

Seychelles' Image as Tourist Destination: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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It has generally been argued that the image of a destination influences potential tourists' decision-making processes. For the host, the image is the attribute that helps differentiate the destination from other competing places and its position in the minds of tourists (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). Oppermann and McKinley (1997, p.118) stated that the image of a tourist destination is the sum of ideas and beliefs about a destination. The obvious question when dealing with destination image formation is when and how it was formed in the tourist's mind. It is believed that the starting point of image formation originates from different inputs from various sources. It could be the traveller's own or others' past experiences, a television programme, books, advertisements, or guides (Molina and Esteban, 2006). But ultimately, the tour operator seems to remain one of the main points of contact to advise, counsel and direct the tourist, and above all sell the destination. Several researchers have attempted to describe the process of image formation (Baloglu and MacCleary, 1999; Choi et al., 2007), but Gunn's (1972) concept of an organic and induced image was one of the earliest attempts to understand how an image was processed in the mind of an individual. According to Gunn (*ibid.*), the 'organic' image was based on non-commercial information such as books, documentaries and magazines, and the 'induced' image was the one deriving from commercial sources such as brochures, travel agents and guidebooks.

In an empirical study by Echtner and Ritchie (1993; 2003), they argued that the majority of research conceptualized destination image based on a list of attributes, thus neglecting a more holistic and psychological impression of the place. Based on that conceptual framework, they defined destination image as 'not only the perceptions of individual destinations' attributes but also the holistic impression made by the destination' (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). Choi et al. (2007, p.119) expanded on this definition by stating that an image was 'a compilation of beliefs and impressions based on information processing from a variety of sources over time'. If an image was formed from various sources, then Gunn's (1972) concept of an image could be seen to be too restrictive and limited to media type materials, thus neglecting travellers' own experiences (Molina and Esteban, 2006). For this reason, I would define destination image as: a set of attributes, impressions and values describing a destination, and which are formed through the media, history and the lived experience of its social actors.

Several studies (Echtner, 2010; Echtner and Prasad, 2003; Britton, 1979; Britton, 1982; Wilson, 1994; Dann, 1996; Schellhorn and Perkins, 2004; Adams, 1984) derived from various fields of study have begun to examine destination image, with advertising being central in influencing a tourist's decision to pick one place over another. This process was not through a mechanical choice, instead it appealed to the tourist's presuppositions, beliefs and expectations (Oppermann and McKinley, 1997). Several theoretical frameworks drawn from anthropology, ethnography, sociology and economics have been used to explain and understand the tourism phenomenon. But more importantly, factors that motivated tourists to travel vary from one to another and depending on their respective needs. For some, it was the pursuit of the authentic experience (MacCannell, 1989); for others it was rather the inauthentic contrived attractions (Boorstin, 1964). That said, tourists' motivations and experiences were not limited just to those extreme positions. Other forms of motivations such as visiting new places, or experiencing activities that were not culturally acceptable in their home environment such as gambling and prostitution (Dann, 1981), were also part of the sought experience.

The concept of the gaze (Urry, 2000; 2002) was also one way of understanding the experiential elements of tourism motivation as it was related to expectation. For example, Urry (2002; p.1) argued that: 'There is no single gaze as such. It varies by society, by social group and by historical period. Such gazes are constructed through difference. By this I mean not merely that there is no universal experience that is true for all tourists at all times'. And this was true when one considered the vast list of Foo, McGuiggan and Yiannakis (2004), which mentioned different types of tourist experience: the explorer, the thrill seeker, the escapist, the sport tourist and the jetsetter amongst others. Tourist experience and motivation were not a static phenomenon, but rather dynamic.

Additionally, the sale of the holiday also involved the tourist's education on image and attributes of the destination as well as the identity, the culture, and the practices of the host. It was the process of gaining knowledge about the latter that was usually the point of scrutiny for researchers. Knowing the host became, amongst other things, a parody of racial stereotyping and misrepresentation. So, the tourist, even before leaving home, was offered a pre-packaged ethnic stereotype which will become reified (or destroyed) during the course of the travel abroad (Adams, 1984). Referring to tourism in the Bahamas, Palmer (1994) reinforced the points above by stating that the industry manipulated the 'memories, myths and traditions of the local people so as to attract tourists to the destination'.

In this paper, the intention is to further contribute to the image-formation debate and the theoretical frameworks by drawing on the lived experience of the tourists visiting Seychelles as well as from the locals. Although this subject of representation and image construction in tourist brochures was prominent in the literature, it was mainly based on theoretical assumptions. Therefore, the intention is to use the phenomenological and

interpretivism approach by interviewing respondents that actually have some lived knowledge of the destination. In order to do so, I used photography as one of the mediums whereby the respondents told their stories. With all these things in mind, several questions addressing the gaps in the literature were considered and thus resulted in the following research question: What image do tourists and locals have of Seychelles as a tourist destination?

Method

Participants

The sample for this study comprised 50 participants: 25 tourists and 25 locals. For the selection of the respondents, I sought permission from both hotels and Destination Management Companies (DMC) and used their tour guides to grant access to their clients. I used a purposive sampling to select the participants. That procedure allowed the researcher to use his or her judgement to select the cases that made up the sample (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). For example, in my research, some of the selection criteria were: (a) the spoken language being English, French or Creole – since the study was based on an interview, it would be impractical if the interviewee did not speak any of the researcher’s languages; (b) the respondent owned a digital camera or smartphone to be able to take the photographs; (c) the respondent was not underage and was able to sign a consent form.

