
Perceptions of Kazakhstan as a Tourist Destination

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Abstract:

As brand is defined as perceptions or associations in the consumer's mind, as such it can vary across people and countries alike. The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions of foreign tourists about Kazakhstan as a prospective tourist destination.

The study seeks to capture major attributes of the common image of this country in Europe. It relies on the qualitative techniques, namely word associations and collage method accompanied by interviews, which were used to examine people's views and opinions about Kazakhstan as a tourist destination.

The respective data produced by these techniques were combined into Echtner and Ritchie's framework used as a guiding model to interpret those data.

The findings demonstrate a lack of public awareness about Kazakhstan as a country with its distinct identity. In fact, they reveal a still dominant image of Kazakhstan depicted with the three major attributes: the fictitious Hollywood movie character Borat, nature and tradition.

Thus, the study highlights a deplorable knowledge gap on the part of the world at large about Kazakhstan and, therefore, underscores the importance of a more concerted and positive brand-building of the country as a tourist destination.

Keywords: Brand, perception, view, image, Kazakhstan, tourist destination, hospitality.

JEL Classification: L80, L83.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, one of the main aspirations of any country is arguably to create their own positive image in the eyes of the world community if it is to successfully integrate into the 'global village'. This gives an additional advantage in many issues of foreign policy, trade, economic development, tourism, and attracting investments (Nikitinsky, 2006). In other words, people across the globe expect every country developing its tourism industry to build a positive international image. Such image is created based on a set of the most recognizable attributes, each of which could be either emotionally positive or negative. For example, France is associated with Paris with its famous Eiffel Tower and Louvre; Italy with the Colosseum, pasta, pizza, and fashion; and Netherlands with bicycle, windmill, flowers, and cheese, just to name a few. As to the international image of Kazakhstan, which would reflect some notable features of its culture and history, it still seems to be at the formative stage. In this regard, the purpose of the study is to analyze views and perceptions of representatives of two European countries, namely Netherlands and Germany, of the image of Kazakhstan. Thus, the study seeks answers to the following research question: *How is Kazakhstan as a tourist destination perceived in Europe?*

When people think of going on vacation overseas or of buying a foreign-made product, they always rely on their own representation, or image, of the respective locale, trying to make decision-making easier and faster. This kind of image is based on stereotypes, or cliché, built overtime. Kotler and Gertner (2002) posit that stereotypes help simplify the representation, yet they can distort the reality. In fact, publications in the media have been conducive to generating many sorts of myths about countries. For instance, Sicily (Italy) is still associated with the characters of The Godfather novel and movie, mafia, and crime; Afghanistan is associated with terrorists, Al-Qaeda, and Osama bin Laden. Therefore, the attractiveness of a country hinges on people's perception of this place (Prebensen, 2007; Sazhin and Saraikin, 2016). This research seeks to understand what is in Dutch and German students' mind about Kazakhstan, what prevalent stereotypes they have, and what attracts or alarms them. Thus, it aspires to illuminating the following aspects of the main research question:

1. what aspects of the country image help, and which ones hinder the attraction of tourists;
2. to what extent the prevalent outside image of Kazakhstan is congruent with the image that this country seeks to project;
3. what stereotypes should be accounted for in developing the brand of the country as a tourist destination.

There are four major components of Kazakhstan's image, which need to be developed: the one is the history of Kazakhstan, the Kazakh government's image, the overall image of the country and that of the national character. Name Kazakhstan from ancient Turkic can be literally translated as a country of the Kazakhs. As to its

history, the government, and the national character, except for some elements of the Kazakh culture and language, there appears to a great knowledge gap in the public mind. That is why, Kazakhstan as still an emerging new country is a fascinating case to explore to learn what the world at large really knows about it.

Knowing perceptions of outsiders is a prerequisite or any country to become a well-known tourist destination (Prebensen, 2007). The lack of studies on the image of Kazakhstan as a tourist destination thus inspired this study to contribute to the respective knowledge-building. The findings would be of interest to hospitality professionals seeking to develop foreign tourism in Kazakhstan, which is considered as one of the priority sectors of the national economy. It can be argued that images stem from stereotypes. Kotler and Gertner (2002) posit that stereotypes tend to primitivize the reality by skewing some important attributes of a destination place. In this regard, the study also aspires to finding out to what extent the prospective foreign tourists' images of Kazakhstan are congruent with the reality.

