

Research Note

Singapore's Image as a Tourist Destination

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ABSTRACT

The present study seeks to examine the image of Singapore as a tourist destination. A sample of 131 tourists was collected at the Singapore Changi International Airport's two departure halls. In addition to answering a short Likert-scale questionnaire, respondents were asked to describe in their own words the unique aspects of the country. Comparisons of response differences in respect of gender, age groups, educational levels as well as countries of origin were also conducted. Significant perceptual differences were detected with respect to the last three categories. Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Received 2 October 2002; revised 10 March 2003; accepted 18 March 2003

Keywords: tourist destination; image; Singapore.

THE CONTEXT OF SINGAPORE

As a result of the aftermath of 11 September and the global economic slowdown, the number of tourist

arrivals to Singapore dropped by 2.2% from 7.69 million in 2000 to 7.52 million in 2001. With increasing marketing efforts by other Asian countries trying to increase their portion of the tourists' receipts, Singapore is losing its market share. A survey conducted by the Singapore Tourist Board (1999) revealed startling facts. Singapore is fast becoming a modern, familiar and expensive place, so much like the western countries that it has lost its attraction as 'something different'. Through years of rapid economic growth and infrastructure development, Singapore has lost most of its natural, exotic, inexpensive and 'different' appeal.

Singapore as a tourist destination has for many years been regarded as family-orientated, safe, modern, plenty of sun and good food. Backed by the most efficient airport in the region and perhaps the world, a national airline with a strong reputation for reliability and service, a position as the tourist 'hub' and a massive tourism promotion budget, Singapore is indeed hard to beat despite the negative impressions of its small size, expense and 'boring' nature (*The Straits Times*, 5 February 2003). Nevertheless, the ebb and flow of tourism receipts still very much depend on the status of the world economy and political/social stability in this part of the world. For example, because of the 1997–98 Asian economic crisis, the total number of visitor arrivals experienced a negative growth rate of –13.3%. Strong recovery was noted for the years 1999 (+11.5%) and 2000 (+10.5%). The growth slipped to –10.5% (October 2001) and –14.6%

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(November 2001) immediately after the 11 September tragedy. It began to pick up in 2002 with a growth rate of merely 0.1% (Singapore Tourism Board (STB), November 2002).

Intense competition from around the region serves as a wake-up call to reposition the country and to redefine its image. A basic understanding of tourists' perceptions and needs will help Singapore to initiate informed marketing strategy to position itself as a choice destination. By creating and managing an appropriate destination image, STB should be in a better position to market the country as a key tourist destination in this part of the world.

Research about the image of Singapore as a tourist destination has always drawn interest among government bodies, hotels and travel agencies in the tourism industry. The STB has conducted surveys on overseas tourists on a yearly basis. Respondents were asked what aspects of Singapore they found most appealing to them. Throughout the years, Singapore's clean and green environment continues to emerge as the winning factor. Most tourists still regard Singapore as a shopping paradise and as having beautiful scenery. A heartening note is that more tourists find the island to be a safe and stable, orderly and disciplined environment. However, they do not put its 'warm, friendly and courteous people' and 'varied and exotic food' among the few top factors.

The purpose of this paper seeks to ascertain the image of Singapore as a tourist destination, using the framework developed by Choi, *et al.* (1999). Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used to capture the attributes and tourists' holistic impressions of the country. Implications of the tourists' perceptions will be explored to highlight their possible impact on the marketing focus of the country.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGE DESTINATION

The importance of a tourist destination's image is widely acknowledged because it affects an individual's subjective perception, his/her consequent behaviour and destination choice (Chen and Hsu, 2000; Qu *et al.*, 2000; Joppe *et al.*, 2001; Kozak, 2001, 2002; Klenosky, 2002; Seddighi and Theocharous, 2002). Guthrie and Gale (1991) argued that 'images

are more important than tangible resources and perceptions rather than reality are what motivate consumers to act or not to act.' Although this may be a rather broad claim, we are of the view that because the person has not been to the place before, his/her knowledge about the destination is likely to be based on secondary sources only.

