DESTINATION IMAGE PERCEPTION OF INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS: THE CASE OF SRI LANKA AS A TOURIST DESTINATION

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is considered as a growing industry in Sri Lanka and constitutes a major contributor to the Gross Domestic Product. However, with the high competition among destinations worldwide, the image held by travelers on a specific tourist destination is of high influencer to select alternative tourist destinations. Despite the importance of positive images for destinations, more recent literature acknowledges that there is a dearth of research on the influence of nationality on interpretations of destination imagery. Therefore, this study is designed to address the research question of whether the nationality a tourist has any significant impact on the perception they hold on Sri Lanka as a tourist destination. The major objectives are to assess the nature of image perception (IP) of tourists in Sri Lanka and to examine whether image perception varies in terms of the country of the tourist. A single cross sectional research design is employed to collect data through a self administered questionnaire. The unit of analysis and the proxies are the international tourists to Sri Lanka. A sample of 223 international tourists, who came to Sri Lanka during April and May, 2014 has been selected. One way ANOVA was performed to examine the differences among the perceptual evaluation of tourists on the destination image. The analysis shows that the destination image perception varies according to the nationality of the tourists. The implication of this research can be used to develop the tourist marketing mix to suit the image perception of tourists.

Key words: Destination, Image perception, International Tourists, Nationality

INTRODUCTION

Tourism, today, is a highly growing industry in the world (UNWTO, 2013). It has been recognized as a great contributor to many global economies to recover from financial difficulties, which they have gone through during the past few years. For most of the developing countries, tourism serves as a major source of income generation. As an example, the South Asian region demonstrated an increase of 7.5 % of international tourism receipts (in US$ millions) in the year 2012 with compared to 2011,where India, Maldives and Sri Lanka showed 5.5 %, 0.6% and 0.3 % of growth respectively in 2012 with compared to 2011 (UNWTO,2013).Although the contribution from tourism to the Sri Lankan economy has been comparatively less for the past three decades due to the war against terrorism, Sri Lanka has again repositioned itself as a tourist destination in the world with the end of 30-year-long armed conflict, in 2009. Both global and local tourists can now freely travel anywhere in the country and enjoy this highly diversified tourism product. For example, according to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, gross tourist receipts were around Rs.mn. 40000 (US $ mn. 400) from 2003 to 2009. The amount of Rs.mn. 40133 recorded in 2009 increased by 62% in the year 2010. This figure of Rs.mn. 65018 (US$ mn.540) in 2010 has been more than doubled in the year 2012 with reporting Rs.mn. 132427(US$1039) (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2014). With compared to

2012; in 2013 it has grown from 67% by recording a gross tourist receipt of Rs.mn. 221720 (US $.mn. 1715)(Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2014).

With tourism industry reporting a high growth rates in Sri Lanka, for example tourists' arrivals displayed a 17 % growth in 2011 compared to 2012 and 27% growth in 2013 compared to 2012 (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority- SLTDA) tourism development occupies an important place in the government's economic development policy. Sri Lanka uses the tag line "Refreshingly Sri Lanka- the Wonder of Asia" for tourism promotion (SLTDA), emphasizing the nature of experience that accrues to those visiting the destination. Further, authenticity, compactness and diversity have been presented as the main benefits for tourists by visiting Sri Lanka (SLTDA).

Problem Statement

When it comes to destination marketing, attracting and retaining the customers is said to be more challenging. Unlike most other products and services, there is no urgency or emergency about a holiday (Sarma, 2007) and it is an infrequent purchase, which occurs once a year or less, especially when it comes to an international trip (McKercher and Guillet, 2011 quoting Andreassen and Lindestad, 1998).Tourists worldwide now have more destination choice with the emergence of new tourist destinations around the world. This demand the marketers' attention in preparing careful and strong plans to market the destination product after a careful analysis of the marketing environment; especially tourist behavior. Hence, when taking strategic marketing decisions, policy makers need to consider what travelers expect from the destination in order to satisfy them and attract new tourists to the country.

Travelers with more positive images are most likely to visit the area and image perception has a high impact on tourists' behavioral intention, return intention, loyalty and positive word of mouth communication (Koecnic and Gartner, 2007 cited in Boo et al., 2009). As a result, when designing marketing communications to attract new customers (or tourists) and when designing marketing strategies such as segmenting, targeting and positioning, paying attention on the customer perceptions will be crucial.

On the other hand, with the considerable growth rate demonstrated in the tourism industry for the past few years, the Sri Lankan government aims to earn higher economic benefits for the country through this industry. At the same time both government and private sector organizations have been investing heavily in this booming industry.

