Assessing negative media publicity on a tourism destination image in Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

A negative destination image is a challenge to any tourism destination. This paper aims to assess the challenges of negative destination image and its impacts on the tourism industry. The study employed a qualitative research method and used an interpretive research paradigm that is inductive in nature. The study used non-probability sampling which combined convenience and snowball sampling. The qualitative data were collected through face-to-face interviews. A total of seven semi-structured open-ended questions were asked during interviews ranging from 10 to 30 minutes, and the interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder. These were done through voluntary informed consent. As part of the ethical process in the research, the research participants were provided with complete information about the research and they participated on voluntary basis. The study found that PNG's tourism products were not marketed in New Zealand. All the participants stated that they have not seen any advertisement about PNG's tourism products but what they expose to is not related to tourism promotion and marketing but news reports about crimes and murders. As a results, they have negative perception of PNG and recommended PNG Government to market its tourism products and services through sports, events and other mediums to poster and strengthen a strong positive destination image for PNG tourism in New Zealand. The study also provides a better understanding of negative destination image and its challenges.

Keywords: Destination image, destination branding, Papua New Guinea, tourism, marketing, promotion, sports tourism

Introduction

Tourism contributes to economic development and generate income. In 2019, visitors' total spending was approximately   K1.5 billion (AU$654,847,625.95), an increase of seven per cent compared to the estimated K1.4 billion spent by visitors in 2018 (Sumb, 2020). However, negative media publicity is the main challenge that affects tourism in PNG (Sumb, 2020). A major share of this happens on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, but also the mainstream media spread news worldwide in seconds. Tourism in Papua New Guinea (PNG) has been greatly affected by negative media publicity both in the country and abroad (Sumb, 2020/2019/2017; Rayel, Kua & Manohar, 2014; Imbal, 2009). On the tourism map, PNG is labelled as an unsafe destination (Sumb, 2020; Rayel, Kua & Manohar, 2014) due to reports of violent crime, armed robbery, car hijacking and sexual assaults, which are common in major towns and continue to pose serious risks to the general public (Sumb, 2020/2017). The rationale of this paper is to explore potential New Zealand travelers' perceptions of PNG as a tourist destination. This is related to negative destination image portrayed by the media. The aim is to identify and discuss the challenges of negative destination image and how it can be addressed.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part presents the introduction of the negative destination image and its challenges. The second presents the existing literature on negative destination image and how it can be addressed. The third presents the methodology of the study followed by a section on the findings and discussion. Finally, a conclusion is given.

Negative media publicity

PNG is seen as an unsafe tourism destination as portrayed by the international and local media (Sumb, 2020/2019/2017; Rayel, Kua & Manohar, 2014; Imbal, 2009). There are criminal activities reported in all major centers and tribal fights in some parts of the highlands region, ethnic clashes in the urban centers, political violence in some provinces and civil war experienced in Bougainville (Sumb, Sumb, 2020/2017). These issues are featured prominently in the media every day. For instance, the Bougainville crisis, which began in 1989 and lasted for nine years (Sumb, 2020), and during those years most media outlets regularly reported on the crisis. Similarly, tribal fights in the highlands received a lot of negative media publicity (Sumb, 2020; Bhanugopan 2001). For instance, the most recent Karida Massacre of 18 people, mostly women and children, in Hela Province (Srinivasan et al., 2019) and the burning of Air Niugini and the National Courthouse in Mendi Southern Highland Province (Kama, 2018) which received negative publicity nationwide. The presence of issues and resultant violence cannot be denied; however, they

are confined to certain tribes in Hela or Southern Highlands Provinces due to land disputes or other social problems and not the entire province is involved in a tribal fight. The perception portrayed by the media is that the entire province is in a state of unrest, and the same is conveyed to the international visitors. As a result, they assume that the entire province and the country are not safe for tourism related programs and activities (Sumb, 2020/2017; Bhanugopan 2001).

Impacts of negative destination image

Destination image influences a person's choice of destination in travel planning. If a tourist's evaluation of the destination is negative due to issues discussed above, this could alter their choice of destination (Basala & Klenosky, 2001; Dowling & Staelin 1994). Safety and security are of great importance to international travel worldwide and have a significant impact on the tourism and travel industry (Reisinger & Macondo, 2005).