In the field of marketing, tourist destination image (TDI) has been the subject of considerable research during the past three decades. Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993) acknowledged the existence of three continuums that support the image of any destination: (i) functional–psychological, (ii) unique–common and (iii) attribute–holistic. Choi *et al.* (1999) borrowed their framework to assess Hong Kong's tourist destination image. An example of a unique feature of Hong Kong is its Star Ferry or the Victoria Peak. No other places outside Hong Kong offer the same attractions. On the other hand, the presence of lots of skyscrapers is considered as common to many other cities and hence not unique to Hong Kong. An example of the functional attribute of Hong Kong is its good nightlife, whereas local residents' attitude towards foreigners is more psychological in nature (i.e. less observable).

There are many ways of measuring TDI. These approaches can be divided into two main categories; (i) qualitative and (ii) quantitative techniques. The first category encompasses methods such as free elicitation and open-ended questions, focus groups and in-depth interviews and expert discussions. The second category mainly consists of statistical procedures involving bivariate (*t*-test and correlations analysis) and multivariate methods such as factor analysis, cluster analysis, ANOVAS and MANOVAS.

In general, multivariate techniques predominate because they allow for the determination of latent multidimensional structure (components) of TDI as well as average scoring as a numeric measurement of image (Gallarza *et al.*, 2001). The most commonly used procedures for measuring destination image are information reduction techniques: multidimensional scaling, principal components analysis and factor analysis. These are statistical methods used for classifying a large number of variables into a limited number of dimensions or factors.

However, the study of TDI using only statistical procedures can only capture the common and attribute-based aspects of image and not the unique and holistic aspects (Choi *et al.*, 1999). To counter this problem, an 'unstructured' methodological approach, such as open-ended questions, should be deployed. This method, although not as widely used, can be seen in the works of Choi *et al.* (1999), Reilly (1990) and Echtner and Ritchie (1993).

METHODOLOGY

The survey instrument consists of three sections. The first section of the questionnaire comprises of 37 Likert statements which are used to measure the functional and psychological attributes. Examples of those items that measure leisure and tourist amenities are: 'There are many interesting places in Singapore'; 'Availability of good tourist information'; and 'There are many packaged tours available in Singapore'. Examples of items measuring shopping and food paradise are: 'Food is varied and exotic in Singapore'; and 'Singapore is a cosmopolitan city'. Examples of local residents and night life are: 'The local people are honest'; 'The local people are friendly' and 'Singapore has a good nightlife'. Other attributes (each measured by at least two items) include political stability, weather, local culture, cleanliness as well as personal safety and convenience.

Twenty-five of the items were based on the previous study by Choi *et al.* (1999). The rest of the items were derived from the annual survey reports conducted by the Singapore Tourism Board. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement on a five-point scale ranging from 1 being 'strongly disagree' to 5 being 'strongly agree'.

In the second part of the questionnaire, three open-ended questions adapted directly from Echtner and Ritchie (1993) were used to capture the qualitative aspect of our study. The three questions are firstly, what images or characteristics come to mind when you think of Singapore as a vacation destination? Secondly, how would you describe the atmosphere or mood that you would expect to experience while visiting Singapore? Thirdly, list any distinctive or unique tourist attractions that you can think of in Singapore.

The third section includes questions on respondents' demographic background. These include respondents' age, educational level, country of origin and gender.

The sample was selected at the two departure halls of Changi International Airport, Singapore. Data collection (face-to-face administered by the researcher) was carried out on 1 and 3 March 2002 with a target sample size of 160. Out of this 160, only 82% (131) of the surveys were fully completed and used for this study. Following Choi *et al.* (1999), we define our population as visitors that had stayed for at least 1 day but less than 1 year in Singapore. Systematic random sampling was used and survey questionnaires were distributed to every fifth person waiting at the check-in counters of the various airlines.

The 37 Likert statements on Singapore's image attributes were explored by principal component factor analysis and Varimax rotation giving rise to an eight-factor solution. The purpose is to summarise information in a larger set of variables into fewer constructs that were deemed to represent the image dimension of Singapore as a tourist destination. After the items have been grouped into factors, we measure the internal consistency (reliability) of items within each factor using Cronbach's alpha tests.

