An Assessment of the Image of Mexico as a Vacation Destination and the Influence of Geographical Location Upon That Image

JOHN L. CROMPTON

A sample of 617 student respondents was drawn from 12 universities, in different parts of the United States. Semantic differential instruments were used to measure respondents' descriptive and importance dimensions of their image of Mexico.

The analysis indicated major differences between the two image dimensions. Those image attributes which respondents considered to be important when considering a vacation in Mexico were related primarily to sanitation and safety. The most positive attributes respondents reported about Mexico related to climate and low costs.

Measurement of respondents' descriptive image of Mexico indicated that the farther away respondents resided from Mexico, the more favorable was their image of that country as a vacation destination. Analysis indicated that the regional differences were not significant. However, significant differences were found on 12 of the 30 individual attributes which were used to measure image.

Introduction

All segments of the tourist industry spend large sums of money attempting to build an image. An image may be defined as the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination. In recent years more attention has been paid by researchers to the role of image in the tourist's destination selection decision process. Hunt stated, "It seems likely that images, as perceived by individuals in the travel market, may have as much to do with an area's tourism development success as the more tangible recreation and tourist resources." It is rationalized that this occurs because the consumer often has very limited personal experience with the destination he is considering. A number of studies in a variety of fields suggest that the relationship between image and decision making is important, since a decision maker acts upon his image of the situation rather than upon objective reality.

In a study which related to a four-state region of the Rocky Mountains, Hunt suggested that distance from a region may be an important ingredient in image formation, for respondents who resided farther from the region did not differentiate areas within the region as well as those respondents from closer markets. Mayo's study of regional images in the United States found that some regions had a very favorable image while other regions had a relatively weak image. He concluded that three image attributes appeared to be critical: scenery, lack of congestion, and climate. These findings were generally supported by Anderson and Colberg who concluded that the dominant attributes were cost, climate, and scenery.

Objectives of the Study

The first objective of the study was to examine the relationship between respondents' descriptive image attributes of Mexico, and attributes which they considered important in any decision to visit or not to visit the country for a pleasure vacation. Tourist agencies have limited budgetary allocations to finance marketing activities. They may decide to use these funds for a national and/or regional marketing effort. To assist these budgetary allocation decisions, the second objective of the study was to identify those attributes of image which should be emphasized in order to most effectively market Mexico vacations. In addition, the study sought to identify if there were any differences in the image of Mexico as a vacation destination held by respondents located in different regions of the United States. Sound planning for a campaign to market Mexico as a vacation destination requires that the campaign be fitted to the particular segment of the market at which it aims. If differences between regions were evident and a national marketing strategy were adopted, it would suggest that this effort should be differentiated to ensure a more congruent relationship with respondent image in each region. If a regional market-
The principal technical difficulty with the image study is that there is no clear-cut rule on how to use the data for decision making. Should advertising stress the issues on which the image of a country is weak, as in the case for which a country is perceived to have a relatively poor image on things to do? Or should corrective action be taken when the image is poor image on things to do?

Assuming that these are legitimate alternatives, the answer to this predicament was provided by the evaluation of the image study:

**Methodology**

**Derivation of Semantic Differential Scales**

The qualitative concept of image was operationalized by the use of semantic differential scales. Image configurations were represented by the summation of the individual attributes which constituted each of the scales.

An effort was made to develop a comprehensive set of terms which, when taken together, would constitute a valid content universe of the image of Mexico. This approach minimized the danger of forcing respondents to react to a standardized framework which may not be an accurate representation of their image.

The set of terms was derived in two ways. First, a content analysis was undertaken of selected general reading materials on Mexico and of advertising brochures published by the Mexican National Tourist Council. Eight content areas of image emerged and key words or phrases descriptive of image attributes were collated. Subsequently, the words and phrases in this set were expanded by 36 unstructured interviews which were similarly content analyzed.

The basic descriptor terms were organized into 42 semantic differential scales. The scales were administered to a convenience sample of students (n = 70) and the data were factor analyzed. Thirty scales displayed a salient loading on the factors and they formed the measuring instruments.

**Use of the Measuring Instruments**

Two measuring instruments comprised of identical semantic polar terms were used to measure both the descriptive and the evaluative or importance dimensions of Mexico's image. The descriptive data without inclusion of the evaluative dimension is of limited value for it gives no indication of the relative importance which respondents attach to particular attributes of destination image when making a vacation decision. For example, two semantic differential scales, such as “The People of Mexico are: Rich-Poor and Friendly-Unfriendly,” may both receive a score of 5 by the same respondent on descriptive scales. However, a decision to go to Mexico on vacation may be greatly influenced by the latter, while the former may be of only marginal importance. The inclusion of an evaluative (importance) component identifies respondents' salient image attributes and it is these which are most likely to serve as behavior determinants.