2. Underpinning theoretical framework

This section will discuss a theoretical framework used as a basis for the study. Image is an important concept in tourism studies as it serves as a key criterion in choosing tourist destinations (Zahra, 2012). Therefore, hospitality professionals should be keen to an attractive image-building goal for a destination place. In this regard, of paramount importance is understanding the phenomenon of destination image, its formation, and how it impacts tourists' choosing a certain destination place (Sirakaya *et al.*, 2005).

2.1 Destination image

Echtner and Ritchie (1991) posit that even though the term "destination image" is used very often in tourism studies, there is no accurate definition for it yet. However, the concept of image should be addressed first. In this respect, it can be argued that image is 'a term with vague and shifting meanings' (Pearce, 1988) interpreted differently based on the context. For example, in psychology image is defined as a visual representation; in geography it refers to the social or spatial reality; in marketing it is associated with attributes that relate image to the consumer behavior (Jenkins, 1999).

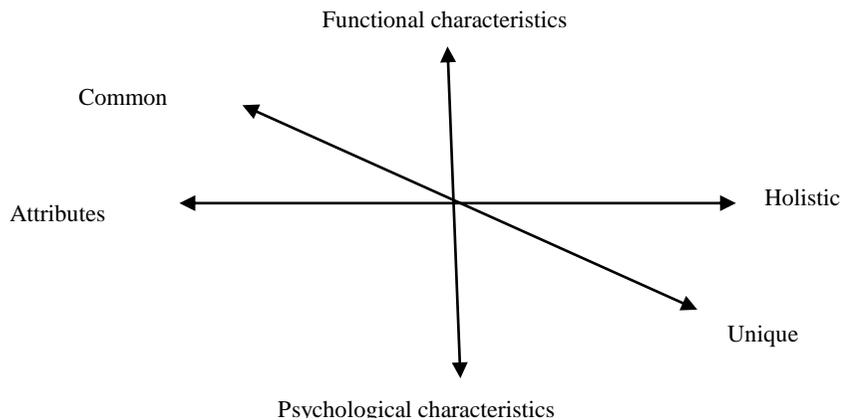
As to destination image, for instance, Baloglu and McCleary (1999) define it as "*...an individual's mental representation of knowledge, feelings, and global impressions about a destination*". The image associated with a destination is based on different sources including an individual's knowledge about the destination acquired from school subjects such as geography and history. Besides, other information sources may comprise media, friends, and family. Finally, mental image of a destination place draws upon one's own travel experiences. In this regard, the image can be viewed as "*...the set of selective representations and perceptions that*

are related to the frameworks of reference of individuals” (Mayo and Jarvis, 1981). In a similar vein, Gertner and Kotler (2004) consider image as a sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has about a place, it is an individual perception and different people can have different images of the same place.

Destination image can be viewed as comprised of three major components: cognitive, affective and conative (White, 2004). The cognitive component represents the knowledge people have about the destination; affective one reflects the feelings about it; and the conative component relates to tourists’ behavior when at the destination. The knowledge and the feelings about the destination place have an impact on the behavior of tourists. Thus, the overall image of the destination would result from an interaction of these three components (Stepchenkova and Morrison, 2008).

In sum, to better understand the destination image concept, both academic and hospitality professionals need to account for a multi-layer, individualized, and dynamic nature of the destination image and what major factors affect its formation. This study will rely on the conceptual framework offered by Echtner and Ritchie (1991; 1993), which is featured below by Figure 1.

Figure 1. Components of the destination image. Adapted from Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993)



It views formation of a destination image within the following three dimensions: functional-psychological, attribute-holistic, and common-unique. The functional image attributes will be considered as measurable, whereas psychological characteristics would be harder to assess quantitatively. The common-unique dimension ranges destination images from common to unique. Finally, the attribute-holistic one reflects impressions of a destination place perceived either thru its separate attributes or as a whole (Di Marino, 2006). For example, common functional attributes are price, climate, and accommodation classes, whereas psychological ones may feature the beauty of a landscape, friendliness of a

population. Unique psychological attributes can be related to feelings associated with a place (Jenkins, 1999) whereas unique functional ones maybe based on a distinct resort location, exceptional hospitality service, or special events.