The tourists were people that arrived in the country for over seven days; just enough time to accustom themselves to the environment. Moreover, I targeted different nationalities of tourists, French, British, German, and Italian, as they were the top four sending destinations, and then the emergent countries such as the UAE, China and South Africa. The locals were selected from within a diverse group composed of students, lecturers, officials from the ministry of tourism, Seychelles Tourism Board (STB), DMCs, and people from the general population.

Design

A multi-method approach was used to answer the research question which was to understand the image of Seychelles from tourists’ and residents’ standpoints. Previous studies adopted a single analytical approach for such a study. However, it was considered that a multi-method approach would enable the researcher to dig deeper into the data which was expected to be both multi-layered and highly contractual (Decrop, 1999). The multi-method approach refers to those combinations where more than one data-collection technique was used, with associated analysis techniques (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). The multi-method approach is also referred to as triangulation. Its objective was not necessarily to zoom in on the ‘truth’ through different methods, but to create a richer picture (Denzin, 2011). Furthermore, that approach enabled the findings of each participant’s data analysis

to be used to inform, corroborate and validate the conclusion drawn from each of the others (Decrop, 1999).

Firstly, a photo-elicitation technique was adopted. Harper (2002, p.13) defined photo-elicitation as the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview. The results that photo-elicitation generated made its use fundamental for the researcher and provoked a better recollection for the respondent (Rose, 2012; Matteuci, 2013). Matteuci (2013) went a little further asserting that the purpose of photo-elicitation was to trigger memories and elicit values, beliefs, attitudes and meaning. Additionally, Bryman and Bell (2007) argued that in this technique, 'the respondents are asked to reflect, explain and comment on the meaning of the objects in the photographs, the events that are taking place or the emotions they associate with them'. Using photography in research also helped to add richness to the analysis and provided better support for the findings (Goulding *et al.*, 2018).

Secondly, wanting to hear, from the consumers' perspective, about images that were sold to the world, an inductive approach with an in-depth, photo-based interview was adopted. With that technique, the respondents were able to comment, interpret and provide their views on the photographs. Besides the in-depth interview, I set up a discussion group composed of three to four locals to dissect the transcripts in order to get more divergent insights that could help interpret the data. Furthermore, I felt that this approach would also prevent my subjectivity clashing with the intended meaning by the respondents in cases of ambiguity and inconsistency within the transcripts.

Considering all the above, an epistemological position of interpretivism underpinned my research. The interpretivist position requires the social researcher to grasp the subjective meaning of social action (Bryman and Bell, 2007), therefore in this study, the focus was solely on the social actors and the meaning they give to the photographs they have taken. This position is contrary to positivism which seeks to apply scientific method to human affairs (Hollis, 1994).

Each of the tourists was asked to propose a maximum of ten pictures that could summarize the image they have captured of Seychelles. Ten pictures per respondent were chosen because they seemed to be the right number to capture the image of Seychelles; not too many to overwhelm the tourists or frustrate them, taking into consideration that they had their own photographs to take as well. Ten was also appropriate as it did not deviate from the average number of photographs proposed by other researchers in similar case studies. For example, Garrod (2007; 2008; 2009) used twelve, Mackay and Couldwell (2004) had thirteen, Stedman *et al.* (2004) got twelve and Groves and Timothy (2001) opted for ten. Another reason for sticking with a more manageable number was not to overload myself with so many photographs that would be impossible to codify or analyse. The extra note to the respondents was to photograph something unique, that they did not come across in

tourist brochures. In total, I was expecting an average of four hundred photographs based on an estimate of an 80% success rate, based on previous studies (Garrod, 2007; 2008).

Like the tourists, the locals were also asked to take pictures of what represents Seychelles and what makes it unique. However, for the locals, the exercise was more than just describing the constructs of Seychelles. They were given the opportunity to tell their stories through the photographs: their everyday life, their resentments, or what they did like about the tourism industry; their participation in that sector, the impact the sector was making on their lives and their environment. In general, the idea was to give voice to those whose voices have traditionally been ignored (Warren, 2005). Moreover, using the locals' photographs allowed them to contribute their ideas to the process of image construction. So, in a way, they were not 'research subjects' as such, but rather active participants, as they considered the research questions and identified issues and topics of interest to themselves and their community (Kolb, 2008).

The interview with each respondent lasted approximately sixty minutes. This time frame was an average based on what other studies (Morgan and Kavaratzis, 2014; Loeffler, 2004) had spent within the framework of the photo interview. The interviews were audio recorded and the photographs labelled. Besides the interview, group interviews with locals were organized. The aim was to ask the respondents diverse questions relating to their views on the photographs and their interpretation of them. Additionally, they were given the transcripts of the tourists' interviews for assessment. The idea was to analyse, compare, and contrast tourists' views with the locals' on the emergent topics that came out of the interviews. One of the advantages of the group interview was that it created an environment where statements could be challenged and scrutinized by other members of the group, especially when there were disagreements. It also allowed the participants to be themselves and provide their subjective views. For me, as the researcher, it was an opportunity to see how, collectively, the locals were making sense of the issues around the perceived image of Seychelles' and how they were constructing meaning out of the photographs and the interview data.