Sherak has challenged the value of these semantic-differential type of instruments for measuring destination image:

The principal technical difficulty with the image study is that there is no clear-cut rule on how to use the data for decision making. Should advertising stress the issues on which the image of a country is relatively strong, under the assumption that it is best to lead from strength? Or should corrective action be taken when the image is weak, as in the case for which a country is perceived to have a relatively poor image on things to do?

Assuming that these are legitimate alternatives, the answer to this predicament was provided by the evaluation scales. If the image attributes deemed important by respondents on the evaluative scales received high scores on the descriptive scales then the destination should emphasize those. If they received low scores then corrective action would appear to be the appropriate strategy, if it was considered feasible. For this reason, the evaluative scales included in this study represented an advance upon image studies which have used only descriptive scales. They enabled the salient attributes to be identified and an assessment of their influence on behavior to be made.

**Selection of the Sample**

Respondents were selected from 12 universities in different parts of the United States. The Discover America Travel Organizations, Inc. (DATO) divides the United States into eight regions. For analytical purposes two schools were assigned to each of six regions which were reasonably compatible with DATO region boundaries. The six regions were Frontier West, Far West, Great Lakes Country, South, George Washington, and Eastern Gateway and New England which were combined and treated as one region.

Selection of the 12 universities was determined by availability of a faculty member who was likely to be sympathetic to a request for cooperation. Each cooperating faculty member was provided with instructions for administering the instrument and was sent 65 questionnaires with a request to administer them to junior and senior level students in their recreation and park curricula. All sets of questionnaires were returned although for various reasons some did not complete their full quota of 65. After editing, a total of 617 usable questionnaires were retained for use in the analysis.

The use of a student sample was an important limitation of the study, for, clearly, their image may not be representative of that held by other potential travelers. At the same time, the use of students does provide a relatively homogeneous occupation, education level, and age grouping across regions. It was anticipated that this homogeneity would assist in partially controlling extraneous sources of variance, inevitable in the non-randomized ex post facto type of research design, which could serve as alternate explanations to locational differences for any variance identified.

**Analysis**

Since this was an exploratory study, concern was in assessing the utility of the methodology and in maximizing the search for relationships between variables which may be worthy of further study in the future, rather than having a high level of confidence in a particular statistical result. Hence, a 0.10 level of significance was used rather than the more usual 0.01 or 0.05 levels.

Mean scores of the total sample (N = 617) were calculated for each scale. A comparison of the highest scores recorded on each scale of both the descriptive and the importance instruments quickly identifies the problem confronting Mexican tourist agencies (Table 1). The eight scales (a little over 25% of the total) which received the highest mean scores indicating that they were the most positive image attributes of Mexico reported.
by respondents, were, with one exception, different attributes from those which respondents considered important when considering whether or not they should visit Mexico on a vacation. The single exception was the attribute "friendly people" which scored high on both instruments. This is an extraordinary lack of congruency.

Similar comparisons of the eight highest scoring scales on the descriptive and importance instruments for each of the six DATO regions yielded similar incongruent results. In all regions except the South, friendly people appeared in both lists. In the Frontier West, Far West, South, and Eastern Gateway/New England Regions, the attribute "safe resorts" was also rated high on both instruments. The only attribute which appeared in both rankings was "inexpensive food" in the George Washington region.

The mean scores for each of the 30 attributes on both instruments were calculated. A Mann Whitney U test was administered to test for differences between the two schools within each DATO region. The six tests revealed that there were no significant differences between pairs of schools, and hence the overall image of the selected universities within each region was consistent. A Kruskal-Wallis test was administered across scales on these mean scores to determine whether or not there were differences in image between the six DATO regions. It yielded H. values of 3.64 and 2.32 on the descriptive and importance scales respectively, which with five degrees of freedom suggested that there was no significant difference in image of Mexico between respondents from different regions.

Although overall image was not significantly different, analysis of variance tests administered to individual image attributes on the descriptive instrument identified significant differences between the regions on 12 of the 30 image attributes (.10 level). These scales are shown in Table 2. The mean scores of each of these 12 attributes were ranked across the six regions, with a rank of 1 indicating the region with the most positive response to that image attribute. In this way, the direction of differences between the regions can be identified. In addition, the importance values recorded on these attributes are also included in Table 2.