Echtner and Ritchie (1991; 1993) argue that while it is helpful to examine the destination image from the above three-dimensional perspective, in reality, those dimensional attributes are intertwined. In fact, holistic impressions of a place emerge out of a set of attributes, and in return, overall impressions affect perceptions of individual attributes (Saenko, 2010). Likewise, MacInnins and Price (1987) posit that image formation process involves individual attributes, holistic impressions as well as functional and psychological characteristics.

The concept of brand also appears to be an important factor for a destination image. The term 'brand' originates from the Old Norse "brand" meaning to burn, used as a sign of identification by burning a stamp on the livestock. Brand as a distinguishing mark has been relied upon as a guide to selecting among competing offers, which still works nowadays (Keller, 2008). Thus, brand has evolved from being just a sign of ownership to a mark of differentiation.

Dobni and Zikhan (1990) proposed a set of definitions for the concept of brand image divided into five categories: blanket definitions (broad definitions), definitions with focus on symbolism (relate commercial objects to symbols/imagery of the users), definitions with emphasis on meanings (meaning that consumer ascribe to a product), definitions with emphasis on personification (attributing human characteristics to the brand) and definitions with emphasis on cognitive or psychological elements (feelings, ideas, attitudes that consumers have about the brand). Also, there emerged definitions with emphasis on perceptions (brand associations), self-concepts (self-image) and relationship/communication (between the brand and the consumer (Pereira, 2009; Egorova *et al.*, 2015; Gorina 2016).

Brand image is not necessarily identical with the either actual image of a destination place or a desirable one. Lopes (2011) affirms that the following three levels should be considered for analyzing brand image:

1. Perceived image – how tourists perceive a destination place.
2. Actual image – existing state of a destination with its current condition of hospitality industry.
3. Desired image – how a destination place seeks to be perceived by tourists.

In sum, this study seeks to explore perceptions of foreigners about Kazakhstan as a destination place by integrating the concepts of branding and destination image. A tourist destination place may have a name, but not necessarily a brand name. Brand appears to build upon an attractive destination image. A place with a strong or unique image stands a higher chance to succeed in having a tourist choose it as a destination (Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; Hunt, 1975). A destination place with a

clear and well-defined image in tourists' mind can also be more easily branded. Branding as a marketing tool needs to have a clear purpose. It is a long-term investment, so it will take time to develop a strong brand to stand out of the crowd. Therefore, brand is one of the key factors in choosing a destination place (Ekinici, 2003).

3. Methodology

This study employs qualitative methods, this choice being affected by the nature of the subject area. Indeed, destination image is largely in the subjectivity realm shaped by individual views and experiences. Besides, as Strauss and Corbin (1990) posit that qualitative methods are instrumental in exploring previously unstudied phenomena (Zhao, 2006). Finally, qualitative research provides for an opportunity to use different data collection tools (Banyai, 2009; Medvedeva *et al.*, 2015).

Two exploratory methods, namely word associations and collage technique, are employed. These tools initially developed by Freud (1911 cited in Wagner, 2009) are qualitative techniques that can be applied to examine individual perceptions and views of a destination image. Thus, the study relies on a tandem of these two data collection tools to gain insights of how prospective tourists perceive Kazakhstan.

By way of defining a primary data population, European students from two countries, namely the Netherlands and Germany, are targeted. Selecting European students is based on the two following reasons. First, Europeans are known as world travelers, and second, the study physically took place at two European Universities with numerous students coming from different countries of the region. Non-random convenience sampling is used whereby respondents are selected at University campuses in classrooms, food courts, hallways, gymnastic halls, and dormitories. A sample of 20 students as prospective tourists comprised of international students of Wageningen and Zittau University, is selected. The sample features almost equal proportion of male and female students representing different countries. Table 3 displays the composition of the sample.