Crimes in PNG contribute towards a negative destination image and affect the tourism industry and businesses. Consequently, most tourists travel to other Pacific Island countries such as Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and the Cook Islands (Sumb, 2020; Imbal, 2009). These countries offer affordable airfares and cheap tourism products and less safety and security concerns (Sumb, 2020). A study has revealed that the majority of the travelers to PNG come for business and employment while only a few on holiday (Sumb, 2019). Some on business travel stay in inclusive resorts and hotels and do not spend money on other tourism products. They make money in PNG and invest overseas (Sumb, 2019). The genuine holiday travelers are the ones who visit rural villages and spend money not only on accommodation and airfares but all sectors of the local economy (Sumb, 2019).

The challenge for PNG tourism is to correct the negative destination image. Thus, PNG Tourism Promotion Authority (PNG TPA) is promoting PNG in the key tourism source markets such as Australia, New Zealand, Europe and Japan through different advertising methods such as social media, print and electronic media. However, still more work to do to promote PNG's tourism products and services (Sumb, 2020).

Sports tourism and destination image

Several international sporting events have already been hosted to promote PNG globally (Sumb, 2020). The first event was the 2015 South Pacific Games, which was hosted in Port Moresby. Approximately 4000 athletes from 20 Pacific Island countries participated in 24 sports categories. (Business Advantage PNG, 2014). Despite the fact that PNG was perceived as a dangerous place, during the game, there were no criminal activities involving the athletes, officials, trainers and coaches reported (Norman, Disney & Young, 2015). The South Pacific Games changed the global perception of PNG. The athletes and officials enjoyed their stay in the capital city of PNG (Business Advantage PNG, 2014). The second major event was in 2016 when PNG hosted the Under 20 FIFA World Cup. 16 teams from around the world participated. The theme of the game was a campaign to end violence against women and children. The games were telecasted overseas, contributing to a powerful destination image for PNG (Turnbull, 2016). The third event was the Surfing World Long Board Championships held in Tupira, Madang in 2017 (Keslep, 2018). The fourth event was the Rugby World Cup in 2018. PNG cohosted Rugby World Cup with Australia and New Zealand.

These sporting events and activities have promoted PNG to the rest of the world as global media was in the country in each of the events to telecast the games (Sumb, 2020). Further, the events served as indicators to the potentials for sports tourism in PNG. Besides these international events, PNG hosts the Prime Minister's XIII games played between PNG Kumuls and Australia Kangaroos annually. Moreover, PNG Hunters participate in the Queensland Rugby League Intrust Super Cup competition and act as excellent ambassadors for PNG overseas (Lester et al., 2017).

Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leader's Summit

In 2018, PNG hosted the APEC meeting. It was argued that PNG might not host the event successfully due to high crime rates in Port Moresby and lack of funding to maintain the infrastructure but PNG was able to successfully host the meeting. It has been found that PNG benefited from the Summit in creating a powerful destination image and building of infrastructures. Moreover, the developed infrastructure continues to benefit the country, in economic development and promotion as well as in showcasing PNG's culture and tourism products (Sumb, 2020).

Methodology

The present study is qualitative in nature and employed an interpretive research paradigm. Interpretive studies presume that individuals make and link their own personal and interpersonal values as they communicate with the environment around them (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Bryman, 2012; Schwandt, 2001).

Thus, this research paradigm is appropriate to study New Zealand traveler's perceptions, views, ideas and opinions about PNG's destination image. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in Dunedin, New Zealand to obtain opinions and perceptions of New Zealand travelers. The main advantage of semi-structured interviews is that they offer much more comprehensive data than what is obtainable through other data collection methods, such as surveys (Fylan, 2005).