Summation of the rankings in Table 2 suggests that there were a relatively large number of image attributes on which the Frontier West and Far West regions rank low. That is, they are ranked fifth or sixth of the six regions on the attribute. Hence, on these attributes their image is relatively unfavorable compared to the image reported by respondents in other areas. Table 3 indicates that far more respondents have visited Mexico from these two regions than from any of the others. Thus, it may be reasonable to postulate that this nega-

TABLE 1
THE EIGHT MOST POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES OF MEXICO COMPARED WITH THE EIGHT IMAGE ATTRIBUTES CONSIDERED MOST IMPORTANT IN MAKING A DECISION TO VISIT MEXICO ON VACATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive Scales</th>
<th>Importance Scales</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Varied physical geography</td>
<td>Sanitary food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mild winters</td>
<td>Safe environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inexpensive food</td>
<td>Safe resorts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inexpensive public transportation</td>
<td>Safe public transportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inexpensive public transportation</td>
<td>Transportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mild summers</td>
<td>Friendly people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low average annual rainfall</td>
<td>Uncrowded resorts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly people</td>
<td>Law abiding people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inexpensive goods</td>
<td>Clean public transportation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 617
Figure 1 indicates that when all 30 scales on the description instrument were ranked and the ranks summed, the relationship between a positive image and distance is clearly apparent. The map was compiled using the indices formed by summing ranks as the input data for the Symap computer mapping process.

Conclusions and Implications

The data relating to the first objective of the study, indicated that there was considerable disparity between respondents' descriptive image dimension of Mexico and the attributes which they considered important in any decision to visit or not to visit the country. Attributes associated with personal safety and sanitation were identified as those which were most likely to determine whether or not vacationers would visit Mexico. This supports the more generalized findings which Harris reported, using a national sample who were questioned about their priorities when considering a pleasure vacation.

The use of a student sample obviously prohibits generalization of the findings beyond the student population. However, if these findings were replicated with a sample which could be generalized to the total population, the data suggest that the problem confronting those concerned with marketing vacations in Mexico is acute. Respondents had a relatively poor image on the key attributes on which a decision to vacation in Mexico was made. The attributes on which they reported a positive image played a relatively minor role in the vacation decision. Hence, the study did illustrate the usefulness of considering both the descriptive and importance dimensions of image.

Images tend to have a considerable amount of stability over time, even in the face of dramatic changes in destination attributes. Thus, even if the key determining destination attributes are improved, a change in image is unlikely to be achieved quickly. There are two schools of thought concerning image causation. However, whichever of them is accepted, it suggests that manipulation of destination image is not easy.

The first school of thought suggests that images are largely person-determined. This implies that considerable image variance will always exist because people have different experiences at the destination and process communications relating to the destination differently.

The second approach suggests that image is largely destination determined. This means that people will form their image on the basis of what they or their acquaintances have actually experienced at the destination. It implies that a destination cannot do very much to create an image of itself which is different from what it really is. If the destination wants to change its image, it will have to improve its product. The tourist agency operating at the state or national level is confronted with unique difficulties in resolving this problem. It does not control its product; it is only able to promote it. The attributes which constitute the product are controlled by others.

A marketing communications program designed to improve the image of Mexico as a tourist destination is likely to succeed only if it brings information to people about attributes of which they are not aware or of which they have a distorted view. To the extent that the potential vacationer lacks awareness of certain attributes of a destination and is not likely to experience them directly, he will add them to his image as long as they are not contradicted by other beliefs. Thus, a destination is able to create an image only to the extent that it can control all the sources of mediated information that come to people.

Unfortunately, the potential tourist is likely to be exposed to a considerable quantity of informational stimuli about a destination, which may be counter to that offered by the tourist agency. Because a state or country is substantial in scope and size, distinctive and diverse, it is frequently referenced by the news media.

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Number of Respondents From the Region Who Had Visited Mexico</th>
<th>Total Sample Size of the Region</th>
<th>Percent of Respondents Who Had Visited Mexico</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frontier West</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Far West</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>69.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Lakes Country</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Washington Country</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Gateway and New England</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data relating to the first objective of the study, indicated that there was considerable disparity between respondents' descriptive image dimension of Mexico and the attributes which they considered important in any decision to visit or not to visit the country. Attributes associated with personal safety and sanitation were identified as those which were most likely to determine whether or not vacationers would visit Mexico. This supports the more generalized findings which Harris reported, using a national sample who were questioned about their priorities when considering a pleasure vacation.