Table 1. *Students of Wageningen University: gender, age, nationality, and their number (in brackets)*

Gender	Female(12), Male (8)
Age	18 – 30 years (10), 30-50 years (8), 50- above (2)
Nationality	Italy (1), Germany (2), Colombian (1), Malaysia (1), Chinese (1), Indian (1), Poland (1), Spaniard (1), Colombian (1), Greek (1), Indonesian (1), Brazilian (1), Dutch (3), African (1), Canadian (1), Georgia (1), Turkish (1)

Source: Table is created by the authors.

The above data collection tools are based on the following question to be asked:
What images or attributes come to your mind when you think of Kazakhstan as a vacation destination?

Table 2. Students of Zittau University: gender, age, nationality, and their number in (brackets)

Gender	Female(12), Male (8)
Age	18 – 30 years (10), 30-50 years (8), 50- above (2)
Nationality	Indonesian (1), Brazilian (1), Syrian (1), African (1), Canadian (1), Georgia (1), Turkish (1), German (1), Chech (1), Poland (1)

Source: Table is created by the authors.

The collage technique envisages various images to be displayed to the respondents whereby they select those to make a collage, which they think best represents Kazakhstan, followed by questions about their image selection. Further, by way of word associations method, a list of destination place attributes is developed using the above framework by Echtner and Ritchie (1993). The three dimensions (attribute-holistic, functional –psychological, common-unique) are relied upon to conceive of a destination image with the respective list of attributes. Prior to offering this list, respondents are asked to convey their general view of Kazakhstan by having them come up with three instant associations when they think of this country. This step would seek not to limit or influence respondents' subsequent attribute selection as well as to garner possible extra attributes about Kazakhstan. In second step, they select within the list of attributes. In subsequent question-answer sessions, respondents are prompted to explain their choices.

4. Findings

This section outlines the analysis outcome of collected responses, first, those gathered thru the collage method and then, by the word association. At the beginning, the respondents were asked to provide their own three one-word associations with Kazakhstan. Then, they were offered to select a background color for their collage while explaining their choice, for instance, choosing red because of the communism or blue because of this country flag. Further, they were shown different pictures related and not related to Kazakhstan. They were asked to select those that they found as associated with Kazakhstan. Throughout the session, respondents had to explain why they chose certain pictures for their collage.

As a summary of free association-making, the following three images when thinking of Kazakhstan as a vacation destination come to the fore as the most frequently indicated: nature, tradition, and rural place. Along with these attributes, respondents also mentioned nomads, history, and the unknown. These findings reveal an image of Kazakhstan perceived as still a nomadic, traditional, and rural life-style based place, which is quite similar across the entire sample. Besides, the selected pictures portray Kazakhstan as a traditionally nomadic society roaming the steppe with their livestock, thus, placing it out of an attractive tourist destination list. When in the collage process, the respondents were offered pictures of major Kazakhstan cities, namely, Astana and Almaty, they didn't select them on the basis that they would be 'too luxury for Kazakhstan' by choosing instead a village picture claiming 'this is an

undeveloped country'. Furthermore, the respondents also selected pictures of Kazakh traditional clothes and music instruments arguing that Kazakh people still live in rural places where it would be customary to sustain their traditions.

Table 3 displays the output of the word association method with the frequency of different images or characteristics selected by the respondents. The first section outlines their selection among a preset list of attributes. The second section is based on the open-ended question designed to help uncover unique and holistic elements of their Kazakhstan image as a destination place. The objective of this question is to identify and categorize attributes indicated by the respondents. The final section seeks to capture their views of Kazakhstan brand as a tourist destination. By way of assessing the prevalence of attributes, the respective number of respondents is provided.

Table 3. *Word Association method output*

1	What images or characteristics come to your mind when you think of Kazakhstan as a tourist destination?	Number of respondents
❖	Natural landscapes	20
❖	Unknown	20
•	Poor economy	19
	Unusual way of life and customs	19
	Asia	15
	Terrorism	14
	Religious	9
	Former Soviet	5
	Attractive	4
	Touristic destination	3
	Good food	1
	Educated people	0
	Big cities	0
	Recreational opportunities	0
2	How would you describe the ambiance or expected feelings while visiting Kazakhstan?	
	Friendly and hospitable	5
	Unique	4
	Dirty	4
	Diverse	4
	Safe	2
3	What kind of tourism do you think Kazakhstan is good at offering?	
	Nature-based tourism	20
	Cultural attractions (museums, adventure, extreme)	0
	Historical sites	0
	Nightlife and entertainment	0

Source: Table is developed by the author using the above framework by Echtner and Ritchie (1993).