Despite this importance, there are only a handful of studies available on image perception on Sri Lanka as a tourist destination. The researchers attempt to understand the nature of image perception on Sri Lanka as a tourist destination and whether image perception varies in terms of the nationality of the tourist. This aspect is also acknowledged by tourism scholars as an important factor and highlighted as an aspect which has drawn less attention from researches despite its importance.

Therefore, through the current study, the researchers intend to fill the gap in the existing knowledge of tourism literature by studying, "The nature of destination image perception of tourists on Sri Lanka as a tourist destination". This knowledge may be useful for policy makers and other public and private investors' engaging in the tourism industry.

In consistence with the research problem, the following research questions are formulated.

- What is the nature of image perception of inbound tourists on Sri Lanka as a tourist destination?
- Does the destination image perception of the inbound tourists vary in terms of the nationality of the tourists?

Accordingly the objectives are formulated as follows;

- To study the nature of image perception of the inbound tourists on Sri Lanka as a tourist destination.
- To study whether the tourist image perception varies in terms of nationality of the tourists who select Sri Lanka as a tourist destination.

The first section of this study gives the conceptual account, the second section elaborates the methodology, and the third section presents the analysis, discussion and conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism and Tourist

Tourism is "the activities and interactions of people, other than regular commuters, and the resultant impacts on both the demand and supply side, while visiting places away from home" Pike (2004, p.23), where tourists can be defined as "people travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes"(UNWTO, 2013).   The purpose of travel can be for any purpose different from being remunerated from within the place visited. In the current study, researchers refer to inbound tourism by the term 'tourism' where the tourist is referred to as non-residents received by Sri Lanka.

Destination

The product as the first and most important element in the marketing mix can be defined as "anything that can be offered to a market to satisfy a want or need including physical goods, services, experiences, events, persons, places, properties, organizations, information and ideas." (Kotler et al., 2012, p.308). Therefore, the tourism product, which is commonly referred to as the destination, is "'anything a tourist consumes', (Kastenholz, 2010, p. 314) and are places that attract visitors for a temporary stay, which range from continents, countries, states, provinces, cities, villages and to purposely built resort areas (Ispas, 2008, quoted Pike 2004).

Rather than a single product, a destination is blend of products "which range over a wide variety of commercial offerings (accommodation, food and beverage, recreation, sports, animation, etc.) and 'price-less goods' (such as natural and cultural heritage, landscape, hospitality, etc.)" (Kastenholz, 2010, p. 314).

Different destinations have different attractions and more importantly a different level of competitive ability. Attractions of destinations are different from each other due to factors such as the size of the location, climate of the destination, cultural heritage and natural beauty and resource availability. This diversity presents a difficult marketing challenge to a particular

destination. Thus, it is not a simple task for any destination which has the desire to become a recognized destination, with the objective of attracting tourists for economic and other benefits.

Destination Marketing

"Marketing is a societal process by which individuals obtain what they need and want through creating, offering, and freely exchanging products and services of value with others" (Kotler et al., 2012, p.6). Stressing the concept of value as a central concept of marketing, marketing management can be defined as "art and science of choosing target markets, and getting, keeping and growing customers through creating delivering and communicating superior customer value" (Kotler et al., 2012, p.6).

In this context, tourist Destination Marketing has been defined as "the management process through which the National Tourist Organizations and/or tourist enterprises identify their selected tourists, actual and potential, communicate with them to ascertain and influence their wishes, needs, motivations, likes and dislikes, on local, regional, national and international levels, and to formulate and adapt their tourist products accordingly in view of achieving optimal tourist satisfaction there by fulfilling their objectives" (Wahab *et al*.cited in Ispas 2008, p.919).

Destination Image Perception

Destination image management is considered as an important aspect of destination marketing and the images held by individuals in the marketplace are considered crucial to a destination's marketing success (Tasci, Gartner and Cavusgil, 2007). Destination image exerts significant impact on the decision-making process of tourists (Byon and Zhang, 2010, Kastenholz, 2010 and McCartney, Butler and Bennett, 2008) and the image connotes the traveler's expectation (Leisen ,2001). Further the traveler's choice of a vacation destination depends largely on the favorableness of his or her image of that destination (Citing Lindquist, 1974-1975 by Leisen 2001). In the meantime, destination image is considered as a critical factor and a driving force behind tourist behavior (Boo et al., 2009, Kastenholz, 2010 and McCartney, Butler and Bennett, 2008) that influences return intention, loyalty and positive word of mouth communication, as well as a prominent dimension of brand equity (Koecnic and Gartner ,2007 cited in Boo et al., 2009) and as a key component of destination loyalty.