Sample size

The study used non-probability sampling which combined convenience and snowball sampling that are popular sampling techniques (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Bryman, 2012). These sampling techniques were appropriate for this study as the researcher recruited some participants for whom he has email contacts and others were identified by the initially selected participants. The research participants were all Otago University staff. The reason for selecting Otago staff is that the researcher has communications with some of them and many of the staff members have interest and sufficient financial resources to travel abroad during their winter holidays. The participants were between 30 and 60 years of age. Thus, some might be potential tourists to the Pacific Islands to spend their holiday. Cook and McCleary (1983) have identified that the factors for travel are time, money, age and distance for potential tourists to take into account when assessing a destination. Therefore, in qualitative research, the sample size is generally small to obtain personal views of participants (Bhattacherjee, 2012). The total number of participants was 8, (4 male staff and 4 female staff). They were all from New Zealand as the research was based in New Zealand. A total of seven semi-structured open-ended questions were asked during interviews ranging from 10 to 30 minutes, and were conducted at neutral sites using digital audio recording. All the participants have extensive overseas travel experience and some have been to the Pacific. The data for the study was analysed using thematic analysis. It is a method used for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. This is the most common method for qualitative projects (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Bryman, 2012).

Ethical considerations

As part of this study, ethical approval was granted by the Otago University, Tourism Department Ethics Committee and the researcher obtained consent from the participants. The research participants were provided with complete information about the research including the reasons they had been chosen to participate. Participants' privacy, confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed by the researcher. Direct quotes reference to participants' names (e.g. John) is used only to show the distinction; they are not participants' real names. Consent forms and a covering letter were provided to the respondents and they signed the consent form to confirm that they agreed to participate in the interview. It was explained that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to refuse or participate in the study.

Limitations of the study

The sample size selected for this study was small, and all participants were selected from among the staff of a single university and were between 30 and 60 years of age, as already mentioned. So the data collected in the researcher's notes are limited. Therefore, the conclusions of this study may only be indicative of the trends and cannot be generalised.

Research philosophy

The ontological assumption is that tourism in PNG is not progressing well for many years. It is assumed that it could be related to poor destination image projected by media. The approach of the study is inductive and subjective which starts from specific data to untested conclusions. This is because the study employs an interpretive research paradigm that believes in multiple realities and truths (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Bryman, 2012). For instance, the poor destination image could be an important factor that affects tourism in PNG. This could be understood through the study that explains how individuals understand the meanings and have knowledge of the assumptions (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Bryman, 2012). This study focused on stories, interpretations, and perceptions as participants have experiences and knowledge of the destination through media. The results of the interpretative epistemology is presented in the findings below.

Table 1: Summary of research participants

No	Pseudonym	Sex	Age
1	Aggie	Female	45-50
2	Philip	Male	45-50
3	James	Male	35-45
4	*Jenny	Female	45-50
5	*Roselyn	Female	35-45
6	Maggie	Female	34-45
7	Benny	Male	45-50
8	Paulus	Male	45-50

*Participants with asterisk beside their names have been to PNG and have family and friends in PNG. All participants are from New Zealand and private sector employees.

Findings and discussion

Negative destination image

The participants were asked if they have seen any advertisement about PNG's tourism products in New Zealand. All the participants indicated that they have seen negative media publicity about PNG from different sources. Some mentioned that they have seen documentaries about violent crime in Port Moresby, Lae, Mt. Hagen and other major canters, tribal fights in the highlands, illegal logging and landowner issues with the mining companies. Others heard from family and friends who have been living and working in PNG. They saw and heard a negative image about PNG with little or no positive advertising. Thus, most participants had a negative perception about PNG and considered it unsafe to travel with families: "I only have seen negative reports about tribal fights, and rascals in Port Moresby who intimidate, abuse and harass people" (Philip). One of the participants mentioned that she heard from a friend working in a mining company that it is not safe to travel by yourself anywhere in the country but only if escorted by locals. This makes her feel that as an "expatriate or foreigner it is not safe to travel to PNG" (Aggie).

Another participant stated that she had not seen any advertisement about tourism products and was not aware that PNG has a tourism industry: "To be honest, I never thought that you from PNG will study post-graduation in tourism as PNG never promotes tourism in New Zealand" (Maggie). She added that most television holiday advertisements in New Zealand are about other Pacific Island countries such as the Cook Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu, Samoa and Tahiti. PNG was seen to be an unsafe tourist destination because six participants in this study expressed that they have no plans to travel to PNG as tourists. Only two who have family and friends in PNG are prepared to visit PNG as they have a strong bond with the local people.

