and cultural attractions of Ladakh should be considered an innate component of the natural settings or vice-versa, instead of regarding them as two distinct components. In pursuit to gain an authentic cultural and adventure experience they come to Ladakh which offers unique cultural expressions and attributes combined with hard natural surroundings.

As mentioned earlier there are both external and internal factors which contribute to form the perceiver's perception about the destination. Here the study explores the constituents on the part of visitors and the outcome established that the socio-demographic attributes significantly associated with the visitor's perception of the destination. The T value based on the factor analysis followed by multiple regression indicated that the gender, age, patter of travel arrangement, length of stay, various places visited during the tour and food preference of international tourist contributed to construct their perception about image of Ladakh.

Since this mountainous region moving to a transactional phase from being less-known in the past to the well-known destination at present and progressing towards advance stage of its life cycle (TPLC) (Butler, 1980) it is of prime concern to develop an appropriate tourism plan which can help to fulfill the principles of sustainable tourism without compromising the quality of visitor experience. However, in this context there exist a limited tourism researches addressing this dimension of tourism concern.

The present study contributes significantly in recognizing the existing perception of visitors about Ladakh and identifies specifically the socio-demographic factors which considerably influence the perception of visitors. For effective positioning of the destination and differentiating it from its competitors in its ability to satisfy the customer's needs it is essential to first identify the key attribute which are strongly perceived by the visitors (Crompton et al 1992) in order to develop a successful tourist destination. Etchner and Ritchie also suggested

that the understanding of destination attribute integrated with the visitor's perception contributes greatly in recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of the destination which can further help in identifying potential niche market and developing competitive and appropriate positioning strategy for the destination (Etchner and Ritchie, 1993). The outcome of the destination image provides useful information on various perceptions of visitors about Ladakh, which can be kept under consideration while identifying the existing and potential destination attributes and niche areas to develop and promote the region as a tourist destination and can be incorporated in destination planning, positioning and designing strategies.

The present findings also provide a floor and stimuli to more elaborated and holistic research probes in the direction of determining the constitutional factors of visitor's perception and its broader association with destination planning and visitor satisfaction in Ladakh. It is to suggest here that the findings of this study could be specific to the area under study therefore instead of generalizing the proposed outcomes, study of similar aim and nature can be conducted to other similar destinations.

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