Unlike most other products and services, there is no urgency or emergency about a holiday (Sarma, 2007) and it is an infrequent purchase, which occurs once a year or less, especially when it comes to an international trip (McKercher and Guillet , 2011 quoting Andreassen and Lindestad ,1998). Therefore, travelers select the destination with the most favorable image, since the positive image promises the traveler a rewarding life experience (Leisen, 2001). In addition, since their perception of the location is what motivate people to travel; perceptions of the location is considered as traveler's realities (Leisen, 2001 by quoting Blank, 1989). Hence, the most important thing is travelers' image of locations but not the real attraction offerings (Leisen, 2001). Thus, it has been argued that the destinations are mainly competing with their competitors based on their perceived image (quoting Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001 by Martin and Bosque, 2007).

Today, destinations are trying to assemble as many positive image attributes as possible, causing intensification of the global travel market (McCartney, 2008). Further, they treat promoting and communicating the image of the product or the destination as the remedy

for leisure marketing success (Sarma, 2007). However, managing and portraying attractive and positive imagery to target traveler segments has become a greater challenge for destinations (McCartney, 2008).

Meanwhile, the strategic challenge for destinations is not only answering 'how to form positive images that induce travel to that destination', but would be also on how to develop sustainable differential images which are different from other competing locations (McCartney,Butler and Bennett ,2009).

Considering the above discussion on the importance of favorable image perception to a destination's success, the present study hypothesizes that tourists hold a favorable image perception on Sri Lanka as a tourist destination.

Image

In general brand image is "the perceptions and beliefs held by consumers as reflected in the associations held in consumer memory" (Kotler et al., 2012) whereas brand associations can be defined as "Anything, including attributes of a product/service, reputation of a company, and characteristics of product/service users, which is linked in consumer memory to a brand." (Quoting Aaker, 1991, 1996; in Wang and Li, 2011,p.149)). When these associations are favorable, strong and unique, it is known as the positive brand image (Keller, 1993).

Hence, destination image refers to "perceptions of tourists in a destination and these correspond to the perceived contribution of the different tourism services to be found there: accommodation, food, transport and more." (Gallarza et al., 2002, p.71). Meanwhile, embracing both the cognitive and affective components into the definition, Kastenholz (2010, p.313) quote Kastenholz (2002) to define image "as a complex mental system of cognitive, affective and imagery associations linked to a product or brand." Further, including the emotional (i.e. affective) component in the definition, Vaughan and Edwards (1999, p.357), quoting Crompton, (1979) points out the image as "The sum of all those emotional and aesthetic qualities such as experiences, beliefs, ideas, recollections and impressions that a person has of a destination".

However, there has been no consensus among scholars on what is meant by image. The ambiguous, subjective and immaterial nature of the image construct and its large number of elements and attributes has made it even more complicated to define (Lopes 2011). Thus, in image studies, there is lack of clarity in defining image where many definitions are vague while in most cases definitions have not been made explicitly available (Echtner and Ritchie (2003), Pike (2008) and Gallarza, et al., (2001),Tasci et al.,(2007)). When examining the available definitions, different authors have defined image differently according to author's own conceptualization because of the lack of unique meaning to image (Gallarza et al.,2002). For some authors, image possess cognitive components, while for others it encompasses both cognitive and evaluative components where another set of researchers notify cognitive, evaluative and conative as interrelating components of image (Gallarza et al., 2002).

Features Describing the Image Construct

"Image" has been argued for being consisted of multiple natures, due to its multiple elements and its formation process. According to Kastenholz (2010), image is a holistic, multi-attribute and multi-dimensional construct. Gallarza et al., (2002) have identified four features of image construct, as complexity, multiplicity, relativistic and dynamic while Lopes (2011), by referring to literature has included ambiguousness and immaterial nature also into its features.

Accordingly image is regarded as relativistic as it is subjective and comparative at the same time where subjectivity relates to change from person to person and comparativeness occupies perceptions among various objects. For example, according to Gunn (1972) quoted in Leisen (2001, p.51), image "is not merely a camera-like imprint of the destination, but an expression of appraisal, and therefore a purely subjective notion". Thus, different people will have different images of the same product. Further Lopes (2011) quoting San Martín and Rodriguez, (2008) explained this subjective image is based on the perceptions each tourist has on the destinations they have been to or have heard of.