For the analysis of the photographs, content analysis was used to get a sense of the participants' photographs and what they showed. Coding played a key part of my process as it was a starting point in qualitative research, or one of the key phases, as Bryman and Bell (2007) put it. However, coding photographs was not self-evident, as what the researcher sees might not be what the photographer saw. Notwithstanding, as a first step, I decided to separate the photographer from the image and looked at the latter as if it were a piece of art in a museum setting. Since the images were recorded electronically, I created a folder called 'participants' photographs' and within the folder an individual folder was created for each participant. I scanned through each photograph several times, always paying attention to what I saw. Then, I counted the frequency of how often some key attributes appeared, as proposed by Rose (2012). To avoid bias and to help my

classification, I decided not to start with some pre-selected coding but rather let each photograph direct my classification. To do so, I created a table in excel and on top of each column, I coded what I saw each time I scanned through the photographs. For example, how many times did beaches or people appear in the photographs. Then, when I moved through the photographs of each participant, I repeated the process of scanning, looking several times, and recording what I saw in my excel table. At the end of the process, using a simple SUM and percentage function in excel, I revealed the dominant attributes based on which code scored higher. That was how the themes from the photographs emerged, without the assistance of the photographers.

After this initial exercise of trying making sense of the photographs, I proceeded with the interview transcripts by using thematic analysis to interpret the interview data. That technique consisted of reading the transcripts several times, then coding. I started developing clusters of meaning from the significant statements. I grouped the statements into themes or meaning units by removing overlapping and repetitive statements (Moustakas, 1994, p.284). During the stage of interpretation, as a local researcher, I had to use my prejudices in order to bring some clarity to the understanding of the transcripts. For example, the knowledge of the land, the language and the political and social environments helped to make sense of what the respondents meant or implied in the descriptions of their lived experience in Seychelles. However, I had to apply caution as there were also some disadvantages to being close to the data or the respondents (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). Being an insider, I may fall into the trap of thinking I knew what the respondents meant or was implying, and therefore may not probe well enough. That posed a challenge which was not easy to control, but in my case I tried to minimize the problem by having a group interview which allowed me to obtain different views on others' viewpoints, and therefore to better understand them.

Results

Having classified the photographs, two categories stood out as appearing most often in the pictures provided: 'Empty beaches' and 'Nature and greenery'. I therefore named that theme 'Place'.

The second emerging theme was derived from the interview transcripts and it related to the friendliness of the local people. I coined it 'People'.

Finally, the topic of 'Price' emerged as the third theme. It was one of the elements almost all participants, tourists, and locals alike, pronounced extensively on. I will discuss all three themes in turn.

Place

Empty beaches

Photographs portraying beaches displayed some common characteristics: mainly, absence of people. From the three images below, one could assume the intention of the photographer was to showcase the beauty of the beaches.



The impression all the above images gave was a sense of emptiness and desertedness. The photographs themselves did not give any clue as to why humans were not present in the pictures, but one could assume that it was the intention of the photographers. The camera's focus was, rather, on the inanimate, implying the slogan of 'Sun, Sea and Sand' (the 3 Ss). However, it was interesting to note that these photographs were not only taken by tourists, but by locals too, suggesting that the theme of 'Sun, Sea and Sand' was not just the prerogative of tourists, but it seemed that locals also enjoy and appreciate the same. In fact, when I asked the locals, during the interview, why they were photographing empty beaches, some of them responded as follows.

Local 1: It shows that when you come to Seychelles you can have this tranquillity and calmness.

Local 2: To show the unspoilt and untouched nature because that is what is appealing to the customer.

Local 3: This is what we sell. White sand, blue sky. There is nobody. I want the peace, I don't want people around. Now you can appreciate the stretch of the beach, no distraction.

However, when I directed the same question to tourists and foreign workers, their responses were a mix of fantasy and dreams.

Expatriate 1: This is the typical map of the Seychelles, the fantasy of the empty and deserted beach. It is a dream of Robinson Crusoe. On an island, I'm free, I'm naked on the beach. The beach is free. No one comes to bother you unlike in other countries.

Expatriate 2: *It is an exclusive destination and it is expensive to get here. It is pitched at the higher market so you don't get that influx of tourists. Also, it is a remote destination. Here you can go anywhere on the beach and find your own space.*

Expatriate 3: *You have the impression that a pirate boat will come from a corner somewhere and the place is abandoned and wild. No population.*

Tourist 1: *Everyone has their own space. Everyone can come to the beach and it is public. No restrictions.*

Tourist 2: *We had the whole beach for ourselves. You feel that the beach belongs to you.*

One particular European expatriate depicted the feeling of the empty beach vividly with such emotion that I felt he was describing another place.

Our experience is that a lot of resorts, you have that feeling that you are the only one on the beach, like St Anne, Cerf, Fregate or even la Digue for example. You can just cycle and pull out on the beach and there is no one. Even if it is a busy tourist period. That is unique in Seychelles. Another thing that is attractive from the view point of Seychelles is that you don't walk into a beach there is no space to lie down, no privacy.

Another tourist made the following comparison.

The smallest islands I have been too is Antigua. Beautiful island but very much commercialized. And if you want nice beach in those Caribbean islands, you have to go to private beach. Whereas in Seychelles the majority of the beaches, thank God, are still public. You can pull up your car and go to any beach. Many beaches I've been to, in the Caribbean, they charged you unless you are staying in that resort. One of the great things in the Seychelles is that Seychellois themselves utilize the beach fantastically.