These findings are consistent with the literature in that there is little or no advertisement about tourism products in PNG overseas but potential travelers see negative media publicity such as crime and other social issues (Sumb, 2020/2019; Imbal, 2009). As highlighted by participant in this study, they have not seen an advertisement about PNG's tourism products promoted and marketed in New Zealand but other Pacific Island countries such as Fiji and the Cook Islands. It has been noted that Fiji is the leading tourism receipt in the Pacific because they do aggressive advertising of their tourism projects in the key tourism source markets (Sumb, 2020; Pipike 2012).

Effects of negative media publicity

The majority of the participants were exposed to negative media publicity and felt reluctant to travel to PNG in the future. As one of the participants stated: "I have seen a lot of safety issues in PNG and prepared to travel to other Pacific Island countries as they offer similar tourism products" (Roselyn). Tourists are prepared to travel to any destination that has a positive destination image. The destination can be costly in terms of tours, meals, accommodation and airfare but tourists are willing to pay. The issues of negative destination image may be confined to a certain town or city but it affects the entire image of the country.

The findings of this study agree to the literature in terms of the effects of negative destination image. The key factors of a vibrant tourism destination are to be free of safety and security issues and any destination that has negative image is not attractive to potential tourists (Dowling & Staelin, 1994). Potential tourists do their research to understand the destination, its culture, attraction, cost, safety and security and make a decision based on safety and security concerns (Reisinger & Macondo, 2005).

Negative perceptions of other destinations are common

Despite negative perceptions, a few participants felt that PNG's security problems were common among other destinations in the world. For instance, James referred to Spain's Barcelona city which is known for petty crimes such as handbag snatching, pickpocketing and thefts from vehicles: "I went there but nothing happened to me, thus I do not believe in media reports" (James). Similarly, Jenny mentioned that she went to Canada's worst criminal place called 'Prince George' which is known for gang wars, drug abuse, murder and rape, "I went there but nothing happened to me" (Jenny). Similar examples were provided by Philip who mentioned that 'Johannesburg in South Africa' and 'Kingston in Jamaica' have high crime rates but they still benefit from promoting tourism. Further examples were provided by Roselyn about the case of Fiji, which has a history of political unrest. Fiji had internal conflicts such as a military coup in 2006. Similarly, Roselyn mentioned the Bali bombing in 2002, which killed 202 people, mostly Australians and Indonesians.

In the literature review section, it was pointed out that the negative media publicity and petty crimes committed in PNG are not unique to PNG. There are other developing countries in the world who have similar issues but they promote tourism and benefit from it (Sumb, 2020). It is also to be noted that the safety issues experienced in PNG are not related to serious terrorism activities experienced in other countries (Sumb, 2019/2017).

The role of media in a tourist destination

The role of media is very important in promoting tourism products and services of a destination. The aim of branding is to re-invent a place and promote it as a tourism destination to change existing perceptions by reinforcing positive connotations and minimizing any previous negative connotations (Ward, 1998). For instance, civil unrest and violence in Egypt has affected the country's tourism industry. Negative media publicity overseas resulted in many U.S. travelers cancelling trips to Egypt, some tour operators were avoiding Egypt, and Delta Air Lines and Egypt Air suspended flights from the U.S. to Cairo. After the unrest, Egypt came up with a new marketing campaign and the slogan was: "Welcome to the country of peaceful revolution", "7,000 years of history and a new era", and "Tahrir - a square rocks the world". This replaced the previous brand, "Where It All Begins". The new brand was created to restore confidence and positive media publicity abroad (Modiano, 2011).

In this paper, majority of the participants were exposed to negative media which is not intended to market PNG as a tourism destination but for news. Thus, PNG TPA needs to come up with marketing campaigns to counter act the negative media publicity that might give confidence to potential tourists that PNG is different from what they have perceived through the media (Sumb, 2020).