Next the Dynamic nature, refering to image is not static, but changes depend on time and space (Gallarza et al., 2002). Accordingly, Hsu and Song (2013, p.254) by quoting Kim and Richardson (2003) have defined image as "totality of impressions, believes, ideas, expectations and feelings accumulated about a place overtime."

Image or Image Perception

When examining literature on tourism, it is evident that the margin between image and perception seems vague and different studies adopt 'Image' and 'Perception' interchangeably; interdependently while others link both together.

For example, in the process of defining image, authors frequently adopted perception into it, such as "Brand image of a country as a set of consumer perceptions." (Valls (1992) quoted in Lopes, 2011, p.307); "Organized representations of a destination in a cognitive system" (Crompton, (1977) cited in Echtner and Ritchie, 2003, p.41) and as "a pure cognitive state of mind and is not necessarily a readymade one for all visitors" (Sarma, 2007, p.36).

Perception simply means how we see the world around us, in other words it is "the process by which we select, organize and interpret information inputs to create a meaningful picture of the world." (Kotler et al., 2012, p.156). Thus, it is argued that perception is more important in marketing than in reality, because it is a perception that affects the consumer's actual behavior (Kotler et al., 2012). Defining perception relating to image, Coerria et al.,(2007, p.46) quoted Gnoth, (1997) to say "perception is the image of a tourist destination that makes effective the behavior intentions".

According to Balakrishnan, et al., (2011), Although image and perception are two terms that relate closely to each other, it can be distinguished because "the image of a destination sent to the customer is controllable, [though] the image that the target customer receives or perceives is not" (Balakrishna et al., 2011, p.6 quoting Meenaghan, 1995).

Tasci et al.,, (2007 ,P.197) as well, quoting Fridgen's (1987) argued that although both the image and perception are ways of environmental understanding and comprehension, a difference exists when considering the need of environmental stimuli. For perception to occur there should be environmental stimuli whereas there's no need of such stimuli for image. Therefore, image might or might not include perception. To support this argument Tasci et al., (2007, P.197) also used Sussmann and Unel (1999) as "They [perception, attitude and image] are quite different: images are the result of composite perceptions which are, in turn, dictated by attitudes to result in a positive or negative image."

On the other hand, Tasci et al., (2007) justified using two terms interchangeably or amalgamative based on the fact that although authors gave different names it was intended to

assume the same meaning of this concept. However, the use of tourists' perception of an image is theoretically an inappropriate combination when potential tourists have not yet experienced perception through pictures or visitation (Tasci et al., 2007). Hence, in the case where tourists have experienced the destination; using the term image perception can be argued more appropriate. Therefore, the destination image perception can be defined as individually constructed, socially projected and shared perceptions held in the tourists' memory about a destination which is reflected by the set of associations linked to the destination.

Image Formation

The concept, image, has been explored in different ways by different authors as, stages of image formation , push-pull images of destination, affective translation of that perception into an attitude (Vaughan and Edwards ,1999) and as cognitive, affective and conetive components into three interrelating components of image.

A common perspective of destination image formation process is image as a cognitive perception of the destination. Cognition according to Tasci, etal., (2007,p.199) is " a mental response that involves thinking about, paying attention to, remembering, understanding, interpreting, evaluating, (good/bad, favorable/unfavorable), and making decisions about stimuli in the environment." Further, according to Vaughan and Edwards (1999), cognitive image is how the visitor translates his/her perception of the destination into an overall description of that destination and in turn how the tourist would describe the physical attributes or features of the area.

Nationality of the Tourist and Image Perception

Selectivity, organized and personal perception has been identified as the three main features of perception formation, where the stimuli, that are selected and organized by a person are ultimately interpreted subjectively by the individual (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). When considering this subjectivity phenomenon, social and cultural factors have been considered as the most important factors affecting the perception (Hawkins et al., 2003 quoted by Martin and Bosque, 2007).

However, although the past research has considered destination image as a subjective construction, the importance of socio cultural factors has been ignored (Tasci, 2009 quoted by Chen, Lin, James and Petric, 2012), by causing a dearth of research on measuring the influence of nationality when interpreting destination image (Bonn, Josep and Dai, 2005). Jonsson and Devonish (2008) by pointing out the research works of Brewer, 1978, 1984 and Cho, 1991, claims that among available past research also, most have taken indirect assessments on the impact of nationality on tourist behaviour.

On the other hand, as international tourism products are produced, consumed and experienced in a culturally distinct environment from the country of origin of the tourist, it is very much shaped by cross-cultural interaction (Kastenholz, 2010). Hence, a tourist is required to integrate and in turn that person will react with different degrees of comfort and enthusiasm, causing the satisfaction gained by the experience and also the positive destination image depending on this cross cultural interaction (Kastenholz, 2010).