These photographs also suggested a sense of pride in the beauty of the beaches, their strangeness and their uniqueness; and one of the unique aspects was the empty beach. The beach seemed to mean something special to people. At times I felt the respondents could not explain it, it seemed to have some mesmerizing effect on them. One local student described it as her free therapy.

I like the beach a lot. It is like my getaway. After school I like to go to the beach, remove the stress. Get fresh air, I like the sound of the breeze and everywhere in Seychelles is the same and I need to take advantage of that. The beach is my free therapy. If I am going to a shrink, I would like to see a clean office. A dirty office will make me question the shrink. It is the same with the beach. It is my free therapy. If is dirty it is more stressful.

One picture was taken by a tourist showing a giant tortoise walking slowly on the beach as if it were the only inhabitant of the place. Similar images were also taken by a local

participant with the giant tortoise and a turtle in a somewhat greener environment, noting the importance of the green vegetation and the sense of freedom, for both the local people and the animals. I asked the tourist who photographed the tortoise why he did so, he responded:

Turtles in Europe. You see them in zoo. Seeing them like this on the beach, is extraordinary. So little that they have the chance, you see them out of the sand. That is why you see some tourists who come back. There are few countries in the world where turtles are that free and roam among people on a beach. In France, you don't see them because people disturb them and there is no green to eat. The beaches are private, etc. When a holidaymaker sees this (turtle on the beach) it cannot be happier than that. Here the turtles have no fear.

A tourist respondent who also took pictures of turtles and birds pointed out the uniqueness of the place:

This is the strength of the Seychelles. Each Islands has its own identity. There is no island that looks alike. Each island has its unique feature. It is a country where no one is nasty. Animals are not and the people aren't. You go in Bali you have wild animals, snakes that bite you. Here you don't have to worry about anything. That is why Seychelles always have that magic. I hope that it's going to last. In all other countries you can't be quiet all the time.



However, one can also notice that the beach was not only used to portray beauty, but desolation and degradation. There were some pictures that showed horror in the midst of such beauty. Some of the images showed the carcasses of turtles that were probably killed by poachers – a photograph that was in sharp contrast with those which showed the turtle peacefully roaming around on the beach. That contrast showed the Seychelles beach as a paradisiacal symbol where sun, sea, sand and emptiness were highlighted but at the same time it showed that it was a place where abuse or cruelty to animals occurred. The local respondent who took the picture explained to me her shock when she saw the carcass of the dead turtle:

Something like this frustrates me. Disregard for the environment. We know we not supposed to do it but we do it, for the world to see. We see this in law enforcement in our people. It really frustrates me. People that are supposed to protect you don't do it. We not supposed to eat (the turtles). But it tastes nice.

Nature and greenery

Nature and greenery constituted the second major theme in the respondents' photographs.

Landscapes were seen amongst the photographs and they seemed to convey a sense of adventure, hiking, and trekking. Once again, the perception of emptiness and desolation were what I felt and sensed by looking at them.



On the other hand, the contrast of colours was very striking; the blue and white of the sky mixed with the green of the vegetation. That gave an indication of the climate which undoubtedly was favourable, with copious rainfall.

Seychelles is the home to some of the most protected species in the world. However, most fauna and flora are part of a conservation programme, strictly enforced on the island by government and international agencies.



Unlike the 'Vallee de Mai' and the 'Coco de Mer' that were mostly photographed by tourists, the birds and reptile images were provided by the locals.

There was no story directly attached to the birds and lizards, but besides their beauty as frail creatures, one could assume that they convey a message of conservation and protection.



People

Locals give directions

On the question of how they saw people in Seychelles, most answers from tourists related to how helpful people were:

Very friendly people everywhere. In the hotel, in the catamaran, they are very helpful. The people are kind. Friendly. Helpful.

If you go to town for a walk, and you ask, they are always ready to help. They are ready and willing to help you.

When pressed on what it meant to be helpful, they elaborated by giving examples of how they had been helped. Generally, the sort of ‘help’ they were referring to was how they had been given direction when lost, or when they had been given good service. For example, one tourist related her experience as follows:

When you ask something, they respond with kindness. On la Digue, we had our map and we checked and someone came to offer help. In Germany, people don't care about you. When

you ask someone about your itinerary, they say why you ask me, ask somebody else. Also, their faces not friendly.

The experience of that German tourist in relation to the kindness of Seychellois highlighted the fact that locals willingly came forward to offer their help without being asked first. It seemed that it was the caring factor that impressed her because she quickly compared the attitudes in Germany with those in Seychelles and concluded that people did not care about other people in Germany but they did in Seychelles. An American tourist also related a similar experience stating:

They are very friendly. Great, amazing. That was kind of our main interaction with people and they were very good. But one thing is that we are used to people running all the time in the US, but here people take their time.

Another respondent confirmed the same position by stating:

Seychellois give time to people, to tourists, you pay attention to people. The kindness of the people. People give directions. It is an amazing quality you have.

The Seychellois are very welcoming. If you are lost, like we couldn't get to the bus terminal. A lady working in a shop took us to the bus terminal.

Apparently, the fact that the lady is working and then left her shop to take the tourist to the bus terminal was seen as an act of caring. This might be regarded as an exaggeration, but it showed the extent of the care provided by the locals to tourists or visitors in need. That attitude was well summarized by this tourist who said: 'Small community of people knowing each other. Small town with a big heart.'