PNG needs positive media publicity

The majority of the participants suggested that PNG needs to promote its tourism products in New Zealand and other countries because of their perceptions about PNG as a lawless and violent crime-ridden destination. PNG should host mega events and get media attention and mentioned Brazil as an example (Benny). Brazil has violent crimes, slums, and drugs and has extensive negative media publicity, but has successfully hosted the Olympic Games. PNG can host similar events and change the perceptions of travelers. For instance, in 2015 PNG successfully hosted the 2015 XV, Pacific Games in Port Moresby, and this testifies that PNG can promote sports tourism.

These are potential avenues through which PNG can create a positive image, not only hosting successful events but also marketing through websites, social media sites, television channels, radio stations, magazines, newspapers and

travel deals with travel agents and tour operators. Participants felt that there was a low level of awareness about PNG as a tourist destination. For example, Benny speaks of knowing PNG through postal stamps only.

> "To be honest, I have not heard very much about PNG's tourism products; only saw PNG artefacts on postal stamps. I have not seen a promotional advertisement about PNG in movies, magazines or on television. I only saw advertisements about Fiji, Vanuatu, and the Cook Islands. They do cooperate advertising with airlines and travel agents in New Zealand" (Benny).

Similarly, another participant stated that he only learnt about PNG when studying at a university.

> "I studied Zoology at Otago University and know about PNG's interesting and stunning wildlife but no media advertisements about PNG. I usually visit some common websites such as New Zealand weather forecast and see pop up messages about Samoa, Fiji, the Cook Islands, Tonga, New Caledonia and Vanuatu's tourism products and nothing about PNG" (Paulus).

These findings are consistent with the literature that PNG tourism products and services are not promoted adequately abroad which is a challenge for PNG Tourism Promotion Authority and National Government of PNG to make it happen (Sumb, 2020).

Potential tourism development in PNG

All the eight participants felt that PNG has some unique tourism products and needs to be marketed to tourism source markets. Some suggested that PNG has transit tourism and cruise ship tourism. For instance, Singapore is the tourism hub of South East Asia because they offer transit for most destinations in the world (Benny). Similarly, Fiji has stopover flights from other Pacific Island countries to Los Angeles and tourists can take a stopover break.

Some participants offered constructive options for PNG tourism. For instance, Benny suggested that PNG offer cruise ship tourism to avoid all the issues of safety and security. He mentioned that the cruise ship industry has a huge potential for tourism. This is an alternative form of tourism, which can benefit PNG because it has a negative image in relation to land-based tourism. Benny further states that for cruise ship tourism, tourists visit remote islands which are free from petty crimes and where it is cheap to buy local arts and crafts. Tourists do not have to look for accommodation facilities to overnight or travel by plane or car to a destination. All these services are provided on the cruise ship. "This is similar to inclusive resorts that provide everything for tourists where they feel safe and secure but poses some challenges in terms of capturing tourism income" (Benny).

From the literature PNG has untapped tourism potential that needs to be developed and promoted. Some of the tourism products in PNG are unique to PNG such as 800 plus different languages, different cultures and traditions, flora and fauna and many more that is of interest to tourists but needs exposure (Sumb, 2020/2019/2017; Rayel, Kua & Manohar, 2014; Imbal, 2009).

Conclusion

A negative tourism destination image is a challenge for any tourism destination. The study has found that PNG has a negative destination image in New Zealand. This is partly due to a lack of marketing and promotion activities in key tourism source markets. Most of the participants have not seen any tourism advertisement in New Zealand about PNG, but only crime-related news. This contributes to the poor destination image portrayed by the media. Due to such negative media publicity, most tourists prefer to travel to other Pacific Island countries. Some participants feel that PNG is not very risky as other countries. The issues portrayed by media are also experienced in other countries such as Spain's Barcelona city which is known for petty crimes and Canada's worst criminal place called 'Prince Georg'. However, these countries still benefit from tourism. Thus, some participants suggested for PNG to market tourism through sports tourism such as hosting several sporting events as there is an opportunity for sporting tourism in PNG since Rugby League is a National Sport in the country and PNG Hunter's inclusion in the Intrust Super Cup computation in Australia. These are possible avenues to promote PNG's tourism products.

It is already noted elsewhere that since the sample size for this study was small, the results may not be generalized. A future research with an expanded sample size would be able to produce more comprehensive information. A quantitative study may be even more useful to build on from the suggestions made in this paper.

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