According to the social psychology literature, " members of a group are often exposed to similar patterns of social information, which might result in collective perceptions of outgroup people (people we see as different from us) or foreign nations" (Chen et al., 2012,

p.240, by quoting Alexander, et.al., 1999 ; Rubin and Hewstone, 2004 ; Stangor and Lange, 1993). Therefore, they argue that the formation of destination image also can be a social psychological process which can be influenced by social factors, such as the national or racial/ethnic origins of tourists (Chen et al., 2012 by quoting Mackay and Fesenmaier 2000; Prentice 2006; Tasci and Gartner 2007).

Accordingly, understanding the influence of nationality when interpreting destination imagery is considered critical for destination management, because tourism image relates to an individual's overall perception (Murphy et al., 2004 cited in McCartney, 2008). Further, the image perceptions based on nationality of the tourist is a key consideration in determining a specific positioning strategy for a destination (McCartney, 2008). Thus, it carries strategic marketing and promotional considerations (McCartney, 2008 p.23).

Therefore, identifying whether there is varying image perception between tourists from different nationalities would be crucial in taking such decisions for a destination, which lead the study to hypothesize that the tourist image perception on Sri Lanka varies with the nationality of the tourist.

Research Design

Through this study which is basically descriptive in nature, researchers attempted to ascertain the nature of Image Perception (IP) of the tourists on Sri Lanka and to see whether image perception varies in terms of the nationality of the tourist. The purpose of the study is twofold. First, it is descriptive in nature due to the first hypothesis developed and then as the study undertook to explain whether the IP varies in terms of nationality of the tourist, it is of correlation type (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010). The study was conducted in non - contrived setting which means in a natural environment where events normally occur. Further, this descriptive study with a single cross sectional design has employed a self administered questionnaire to collect data. The unit of analysis as well as the proxies was international tourists to Sri Lanka. A sample of 60 international tourists was non - randomly selected for the purpose of a pilot survey and then a sample of 163 international tourists was non -randomly selected for the survey.

Data were analyzed in two steps. First, a sample of 60 respondents was taken for the pilot study and performed an exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation to examine whether the originally developed indicators are converge on the respective dimensions. Only the factor loadings greater than 0.5 were retained for each factor grouping. Factors with Eigen values greater than 1 were reported in the final factor structure. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of factor grouping. Next, the final analysis was conducted with a total sample of 223 respondents, where one sample t-test and one way ANOVA has been performed to test the hypotheses respectively.

Operationalization

The Image perception construct was operationalized based on Beerli and Martin (2004a, 2004b) quoted in Hsu and Song (2013). Dimensionality of IP which was recognized as a multidimensional construct was arrived at priori basis and subsequently validated by testing against data. Nine first order factors (dimensions) have been employed initially and were measured by multiple indicators [i.e., Natural resources (3 items), General infrastructure (3items), Tourist infrastructure (3 items), Tourist leisure and recreation(5 items), Culture,

history, and art(6 items), Political and economic factors (4 items), Natural environment(4 items), Social environment(3 items), Atmosphere of the place (4 items).] All indicators of interest were measured through respondents' perceptual evaluation on a five point Likert scale. The response categories for each item were anchored by 1-strongly disagree, 3 -neither agree nor disagree and 5-strongly agree. The mean scores of the measurement were calculated to determine the degree of image perception held by tourists based on the decision criteria given in Table 1.

Table 1 Decision Criteria-Degree of Image Perception

Mean Value	Decision
Between 1 and 2.29	Unfavorable Image Perception
Between 2.3 and 3.59	Neutral Image Perception
Between 3.6 and 5	Favorable Image Perception

Validation of Measurement Properties

Major psychometric properties which were validated in the study are, Content validity, unidimensionality, reliability and construct validity (convergent and discriminant validity).

Before the measurement item purification in each test, basic statistical analyses of the collected data were performed. Those include examination for incorrect coding, mean, minimum maximum values, and standard deviation and normality tests such as skewness and kurtosis. No indication of serious violations of univariate normality was detected.

Content Validity

The content validity ensures that the measure includes an adequate and representative set of items that tap the domain of the concept (Malhothra, 2005). By carrying out a rigorous literature review, content validity of the construct has been ensured where dimensions as well as items were arrived at priori and tested against data by using exploratory factor analysis.