That said, the discussion groups were asked if the locals were as kind as the tourists pointed out. The majority of the respondents agreed that, in the context of giving directions, the Seychellois were helpful, but not necessarily that they were kind. For example, the respondent Sonia stated:

Sorry, I'm not. I'm not going to be kind to my fellow creole because I know how they are. But if somebody comes from outside and ask my advice of where to go etc... I don't have problem with that. People here might have some hidden agenda also.

This declaration of Sonia not only categorically refuted the attitude of kindness but clearly differentiated between giving directions to a tourist and being naturally kind to other fellow Seychellois. The statements of 'I know how they are' and 'have some hidden agenda' led the discussion to further consider the attitude of locals. Another respondent, Mervil, in the same group, pointed out that among ourselves, as locals, we were always suspicious and not trusting. But he too, like other respondents in other groups, agreed with Sonia that 'if

somebody stops you on the street, you will give directions as much as you can'. He went further sharing an experience to confirm his point and to illustrate why tourists saw the helpful attitude as a sign of kindness:

Of course, in those countries (where the tourists are from), like the first time I went to London I was lost and you try to stop someone and they push you over. For them (the tourists), just somebody standing there and taking their time and explain to them the directions is kindness. So, how I see this is that it is measurable based on where they come from.

The suspicion and untrusting nature of the locals they are referring to seemed to do with etiquette and basic courtesy. For example, Mervil mentioned that you can go to work and some people do not even say 'hello', and others are not even polite. In another group, Carine stated: 'I find it really strange as we don't even say "hello" these days.' This basic savoir-vivre appeared to be important for local respondents and its absence was seen as unacceptable and definitely not a sign of being friendly. What was even divisive was the fact of being a small nation, with a small population, and everyone seemed to know each other and all about each other, exactly as the tourist pointed out earlier, 'small community of people knowing each other'. The fact was that there was always the suspicion that you were being watched and that was probably what prompted Sonia to be mistrustful towards the locals.

In addition, when asked if the locals' friendliness was faked, Mervil pointed to other attitudes that would have suggested they were not inherently 'kind'. He argued that the kindness displayed by locals was 'selective':

It is selective. Another example. Maybe it is racist. If you take a tourist from Africa and he or she stops someone on the street. The amount of attention is very different from a European. We are suspicious of our own kind and certain group. In my view, it infiltrates the whole society even in business. If you get a white man giving you a presentation, it is good (others applaud), the same level of presentation from an African, is like they don't know what they are talking about.

Apparently, using the 'selective kindness', the locals decided who to be friendly to or not. In that case, it seemed the tourists were being shown friendliness when they asked for directions, but the locals were not friendly to each other. That was selective. Moreover, among the tourists, there seemed to be further selection as well. Based on the example of Mervil, the white tourists were being shown kindness whilst those from Africa were not.

Locals smile and give good service

When asked how she would describe Seychellois, a local respondent, Mora stated:

Seychellois are the friendliest people in the world. Even if you go to immigration, people are still smiling. In other countries, at immigration, they are smiling, but not from the heart, but as required by the job. But when you turn your back, they stop smiling.

From Mora's perspective, smiling seemed to be a natural attribute for Seychellois. And, importantly, they smiled at the point of entry into the destination, which was the first contact between the tourist and the local. By comparing the local smile to the one given by other nationalities in their home countries, it seemed that, in Seychelles, when local people smile, it was genuine and not simply required by the job. A tourist agreed, saying that in Seychelles: 'People smile at you, not aggressive. You meet someone on the street and they smile and say hello.' Another one said: 'Kids smiling at you... the kindness of the people... it is an amazing quality you have.' One respondent remarked that: 'People are happy to live here. We don't see people sad, always happy. That is a lot.'

That attitude of smiling, was not dissociated from service. The context where the locals smiled was mostly when they were giving service. For example, a tourist testified:

People are very friendly. Always smiling. The service was very nice.

They are ready and willing to help you. They are polite and smiling. The service is very good. We stayed in different hotels on the three islands.

The welcoming is still warm. The joy of living is still contagious.

The service is very good. I cannot say anything I wasn't happy with. People are friendly and I didn't feel outcast. All type of races and religions. Really an amazing place. Never like in any other country. Here people are intermingling, black, white, Chinese all living in the same neighbourhood. If the world is like Seychelles it would be heaven. It is an amazing place.

They are very nice with tourists. Polite. Easy communication, smiling. Service is impeccable. Very good.

Something to notice during the interviews and in the transcripts was that the place where the tourists were staying had an impact on how they felt about the locals and the service. Those in guest houses appeared to have forged a relationship with the owner, thus experiencing the real creole life and the kindness found amongst the locals. As one local respondent pointed out: 'I see tourists making friends with the locals, going out with them, dining together. Owners of small guest houses are connected with the tourists. They will make barbecue.' That is confirmed by a guest house owner, Gerald:

My guests are always taken care of. I explain to them my charging structure. It is not of making profit, but getting them to enjoy Seychelles at low price. Being involved with them. Taking them around the island. Picnic for them. Going back, they get good impression of my place even if not five stars, but for them it is more than five stars. It is not the room where they

stay, but how they have been treated and become part of them. And I get good comment and recommendations.