To further detect whether tourists with various demographic characteristic had different perceptions of the image attributes, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and *t*-test were performed depending on the number of subsamples available (*t*-test for two subgroups and *F*-test for three or more). To meet the statistical assumption of normality on the samples' distribution, demographic variables were recoded if any of the subgroup was smaller than 30 (minimum of 30 data points for meaningful statistical analysis).

RESULTS

Respondents' profile

Out of the 131 respondents surveyed, males constitute 55.7% and females constitute 44.3% (see Table 1). The majority of the tourists belong to the 20–29 years age group (44.3%),

Table 1. Profile of respondents ($n = 131$)

	Frequency	Per cent
Sex:		
male	73	55.7
female	58	44.3
Age:		
below 20	11	8.4
20–29	58	44.3
30–39	17	13
40–49	22	16.8
50–59	15	11.5
60 and above	8	6.1
Highest education:		
below high school	11	8.4
high school	34	26
college/degree	22	55
postgraduate and beyond	14	10.7
Country of origin:		
southeast and east Asia	61	46.6
Asia other than the above mentioned region	9	6.9
Europe	34	26
North, Central and South America	11	8.4
Africa	1	1.5
Oceania including New Zealand and Australia	14	10.7
Source of information about Singapore:		
Newspaper/TV	78	59.5
Travel agents/tour operators	37	28.2
Friends and relations	69	52.7
Travel books/guides	54	41.2
Previous visit to Singapore	39	29.8
Posters	1	0.08
Others	6	4.6

followed by the 40–49 years age group (16.8%). Of the respondents, 65.7% had at least finished college/degree and another 26.0% had finished high school.

An overwhelming 46.6% of all the respondents are from northern and southeastern Asia. The next largest group (26.0%) is from Europe, followed by New Zealand and Australia (10.7%), North, Central and South America (8.4%), other parts of Asia (6.9%) and Africa (1.5%). This is reasonably representative of the profile of visitors visiting Singapore between January and November 2002. According to the STB, 62.7% of the tourists were from northern and southeastern Asia, 14.7% were from Europe, 8.7% from the Oceania, 5.6% from the Americas, 7.3% from other parts of Asia and 0.95% from Africa (Singapore Tourist Board, 2002, p. 11).

When asked to name their sources (multiple answers permitted) of information about Singapore, six in ten mentioned newspapers and television, followed by friends and relatives (52.7%), travel books/guides (41.2%), previous visit to Singapore (29.8%) and travel agents/tour operators (28.2%). It would appear that advertising via the mass media and word-of-mouth constitutes the two most important means of attracting potential visitors to Singapore.

Results of factor analysis

The purpose of factor analysis is to combine the large number of statements into a smaller set of factors to represent the image dimension of Singapore. It is a rule of thumb that factor loadings greater than 0.30 (absolute value) are

considered significant. Loadings 0.40 are considered more important, and if the loadings are 0.5 or greater, they are considered very significant (Hair *et al.*, 1995). Thus, we drop statements as not being statistically significant with factor loadings less than 0.3 from further analysis. Factor loadings were then used to assign a name to each factor. Specifically, items with higher loadings were considered more important (statistically speaking) and hence have a greater influence on the naming of factors.

After the items have been grouped into factors, we seek to measure the internal consistency of items within each factor. This reliability test was carried out via Cronbach's alpha tests. Items that have alpha coefficient below 0.5 were deleted from further analysis. In our study, two factors were removed out of the initial ten factors leaving an eight-factor solution (see Table 2).

Factor 1 is composed of six items relating to Leisure and Tourist Amenities. Examples are: 'There are many packaged tours available in Singapore', 'Good tourist facilities and services are available' and 'There are many interesting places in Singapore'. Factor 2 is related to Singapore's image as a Shopping and Food Paradise. The factor comprises eight items. For example, 'There is a wide variety of a product available in Singapore', 'Food is varied and exotic in Singapore' and 'Singapore is a good place to shop'.

Factor 3 comprises six items and includes those relating to the Local Residents and the Nightlife such as 'The local people are friendly' and 'Singapore has a good nightlife'. Items with regard to Political Stability are captured in factor 4. It consists of three items such as 'Singapore is a politically stable country', 'Singapore is a progressive country' and 'Singapore is an orderly country'. The fifth factor, Adventure and Weather, relates to the weather of Singapore and its image as an adventurous holiday destination.