Unidimensionality

A scale is unidimensional when the items of a scale estimate one factor (Dunn et al,. 1994). The model proposed for this study for measuring IP is a multiple dimension measurement modal. To ensure that each of the dimension is measured by multiple indicators and each of the indicators measures only a single dimension, the scale was examined for unidimensionality through exploratory factor analysis provided by the SPSS program, as the researchers were unable to find AMOS program to conduct confirmatory factor analysis.

 Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's Test of sphericity were performed to examine the appropriateness of the factor analysis. The results of the test which are given in the Table 2 meets the standard value for KMO is 0.5 (Malhothra, 2005) indicating the appropriateness of factor analysis. Chi squire values of Bartlett's Tests of sphericity have been estimated under the hypothesis that the variables are correlated in the population. As the null hypothesis was rejected at the significant level of 0.05 level, variables are highly correlated. Results are recorded in the Table 2.

Table 2 Validity indexes

Dimensions	KMO	Bartlett's Test	
Natural resources	0.623	Chi squire	57.655
		sig.	0.000
Culture, History and Arts	0.718	Chi squire	121.679
		sig.	0.000
Political and economic factors	0.602	Chi squire	103.206
		sig.	0.000

Ultimately five dimensions were remained, after removing the weak dimensions, since the indicators of which were correlated with other dimensions. The set of indicators developed to capture the domain of the respective dimension was highly loaded on the same dimension, assuring the unidimensionality of construct. (Factor loadings are not recorded in the text)

Reliability

Since the data for this study were generated using scaled responses, it was deemed necessary to test for internal consistency. For the dimensions with more than two items, Croncbach's Alpha has been estimated to ensure the internal consistency of the instruments and results are presented in the Table 3.

Table 3: Internal consistency statistics and convergent validity statistic

Dimensions	No of items	Croncbach's Alpha	AVE	CR	Inter item correlation
Natural resources	3	0.732	0.54	0.78	-
Tourist leisure and recreation	2	-	-	-	0.198
Culture, History and Arts	4	0.663	0.50	0.80	-
Political and economic factors	3	0.652	0.59	0.81	-
Social environment	2	-	0.76	0.86	0.500

According to Sekeran and Bougie (2010), reliability values less than 0.6 are poor and, those in the range of 0.7 are acceptable. All the dimensions met the minimum standard of Croncbach's alpha. Tourist leisure and recreation dimension was excluded from the study due to its poor inter item correlation.

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity refers to the degree of agreement in two or more measures the same construct (Sin et al., 2005). Fornell and Larcker (1981) claim that convergent validity can be established if the average variance extracted value exceeds 0.5 for a factor and furthermore, Nunnally (1978) claims composite reliability of the dimensions should be equal or greater than 0.7 (Sin et al., 2005). Since Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values of each dimension exceed 0.5 and composite reliability exceeds 0.7, convergent validity in the IP scale of the study is assured. Results are presented in Table 3.

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity indicates the degree to which measures of conceptually distinct construct differ (Sin et al., 2005). Discriminant validity was assessed by the test provided by Fornell and Larcker (1981) quoted by Sin et al., (2005) in which the pair wise correlations among each and every dimension were compared with the AVE estimated for the respective dimensions making up each pair. The evidence of discriminant validity occurs when the variance extracted estimates exceed the squire of the correlation between the dimensions making up each pair (Sin et al., 2005). Table 4 shows that the relatively high variance extracted for each factor is higher than the inter scale squired correlations between dimensions, ensuring discriminant validity.

Table 4: Discriminant validity

Dimension	NR	CHA	PE	SE
NR	*0.54*			
CHA	0.16	*0.50*		
PE	0.018	0.05	*0.59*	
SE	0.023	0.034	0.195	*0.76*

Italic values are the respective AVE values.

Analysis

The sample profile will be presented in the first section of analysis and then the results of the two hypothesis tests will be discussed.

Sample profile

The sample profile which is presented in the Table 5; demonstrates that the highest number of respondents visit Sri Lanka for leisure (92.4%). Also the sample represents approximately equal numbers from both genders, where male and female representation is respectively 52% and 48%. The highest number of respondents is from the United Kingdom (22.7%) which is followed by India (15.2%) and Holland (10.3%). When considering the Age composition, the age group between 40 to 49 is with the highest representation where 43% of the sample are below age 40 and 31% are 50 or above.