A tourist from Russia who had come to Seychelles five times revealed that they used to go to a five-star hotel whenever they came here, but nowadays, they have discovered the beauty of apartments:

Now we live in an apartment. We have the owners, we go to buy fish, take bus and I like it. The apartment experience is better than the five stars. I'm coming back again next year.

Here we can see that the experience of mingling with locals changed the way the tourists perceived them. Service and happiness, translated into the locals being categorized as friendly.

Price

The high cost of transportation

It was quite obvious that the cost of the international flight was not at scrutiny here as I presumed this would be one of the first things that was checked before making the trip. But once at the destination, the tourists faced unexpected costs relating to internal transportation:

Taxi is too expensive. It is not fair to charge you from airport at SR 600. Tourists feel like cheated. No negotiation. With the same SR 600 in Brazil or New York you can do much more and hotel airport transfer in 15 minutes, it is really not fair. You really should change the taxi and their rates. Because it is really not fair. It sends a message to the tourists that everyone wants to take a piece of the money. But it is not fair to feel like being rip off.

The point that was being made here was the (ir)rationality of the pricing. What we could also gather from the same statement, was the sense of the 'unfairness' in the pricing. The tourist used this word three times, clearly defining the rules on what was fair or unfair in taxi pricing. He saw this form of pricing as a communication tool, telling tourists what they might expect of the destination. In fact, as that was probably the first local expense a tourist will face once he had left the plane, and his first use of the local currency; it was the first red flag: this was an expensive destination. Another tourist proposed 'transparency in the pricing' as a solution. He faced a similar experience of airport transfer cost that he found too high and he provided the following example: from the airport to the Hilton hotel, he paid SR 900 which he said he thought was a 'fair price' at the time. However, on returning from the hotel to the airport he paid SR 500 and that, according to him, was irrational. The discrepancy in the fare between both trips did not add up. He also used similar words to, and shared a similar sentiment as the previous respondent and argued that they felt 'ripped off'.

When the tourists' views on taxi pricing were presented to the locals during a group discussion, they did not dismiss the remarks, rather they confirmed them and stated that it was a point of concern. One local respondent proposed that a cap should be put on taxi fares so that the drivers/companies did not exaggerate and charge their customers exorbitant prices. She also used the word 'unfair' to describe the experience by stating: 'you are making the place expensive whilst I'm bringing foreign exchange. It is unfair. It is like we are pushing them away'.

Another local respondent, who was a guest house owner, proposed a regulation that should govern taxis in Seychelles. According to him, the cars used for taxis were too luxurious, like Mercedes, thus the need for the owners to recover their money, and that was why the customer was charged unfairly.

When tourists refer to high costs, they were not just talking about taxis, but also other items, like food and beverages, that fall under similar scrutiny.

The high cost of food and beverages

The second example of high costs according to the tourists were food and beverages. Although some of them pointed out that, in general, the hotels were expensive, others were very specific detailing what exactly was expensive by giving examples. The question asked of them was what they did not like about Seychelles. After they have given glorious comments about the place and its people, one of the respondents said: 'the price in the hotels is very expensive. One beer is 8 euros. Three times than Germany.' Another respondent made a similar remark: 'it is very expensive. A beer costs a lot. Three times more than Germany.'

The adverb 'very' was used to describe the high cost of beer just as it was used when talking about taxis. That showed an element of horror at how things which were supposed to be affordable could be so expensive. For example, one respondent gave a response in which I could detect sarcasm. When asked about the image of Seychelles, she replied: 'nice and quiet island. Plenty of good fish, fruits. A bit expensive. When I say a bit, it is very expensive. I don't know how the Seychellois see it.'

Other respondents claimed that the issue was not only with beer but also water, adding to the fact, and confirming, that they were complaining about the basics of tourists' consumption needs in the hotels. At one point the use of the word 'expensive' became like a slogan to portray a negative image of the place.

One of the tourists went so far as to suggest that the 'food should be better and cheaper'. Underlining this statement were two issues: bad service and expensive food. Bad service because, if the food was expensive you expected the service to be good. In other words, it was like throwing money out of the window. But so far, none of the tourists, were actually asking why everything seems so expensive. They were only noticing and making their

point and showing their frustration. Others were asking some rational questions such as: ‘the negative is the price which is going up every time. I don’t know how you can live. It is expensive for us tourist so what about you locals?’ That was an interesting question as it suggested that price was not fixed or manipulated for tourists’ consumption, but was the same even for the locals. I presume the other way around would have been more disturbing, which was often the case in some tourist destinations: having one price for tourists and another for locals.

The comments from tourists about pricing and expensiveness prompted me to ask similar questions to the locals. And when they were also presented with the transcripts of the tourists’ interviews, they did not seem to be very surprised at what they saw. They clearly knew about the situation and, in fact, they seemed to be living it, which matched the response of the previous respondent who was concerned about how locals lived with such high prices for goods and services, especially food. The responses from the locals could be subdivided into two: those who agreed that Seychelles was expensive, and those who seemed to justify it being expensive. To my surprise, the first respondent, a university student, said: ‘We are expensive. For us cheap is like you are offending us.’ She was, in fact, also worried about how the destination was too expensive for tourists and she seemed to agree with the tourists’ comments that we were very expensive. However, she commented that we locals thought that ‘cheap is an insult. Cheap is actually attractive’. She meant that low costs would attract more people to come to the destination, a contrary view to some of the stakeholders who did not seem to have ‘cheap destination’ as their marketing strategy, as they want to maintain the destination as upmarket. The argument of that student was that, the less we charge tourists the more they will choose the destination or even come back. She painted a bleak image of the situation:

Restaurants are charging too much for the food. Drinks are expensive. This is one of the reasons why tourists will decrease and will continue to decrease. Seychellois do exaggerate when it comes to pricing. They think tourists are stupid. They will pay but, in their mind, they won’t come back again.