The use of a student sample obviously prohibits generalization of the findings beyond the student population. However, if these findings were replicated with a sample which could be generalized to the total population, the data suggest that the problem confronting those concerned with marketing vacations in Mexico is acute. Respondents had a relatively poor image on the key attributes on which a decision to vacation in Mexico was made. The attributes on which they reported a positive image played a relatively minor role in the vacation destination decision. Hence, the study did illustrate the usefulness of considering both the descriptive and importance dimensions of image.

Images tend to have a considerable amount of stability over time, even in the face of dramatic changes in destination attributes. Thus, even if the key determining destination attributes are improved, a change in image is unlikely to be achieved quickly. There are two schools of thought concerning image causation. However, whichever of them is accepted, it suggests that manipulation of destination image is not easy.

The first school of thought suggests that images are largely person-determined. This implies that considerable image variance will always exist because people have different experiences at the destination and process communications relating to the destination differently.

The second approach suggests that image is largely destination determined. This means that people will form their image on the basis of what they or their acquaintances have actually experienced at the destination. It implies that a destination cannot do very much to create an image of itself which is different from what it really is. If the destination wants to change its image, it will have to improve its product. The tourist agency operating at the state or national level is confronted with unique difficulties in resolving this problem. It does not control its product; it is only able to promote it. The attributes which constitute the product are controlled by others.

A marketing communications program designed to improve the image of Mexico as a tourist destination is likely to succeed only if it brings information to people about attributes of which they are not aware or of which they have a distorted view. To the extent that the potential vacationer lacks awareness of certain attributes of a destination and is not likely to experience them directly, he will add them to his image as long as they are not contradicted by other beliefs. Thus, a destination is able to create an image only to the extent that it can control all the sources of mediated information that come to people.

Unfortunately, the potential tourist is likely to be exposed to a considerable quantity of informational stimuli about a destination, which may be counter to that offered by the tourist agency. Because a state or country is substantial in scope and size, distinctive and diverse, it is frequently referenced by the news media.
The volume of information and the "superior credibility" of this source effectively serve to make such stimuli dominant over any stimuli emanating from a tourist agency which frequently is perceived to be a biased advocate. This limitation may not be so critical at the level of the individual attraction or localized destination because they are less likely to be exposed to counter views from more "legitimate" sources. However, at the level of a state or country the impact which a tourist agency is able to exert on potential vacationers' images is probably limited because of the greater number of competing stimuli from other sources.

Hence, if the image of determinate attributes is relatively negative, it is difficult for an agency to seek to change that image. This realization may account for the lack of attention given to personal safety and sanitation in the Mexican tourist agency's promotional effort even though they are the critical factors. The obvious strategy is to maximize the strength of the attribute "Friendly People" which was the only attribute to appear in Table I as one of the most positive and most important attributes.

It should be recognized that the reported results reflect mean scores. This implies that there are sub-groups whose descriptive scale scores on the key importance attributes were relatively high. Hence, an alternative strategy to seeking change of image attributes may be to identify those groups within regions who scored more highly on the determining descriptive scales and thus form a more responsive market target.

The data did indicate that the overall image of Mexico became more positive as distance from the country increased. This may reflect respondent's experiences at the border towns which many would consider atypical of Mexico. Nevertheless, in the absence of other experiences, these border town images are generalized to the rest of the country.

The differences in overall image of Mexico between respondents from different regions of the United States were not significant. Hence, there would appear to be little benefit to be gained from regionally differentiating a national marketing strategy. There was a significant difference between regions on 40% of the attributes which constitute image, and some of those attributes were identified as key determining attributes. This suggested that if a regional marketing strategy were pursued, the Eastern Gateway/New England and George Washington regions were most likely to be receptive to that effort since they reported the most favorable image on the 12 differentiating attributes.

2. For example, see M.B. Smith, J.S. Bruner and R.W. White, Opinions and Personality (Wiley 1956); M. Rokeach, The Open and Closed Mind (Basic Books 1960); and R.C. Snyder, H.W. Brick and B. Sapin, Decision-making as an Approach to the Study of International Politics (Princeton University Press 1954). These studies may use different terms such as "frame of reference" or "belief system" but their uses are synonymous with the use of "image" in this study.
13. Ibid., p. 137.