Table 5: Sample Profile

Variable	N	Percentage	Variable	Percentage
Gender			Purpose of the visit	
Male		52	Leisure	92.4
Female		48	Business	0.4
			Visiting Family and friends	7.2
Country of the tourist			Age	5
				22
	49	22.0	Between14-19	17
UK	34	15.2	Between 20-29	25
India	23	10.3 7.2	Between 30-39	19
Holland	16	7.2	Between 40-49	11
Germany	16	4.5	Between 50-59	1

Belgium USA Other*	16 75	33.8	Between 60-69 above 70	

*Australia, Africa, Arabic, Austria, Bulgaria, China, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Italy, Israel, Jordan, Maldives , Malaysia, Norway, Pakistan, Portugal, Poland, South Korea, Singapore, Slovakia, Sweden, , Switzerland, Spain , Slovenia, Taiwan,

Tourist Image Perception

The first objective of this study is set to examine the nature of tourist image perception on Sri Lanka as a tourist destination. In line with this objective the hypothesis "there is a favorable image perception on Sri Lanka as a tourist destination among international tourists" was formulated.

The criteria in Table 1 were adopted to determine the nature of the tourist IP on Sri Lanka. One sample t test was performed to test whether the assumed mean (3.59 = the upper boundary of neutral IP) is statistically different from the observed mean. The results of the t test are given in Table 6.

Table 6: One Sample T-test

	Assumed mean	Observed mean	t-value	Sig.level
Natural Resources	3.59	3.99	8.241	.000
Culture History and Arts	3.59	3.82	5.261	.000
Political and Economic Factors	3.59	3.62	0.677	.499
Social Environment	3.59	3.01	-10.487	.000
Image Perception	3.59	3.61	0.671	.503

Since there is no enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis at the significance level of 0.05, the Overall IP is not favorable on Sri Lanka as a tourist destination. Hence, the overall IP on Sri Lanka is Neutral. On the other hand, the null hypothesis can be rejected at the significant level of 0.05 for the Natural Resources, Culture History and Arts and Social Environment dimensions which display a significance with the mean scores of 3.99, 3.82 and 3.01 respectively. Moreover, the tourists have a favorable IP on Sri Lanka in terms of its natural resources and culture history and arts, while, the IP on political and economic factors and social environment of Sri Lanka are neutral. These two lower scores (i.e. political and economic factors and social environment) must have caused the neutral overall IP on Sri Lanka, since the other two dimensions reported much favorable scores.

Image Perception by Nationality

The second objective of this study is to examine whether image perception varies in terms of nationality of the tourists. In line with this objective, the second hypothesis was developed as; the tourist image perception on Sri Lanka varies with the nationality of the tourists. In order to test the statistical differences in the evaluations of tourists from different nationalities, one way ANOVA was performed. The mean score of each dimension is given in Table 7.

Table 7: Variations of Image Perception dimensions

IP dimensions	UK	India	Holland	Germany	Belgium	USA	F value	Sig.
	N=49	N=34	N=23	N=16	N=16	N=10		
Natural Resources	4.48	3.75	4.20	3.94	4.40	4.27		.000
Culture History and Arts	4.11	3.40	3.91	4.17	3.70	3.95		.000
Political and Economic Factors	3.67	3.72	3.54	3.27	3.77	3.70		.294
Social Environment	3.11	3.13	2.98	3.09	2.72	2.70		.391
Image Perception	3.84	3.50	3.66	3.62	3.65	3.65	2.545	.031

Natural resources, Culture History and Arts and overall Image Perception demonstrate significant differences among the tourists of different nationalities. For instance tourists from UK and Belgium perceived Sri Lanka is significantly rich with natural resources demonstrating a favorable IP of 4.48 and 4.4 mean scores respectively. The Indians showed the lowest mean score of 3.75. When it comes to the "Culture, History and Arts", The Germans and the British perceive Sri Lanka is rich in its cultural heritage, history and arts (with favorable IP of 4.17 and 4.11 mean scores respectively) than tourists from India and Belgium who have neutral IP, reporting mean scores of 3.4 and 3.7 correspondingly. When it comes to the overall IP, The British exposed the highest mean value of 3.84 displaying a very favorable IP whilst the lowest is shown among Indians (mean score of 3.5) who have a neutral IP on Sri Lanka.

The differences of IP between nationalities are not significant when it comes to political and Economic Factors and Social Environment, indicating all tourists perceive similarly on respective dimensions.

To determine among which groups the true difference lies, Scheffe's S was calculated, since it is a conservative test that is robust to violations of assumptions (Cooper and Schindler, 2003). The result of Scheffe's S test which is reported in Table 8 discloses where the true difference lies among the six groups.