Another respondent, who was the owner of a small hotel, also concurred with the student’s analysis that food and beverages were expensive in Seychelles. This was what he noticed with tourists:

You see tourists sitting on the beach the whole day and nothing to eat and drink, because too expensive. You go to hotels and see tourists in the bar and listening to music and no drinks. It is just too expensive for them to afford. You go other places in the world and see tourists in the pools with drinks etc... they will not spend if they feel that the price is being exaggerated.

However, some of the locals saw the situation differently. For them, Seychelles was a niche market and cannot be that cheap if compared to other destinations. One respondent tried

to explain the psychology of it when I asked him if the high cost would not damage our image. He replied:

Not really. When it is expensive, it is like good. But if it is too expensive, people will opt for something else. It is paradise, so you have to spend more to get. It is like iPhone, it is expensive and quality. But there need to be a balance.

Ultimately, the high price tag made the destination a quality or a good destination. If it was too cheap, it would lose the exclusivity side of it, thus it would not be a niche market for those who can afford it. Another respondent shared similar views by comparing it to other destinations in the region:

I think it has to do with the fact that it is an exclusive destination, and it is expensive to get here. It is a pitch at the higher market so you don't get that influx of tourist. Also, it is a remote destination. Like Mauritius and Maldives, you have a situation where you have a lot of tourists on the beach except in the Seychelles.

Discussion

This paper has set out to understand the image of Seychelles from the tourists' and locals' perspective. These respondents described their experience in Seychelles through their photographs and their stories. When the two mediums and the two types of participants' stories were analysed, the conclusions were dissimilar. There were agreements and disagreements on certain points, which sometimes were due to semantics or the culture and background of the respondents.

The photographs from both sides centred mainly on the beauty of the beaches and specifically on their emptiness. No other major theme was the point of focus of the cameras. Almost all the images were of beaches and the similarity of the content is so striking that one would not have been able to tell which ones were taken by the tourists and which by the locals. One of the questions that was asked is why the empty beaches? Both sides were unable to explicitly state their reasons despite some attempts to justify why the beaches are empty. One explanation given is of the exclusiveness, the remoteness and the high cost of getting to the destination thus preventing overcrowding. The locals think the emptiness is due to the number of beaches around the island thus making them uncrowded. There is also the locals' tendency of giving space to tourists when they are on the beach.

Despite the fact that all these reasons can easily be justified, it is my view that people are fascinated by the unusual. Most people, in particular tourists, expect beaches to be full of people and that is their main function. No-one wonders why there are so many people on

a beach because it seems normal, and therefore expected. But having an empty beach is surreal, a fascination, and a wonder. Maybe that is what motivates our respondents to take the shots. But one can hardly settle for that without questioning further motivations. It is too simplistic, even though it ticks all the boxes for a typical holiday where one takes a 'postcard' picture to illustrate the advertised image of the destination or just to say 'I too have been there'. But, in this particular instance, locals are also caught up in the phenomenon of capturing empty beaches.

Beyond the aesthetic motivation of photographing empty beaches, tourists are unintentionally recreating the myths of paradise that have been made popular in travellers' blogs or in the writings of the first Western settlers. What are those myths? They are basically the notion of empty lands, bare nature, untouched and uninhabited. These myths are confirmed in the literature through what Echtner and Prasad (2003) refer to as the myth of the unchanged, the unrestrained and the uncivilized. The purpose of these myths is to lock the destinations in the past and sensationalize, commoditize and package them as the land of Robinson Crusoe.

The locals on the other hand, when using the image of empty beaches are only mimicking what has already been established and made popular and commercialized by the tourism industry. The locals, seeing the benefits and the popularity generated by marketing empty beaches, adopt a similar strategy, not necessarily for personal economic benefit, but as a way of creating one's self-identity, like telling the world that 'I live in this place, it is my country and I'm proud of it'. Contrary to what Wilson (1994) claimed, that Seychellois don't have a say in the image construction of their 'place', this research has proven the contrary and shows they do. By proudly showing the beauty of their place, they are claiming ownership and creating an identity for the place, and then their own identity, thus rejecting the myths and the stereotypes. What I conclude is that tourists and locals alike have a common gaze in Seychelles, which is the beauty of the place.

Furthermore, this study shows that constructing the image of a destination cannot solely rely on promotional materials, but also on the lived experience of the actors. It is the lived experience of the actors, such as tourists, stakeholders and locals, that enables us to determine what themes are most or least important to consumers. There was a consensus among all respondents that the three themes I coined, the 3Ps, constitute the image of Seychelles. Could these 3Ps be generalized and used as the base for image construction in other tourist destinations apart from Seychelles, and how practical is this consideration for practitioners?

