



THE LONG TAIL OF DESTINATION IMAGE AND ONLINE MARKETING

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Abstract: This study examines the linguistic structure of destination image using China as an example. The phrases the tourists use to describe China's image follow the power-law distribution and exhibit the long tail pattern. The destination image is dominated by a few very popular phrases, but contains a large amount of phrases in small niches. Analysis on Google keyword search volumes shows that those phrases are likely to be the keywords tourists use when searching destination information online. In addition, the tourists who use those niche phrases are more likely to travel to China. Thus, Destination Marketing Organizations should promote the niche images as well as the commonly held images in their online marketing effort. **Keywords:** destination image, online marketing, search engine marketing, long tail, power-law distribution. Published by Elsevier Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism destination image (TDI), or the overall impression of one place (Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2001; Crompton, 1979), is one of the most studied areas in tourism literature (Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2008). To date, empirical examination of TDI has generally employed either structured or unstructured approaches (Baloglu & Mangalolu, 2001; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Selby & Morgan, 1996). When analyzing and reporting results of TDI measurements, researchers generally focus on image items with the highest ratings in structured approaches, or the most frequently used words in unstructured approaches, as these represent the widespread and salient image held by tourists. Nevertheless, Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) often find such image results merely common

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sense (a typical comment mirrors the following, “*I already know most customers think of us as so and so. Tell me something I don’t know!*”). On the other hands, DMOs usually do not know what to do with the more obscure or “odd” images (for example, “*Hmmm, why do I care that 15 customers are relating us with XXX?*”). This paper attempts to investigate the linguistic structure of TDI and the connection between TDI phrases and online marketing, emphasizing the usefulness of those niche phrases.

Traditionally, most researchers have studied TDI from three perspectives: segmentation perspective, competitive analysis, and analysis of image components (Bigne, Sanchez & Sanz, 2009; Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002). By and large, these studies serve to: (1) understand customer awareness and brand knowledge of a destination and evaluate a destination’s brand equity; (2) formulate product development and destination positioning strategies; and (3) assess the effectiveness of destination promotion efforts and predict tourists’ behavioral intention. In essence, most extant TDI studies try to understand image as a brand component and utilize an image profile as the basis for branding strategies (Cai, 2002). However, search has become a dominant mode in tourists’ use of the Internet for trip planning (TIA, 2008). The importance of TDI partly lies in the fact that tourists search information and enter keywords in search engines based on their mental models, and mental models represent their understanding of online tourism information and their knowledge about specific destinations (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). The phrases tourists use to describe their image of a destination may well be the keywords they use when searching that destination online. An information search perspective may bring new insights to TDI studies. Thus, understanding how TDI affects tourists’ information search provides opportunities for DMOs to apply their knowledge of TDI in online marketing efforts.

Therefore, the broad purpose of this study is twofold: to examine the linguistic structure of TDI; and to explore the utility of TDI phrases in online marketing. Generally, the utterance of any natural language follow the power-law distribution (Pareto & Schvier, 1971; Wikipedia, 2009) which may also exhibit the long tail pattern (Anderson, 2004, 2006). This study first investigates if the distribution of destination phrases follows those patterns; second, the study correlates those image phrases expressed by tourists with search keywords users entered in a search engine. Using an empirical study on American tourists’ image of China, this study demonstrates that TDIs held by tourists are rich and complex and image phrases generated through three open-ended questions follow the power-law distribution and exhibit the long tail characteristics. More importantly, empirical evidence demonstrate that many of those phrases are actually used by online users when looking for destination information via search engines; the aggregated volumes of niche phrases could surpass that of few most popular phrases; potential tourists who use less common image phrases are more likely to travel to China.

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