Local culture is represented by factor 6, which measures the degree of similarity of the architectural styles, lifestyle and customs between Singapore and the respondents' home countries. Factor 7, Cleanliness, is composed of two items 'Singapore is clean and green' and 'There are lots of gardens and parks in

Singapore'. The last factor, Personal Safety and Convenience, is concerned with the safety level of Singapore and the convenience level of the transport system.

The summated means for all factors were above 2.5, which indicates that the respondents generally had a positive image of Singapore. In particular, factor 4, which is concerned with the political stability of Singapore, has a high summated mean score of 4.504. The summated mean score for Personal Safety and Convenience is the second highest (mean = 4.496) owing to the country's low crime rate and well-developed transport system. A high summated mean score for the Cleanliness factor (mean = 4.244) further confirms Singapore's status as a 'Garden City' and affirms the Government's effort in keeping the environment neat and clean.

Although the majority of the summated means for all factors were well above the neutral point of 2.5, it should be highlighted that the Local Culture factor obtains the lowest summated mean score of 3.07. This may be due to the fact that as Singapore becomes increasingly urbanised, there are increasingly more modern buildings and fewer unique architectural buildings that truly reflect our heritage. Indeed, this can be seen in the high item scores for 'There are many modern buildings in Singapore' (4.428) and 'Singapore is a cosmopolitan city' (4.125). In addition, as Singaporean's lifestyle becomes increasingly westernised, some of our unique local customs are being forgotten. Low-score items such as 'There are many restful and relaxing places in Singapore' (2.886) and 'There are lots of natural scenic beauties in Singapore' (2.405) should also be noted. Like Hong Kong, Singapore's fast pace of life and restricted physical environment contributed little to a more relaxed and restful holiday atmosphere.

The three continuums of destination image

Following Choi *et al.*'s (1999) work on Hong Kong's image as a tourist destination, the mean scores for functional and psychological attributes are presented in upper part of Table 3. These include ratings for 'Many modern buildings' (4.428), 'Wide variety of products available' (4.176), 'Food is varied and exotic' (4.153),

Table 2. Factor analysis of image items

Factor name	Items within factor	Mean	Loading	Alpha	Eigenvalue
Factor 1: leisure and tourist amenities	There are many interesting places in Singapore	3.150		0.828	7.205
	There are many restful and relaxing places in Singapore	3.275	0.520		
	There are lots of natural scenic beauty in Singapore	2.886	0.597		
	There are many packaged tours available in Singapore	2.405	0.565		
	Availability of good tourist information	3.336	0.752		
Factor 2: shopping and food paradise	Good tourist facilities and services are available	3.565	0.742	0.800	4.466
	There are many modern buildings in Singapore	3.435	0.749		
	There are many interesting events and festivals in Singapore	4.155	0.479		
	Singapore is a cosmopolitan city	4.428	0.642		
	There are a wide variety of products available in Singapore	3.947	0.684		
Factor 3: local residents and nightlife	Singapore is a good place to shop	4.176	0.746	0.828	2.847
	Good quality of products	3.863	0.552		
	Food is varied and exotic in Singapore	4.046	0.583		
	Many people speak English	4.153	0.532		
	Singapore has a good nightlife	4.481	0.417		
Factor 4: political stability	Singapore has an exotic image	3.639	0.433	0.771	2.149
	The local people are friendly	3.481	0.494		
	The local people are courteous	3.328	0.569		
	The local people are hardworking	3.901	0.730		
	The local people are honest	3.580	0.771		
Factor 5: adventure and weather	Singapore is a politically stable country	3.687	0.829	0.516	1.675
	Singapore is a progressive country	4.504	0.796		
	Singapore is an orderly country	4.573	0.819		
Factor 6: local culture	A holiday in Singapore is a real adventure	4.382	0.662	0.857	1.612
	Singapore has pleasant weather	4.557	0.645		
Factor 7: cleanliness	The architectural styles of the buildings are similar to those in your home country	3.179	0.842	0.646	1.309
	The lifestyle and customs in Singapore are similar to those in your home country	2.855	0.899		
	Singapore is clean and green	3.099	0.770		
Factor 8: personal safety and convenience	There are many gardens and parks in Singapore	4.244	0.782	0.500	1.243
	Singapore is a safe place to visit	4.099	0.698		
	Singapore has a well-developed transport system	4.496	0.725		