The 'P' of 'Place', regroups all attributes that relate to the destination as a place of being. It could be the environment, the nature, the landscape, the ocean and the buildings. It does not necessarily have to be a positive or negative image, that is irrelevant. As long as the consumers are referring constantly to the place in their discussion, one can regard it as a

major attribute. For example, in the case of Seychelles, apart from the fact that almost all respondents talk about the beauty of the beaches and the place in general, they also refer to the locals' laissez-faire or inability to take care of the environment which could destroy its image, but it still reveals the importance of the theme of 'Place'.

The 'P' of 'People', is determined by how social actors within the space of place interact with each other and the role they play. In tourism studies, it is also about how the host is portrayed or advertised in the media. In the Seychelles study, the emphasis was not only on how the tourists see the locals and vice versa, but also how the hosts see themselves. In other contexts, the researcher could also look at how the host sees the tourists.

And finally, the 'P' of 'Price' includes several elements. It is not only the price of commodities in the destination. Price in this context, has a larger consideration such as the cost of living, the price to get to the destination, all the amenities and even the benefits of the industry to the stakeholders. These are all related to 'capital' in general, such as cost to provide the service and the direct or indirect impact of the investment on all parties.

Considering these 3Ps, I am therefore proposing that they could be used as a grid through which a tourist researcher, a tour operator, or a DMC determines and constructs the image of a destination. It is a combination of the physical attributes of the place, the actors lived experience and the perceived image they have of themselves. There could be other attributes that will measure the image of a destination, but as a general guideline, these attributes could be summarised under the 3Ps.

The 3Ps have also given us an additional theoretical insight or steps onto the process of image formation and the destination's overall image concept. I have argued, and agreed with the literature, that before a trip, there is already an image that has been created in the mind of the prospective traveller. These images are from various sources, for example from tourist brochures, media and travel blogs, and they propagate information about the destination and its people. During the interviews, some of the tourists, when asked how they had heard about Seychelles, claimed that their neighbours had talked about it and the image had remained in their head since they were children. Others claimed that only the name 'Seychelles' created a mystical image of the destination in their mind. This confirmed that the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990) does not necessarily take place whilst the visitor is in the destination, but it could well be that it is formed prior to the trip. The point I am making here, based on my respondents' data, is that the first step in image formation is what I coined the 'initial image' which is created before the trip. This image might not necessarily be the right image; it could be subjective, biased and misrepresented. It could be a sum of stereotypes or dreams accumulated for years. It could also be the result of a meticulous study carried out by a well-travelled tourist.

After the initial image, when the tourists finally arrive in the destination, they may face some tension between the initial image and the reality. The tension is about tourists trying to find the realization of what they thought they would see or experience in the destination, but, instead, it may not happen. There could be a conflict between what is authentic and what is staged (MacCannell, 1989). This is what generates the debate about image distortion and misrepresentation of destination in tourist brochures. The tourists in this instance will try to make sense of what they have read or heard and what they are experiencing. These tensions are similar to Massey's (1994) view that places do not have single and unique identities as they are full of internal conflicts. I call this stage, the 'conflicted image' detailing the image that was formed in the destination and during the trip.

After the trip, the tourists may have a different and probably a long-lasting image of the destination. They are now able to make the distinction between the initial image and the conflicted image. One image is set in their mind and I call it the 'dominant image'. It is the image that is formed after the trip. When I interviewed the tourists, they were confident and had plenty to say about Seychelles. They were able to give their impressions about the place, the people and the price. They decided then and there whether they would come back or not because they now knew what their expectations were.

In this process, I am arguing that the image of a destination is not only created, as previously claimed, through an organic and induced process (Gunn, 1972); or through holistic and psychological factors (Echtner and Ritchie 1993; 2003); or by the traveller's own experiences (Molina and Esteban, 2006). The research has revealed that using a combination of tourists' and hosts' lived experience through photo-elicitation and interviews has provided us with the image of Seychelles which takes into consideration all social actors' views. The image of a destination can be obtained from various sources, but giving voice to the main actors that consume the destination and live in the destination provides a better insight to determine what attributes are better used to describe the place and its people.

Practically, and to avoid brochures and tour operators being accused of distorting the image of a destination or misrepresenting its people, this image-formation process using lived experience and the 3Ps could be one approach to adopt. It gives the prospective consumer a set of information covering most of the various factors needed to make an informed decision on where to go. Most tourists might not only be interested in what a place looks like, but also how the local people are. So, more detail could be given about the people and their way of life, not necessarily just how they can be of help to tourists. Moreover, detailed information could also be given on the various aspects of the cost of living and how this could affect tourists' plans. Most decisions about travelling to a country are based on how affordable the place is or not, and tourist brochures are not necessarily the place to go for such information. With the advent of online booking and advertising,

there is the opportunity to provide more detailed information to inform the prospective tourist of the 3Ps.

A limitation of this study is that the scope was in Seychelles only. I decided to do this, firstly, because I am a local and secondly one of my intentions was to understand how the place is seen and perceived by both tourists and locals. However, for future research, the aim might be similar but I would propose a foreign researcher to carry out similar studies to see if by eliminating my subjectivity and prejudices the results might be different. Moreover, engaging in a comparative study on destination image between the islands of Seychelles and Mauritius would also be interesting as these two islands are similar in a number of ways that warrant a comparative study. Additionally, with new developments and the pervasiveness of online tools, I suggest new avenues could be explored to determine how destination images are constructed, marketed, and sold to potential travellers. For example, websites such as TripAdvisor and Booking.com are full of materials on tourists' feedback that could be used to determine the image of a destination.

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