Table 08: Scheffe's S test

	Natural Resources		Culture, History and Arts		Overall Image Perception	
	Mean diff.	Sig.	Mean diff.	Sig.	Mean diff.	Sig.
UK India Germany	.73790 .54549	.000 .015	.70273	.001	.34042	.040
India UK Holland Belgium Germany	-.73790 -.45780 -.65074 -	.000 .045 .003	-.70273 - - -.76746	.001 - - .001	-.34042 - - -	.040 - - -

Germany						
UK	-.54549	.015	-	-		
India	-	-	.76746	.012		
Belgium						
India	.45780	.045				
Holland						
India	.65074	.003				

When it comes to the image perception on natural resources UK shows a significant differences with India and Germany where India shows with UK, Belgium and Holland. India again demonstrates a significant difference with UK and Germany on the image perception of Culture, History and Arts dimension. Finally, when considering the overall image perception; a significant difference is displayed only between India and UK.

DISCUSSION

This study attempts to examine the nature of tourist image perception on Sri Lanka as a tourist destination and examines whether image perception varies in terms of the country of the tourists, representing, a descriptive hypothesis and a corelational hypothesis respectively.

The Results revealed that the overall IP on Sri Lanka as a tourist destination is not favorable, but neutral. However, tourists have favorable IP on Sri Lanka's Natural Resources and on Culture, History and Arts, where they do not pose a favorable image on Political and Economic Factors and on the Social Environment of the country.

The finding of highly favorable IP on Sri Lanka's natural resources are in line with the previous research work of Buhalis (2000), who categorizes destinations with reference to their principle attractiveness. Accordingly, Sri Lanka can be categorized as an authentic destination where, authenticity has been presented as one of the main benefit for tourists to Sri Lanka by the SLTDA. Buhalis (2000) argues authentic destinations attract tourists who are prepared to forgo their comfort in order to interact with local communities and unspoiled surroundings. This may be one of the reasons for the tourists to have a highly favorable IP on Sri Lanka's natural resources. Further, it is argued that the authentic destinations are often lacking the required infrastructure to deliver tourism services (Silver, 1993; Huges, 1995 and Sofied, 1991; quoted in Buhalis, 2000). This may have cause for not obtaining a favorable IP on economic factors as well as social environment of Sri Lanka as a destination.

Moreover, in consistence with the past research it is found that the there are differences of destination image perception among tourists depending on their nationality (Bonn, et al.,, 2005, Martin and Bosque, 2007 , Chen, et, al., 2012 and Kastenholz, 2010). This point also has been emphasized by scholars such as Lopes (2011), McCartney (2008) by referring to Bonn, et al., (2005); and Jonsson and Devonish,(2008) by referring to Hauang, et al.,, (1996).

In particular, British (UK) tourists have stronger IP on Sri Lanka, compared with other tourists, where Indians have the weakest IP. This finding is also consistent with research work of Kastenholz, (2010, p.319) who refused the argument of previously accepted 'the closer the better destination image' claim. Earlier it was acknowledged that the tourists, who are culturally and geographically closer, have the better destination image where tourists who are culturally and geographically distant have worst IP (Kastenholz, 2010).

Moreover, IP on "Natural Resources" and "Culture History and Arts" were found significant variation between countries of the tourists. Specifically, significant differences were found among the British, the Indians and the Germans.

CONCLUSION

Following implications and normative suggestions can be made for tourism policy makers and both public and private sector investors on the tourism industry. Further, the results of tourism image research should be used by marketers when taking important decisions regarding planning, development, positioning, and promotion; in order to conduct intelligent destination marketing Tasci et al.,(2007).

In a situation of high competition among destinations, with often limited promotional resources; marketers' task is to identify the images held by travellers and select those segments that represent the most receptive target markets (Leisen, 2001). As the results of the study indicate a varying image perception over the nationality of tourists, it is suggested to alter the marketing communication on the country accordingly.

Further, the Sri Lankan government specifically needs to work on the unfavorable image of the country's political and economic factors and social factors held by inbound international tourists to the country, in order to obtain overall favorable IP on the destination.

In addition, Sri Lanka needs to take necessary measures to protect its natural environment and resources as it is suggested that authentic destinations need to be properly planned in order to sustain their resources when they develop to mass tourism destinations (Buhalis, 2000).

However, further research should be carried out to examine the impact of psychological factors of individuals on the destination IP as the majority of past research have integrated image perception with external stimuli, ignoring the influence of internal factors (Martin and Bosque, 2007); For example McCartney (2008, p.14) by citing Baloglu and McCleary (1999) and Gallarza et al., (2002) has recognized that, personal factors such as demographic factors (i.e. age, education and marital status) and psychological factors (i.e. motivations) are key constructs in image formation and the major force in determining the overall image construct..

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