The word association analysis coupled with the collage method output helped identify key stereotypical attributes and images of Kazakhstan as a destination in functional-psychological, attribute-holistic, and common-unique dimensions. As Table 3 demonstrates, almost all the respondents view Kazakhstan as a country of natural landscapes, unknown, with poor economy, and unusual customs and way of life. Such attributes as educated people, big cities, recreational opportunities, and safe place were not picked at all. Further, as a tourist destination, Kazakhstan, in their opinion, can only offer its nature as other attractions such as cultural ones, historical sites and nightlife and entertainment were not selected either. A few respondents selected such attributes as former Soviet, friendliness, and religious, possibly stemming from some knowledge about Kazakhstan. Finally, a few pointed to such aspects as being unique, diverse, and dirty while only two respondents view Kazakhstan as a safe place.

When asked to justify their selection, the respondents referred to the fact that Kazakhstan for them is just a faraway country. Apparently, prospective tourists know very little about Kazakhstan with the respective credible destination image simply non-existing in their minds. This premise is supported by respondents' asking the same questions once they have finished responding. Their favorite question was about Borat. Besides, they were all curious about the Kazakh language. Another supporting evidence is that most respondents pointed out that for them Kazakhstan is the same as Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and that travelling to Central Asia is dangerous.

Thus, the overarching common image emerged out of the combined analysis of the collage and word association data so that an overall portrayal of Kazakhstan can be outlined. In fact, the most frequently indicated attributes and images can be summed into the following two common strokes (themes).

1. *Nature (Natural landscape):*

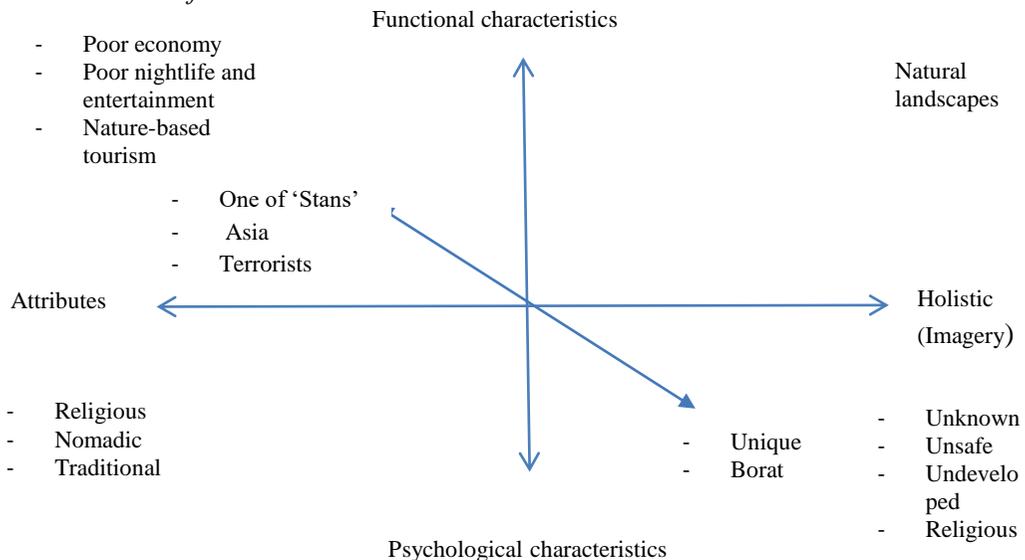
All the respondents perceive Kazakhstan as a country with different types of natural landscape, by indicating mountains, steppes and deserts. However, their lack of solid knowledge shows thru their saying often "I'm not sure". In this regard, their prevalent choice of the green color for collage and of various pictures of mountains, desert, and steppe is supportive of this stance. Their poor knowledge also contributes to the misconception that the country mainly feeds on the nature and it has no other source of income so that Kazakh people always must survive.

2. *Borat*

Another main stroke of the big picture is Borat as an association with Kazakhstan. This movie character came in as another dominant image because it was the first thing that came to the mind of the majority and often the only attribute that they could relate to the country. All the respondents seemed to display ambiguity when saying: "I'm sorry for mentioning Borat but it is still a source of knowledge about Kazakhstan, although this image has nothing to do with the reality, maybe." They couldn't help mentioning Borat, because in popular mind this movie is already

associated with Kazakhstan, even if doesn't truly reflect it. As the country was just a *terra incognita* to the majority of respondents with almost blank image of Kazakhstan, they view it as an undeveloped country based on the scenes from the movie Borat. Moreover, some of the respondents expressed their fascination with the character by imitating his replies such as "Kazakhstan is a glorious country!" "Nice!" "Great success!"

Figure 2. Summary view of Kazakhstan as a tourist destination based on Echtner and Ritchie's framework



Only a few respondents revealed some awareness of Kazakhstan whereas most of them displayed quite a limited knowledge about it. This knowledge gap became evident upon showing them real pictures of Kazakhstan, with respondents' view of the destination changing drastically. In fact, all the respondents tended to think that people in Kazakhstan still live in yurts and rural places. Upon looking at current pictures of Almaty or Astana city, they all commented that it would be too luxurious for Kazakhstan and they were surprised to learn that Astana is the Kazakhstan's capital city.

Figure 2 presents the above summary of the respondents' original views. It places their prevalent attributes and images of Kazakhstan as a destination within functional-psychological and attribute-holistic dimensions, and common-unique dimensions within the Echtner and Ritchie framework displayed earlier in Figure 1.

5. Conclusion

By way of summary, this exploratory study gained initial insights into prospective foreign tourists' views and perceptions of Kazakhstan as a tourist destination. A

small non-random sample of respondents selected from international student body in Europe helped capture current predominant mental images of Kazakhstan, which were placed and examined within the Echtner and Ritchie framework. The findings illuminate a big gap in awareness of Kazakhstan as a country with the result and great discrepancy between the reality and what is known by the world at large about it. In fact, based on the results, it can be argued that, in general, foreigners have the following common views:

1. It is an under developed and remote country, with not so many educated people and the population being mostly nomadic, traditional and rural;
2. Kazakhstan as a country with an undeveloped hospitality infrastructure lacking modern hotels, restaurants, services, and entertainment;
3. On the positive side, the abundance and diversity of natural landscapes could serve as a propitious ground for wildlife-based tourism;
4. Kazakhstan cannot be surely viewed as a safe place for tourists in view of being in the terror-ridden region.

Therefore, from the public policy perspective, there is an imperative for more knowledge and information dissemination across the international community about Kazakhstan as a destination place. On the other hand, hospitality capacity-building in Kazakhstan should account for the global awareness of this country's vast nature, nomadic traditions, and a long unique history. Indeed, it can position itself as one of the homelands of nomadic culture and develop its tourism industry based on these nature-oriented and previous nomadic culture and life-style assets.

Kazakhstan is arguably developing its economy, technology, and education quite successfully, but its hospitality sector is still lagging. From geographical standpoint, Kazakhstan nowadays is well-positioned as a crossroads location for tourism. In addition, its political and economic stability, abundant and diverse nature, and hospitality and inter-confessional tolerance as a part of national character, are strengths to rely on in searching for a niche within the global tourism market. Branding Kazakhstan as a destination place is thus of paramount importance to the tourism industry professionals to address stereotypes about Kazakhstan as a mere place of mountains, steppes, nomads, and underdevelopment. There seems to be no Kazakhstan brand as a tourist destination yet.

It should be noted that Kazakhstan as a tourist destination is not identical to Kazakhstan as a country. A country's image stems from its geography, history, culture, music, and its famous people and it affects its destination image, yet this impact is not easy to assess. As stated earlier, presently, international tourists know very little about Kazakhstan as a country and the respective destination image is yet to be nurtured.

By way of noting the study outcome limitations, only a small sample of students of two European Universities were involved in this study. Further research drawing

upon a larger and more representative sample with members of different socio-professional groups and featuring countries across Europe, would warrant enhanced generalizability of the findings.

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