Table 3. The attribute-holistic, functional-psychological and common-unique images of Singapore (based on the framework proposed by Choi *et al.* (1999, p. 364)

	Functional	(Mean/%)	Psychological	(Mean/%)
Attribute-holistic:				
attribute	Many modern buildings	4.428	Safe place to visit	4.626
	Wide variety of products available	4.176	Politically stable country	4.573
holistic	Food is varied and exotic	4.153	Orderly country	4.557
	Good shopping place	32.4%	Safe place to visit	54.0%
	Good transport links to other Asian countries	28.3%	Modern	41.0%
	Good hotel facilities	22.0%	Clean and green	33.7%
Unique-Common:				
unique	Orchard Road	45.8%	Clean and green	33.7%
	Sentosa	43.4%	Regulated environment	30.5%
	Hawker Centres	29.2%	Disciplined citizens	26.9%
common	Good shopping place	32.4%	Modern	41.0%
	Good hotel facilities	22.0%	Diverse culture and people	16.7%
	Good transport system	31.0%	Friendly and courteous people	15.4%

'Safe place to visit' (4.626), 'Politically stable' (4.573) and 'Orderly country' (4.557).

The functional and psychological holistic images also are represented in the upper part of Table 3. Singapore is generally regarded as a good place to shop and to transit to other neighbouring Asian countries. Regarding the atmosphere or mood experienced in Singapore, respondents generally felt that it is a safe and modern place that has a clean and green environment.

The functional-psychological and common-unique components of destination image are depicted in the lower part of Table 3. Orchard Road, Sentosa and the hawker centres are some of the distinct tourist spots. On the other hand, respondents also felt that Singapore is highly regulated with too many rules and 'fines' and its citizens are much disciplined.

Results of ANOVA

The ANOVAs, Kruskal-Wallis and *t*-tests were conducted in order to identify significant differences in the image attributes, obtained from factor analysis, between demographic groups in terms of age, gender, educational level and country of origin. To meet the statistical assumption of normality on the sample's distribution, demographic variables were

regrouped if any subsample size is less than 30. (Bhattacharyya and Johnson, 1997). A further test of homogeneity of variances was conducted using Levine's test.

Results from ANOVA and *t*-tests reveal that there are no significant differences in perception between the different gender groups for all image attributes. However, significant difference ($p < 0.05$) was found between people of different country origins with regard to their perceptions towards 'Local residents and nightlife' and 'Local Culture'.

Travellers from Europe, America and Australia/New Zealand tend to have a more positive image of Singapore and its image as having a bustling nightlife when compared with those from northern and southeastern Asia. Here, it is important to define nightlife as activities that are performed during the night and not restricted to just the club and pub scene. Therefore, the fact that Singapore is less often seen as having a bustling nightlife by regional travellers could be due to the fact that many regional countries have an equally bustling nightlife. The presence of night-markets (also known as 'yeshi' or 'Pasar-Malam') are common across the region. These night markets often open till the small hours of the morning and are always crowded with people.

'Regional' travellers (those from northern and southeastern Asia) perceive Singapore to have closer cultural affinity with their country of origin as compared with 'international' travellers. This is not surprising given the close proximity of regional countries and, as mentioned earlier, similar ethnic composition. Singapore, being a multi-ethnic society is actually a blend of different cultures from the Chinese, Malay and Indians. These cultures can be found in neighbouring countries as well, hence, the close cultural affinity.

In addition, significant difference ($p < 0.05$) was also discovered between different age groups with regard to the 'Singapore's image as a shopping and food paradise'. Using the Tukey Kramer test, difference in perception for 'Singapore's image as a shopping and food paradise' was found to be significant between age group 1 and 3. We attribute this difference in perception to the differing purchasing power and the objective which respondents choose to come to Singapore. Visitors of age 50 and above are usually retirees. Hence, they tend to have higher purchasing power than visitors of ages below 29. The higher purchasing power could also translate to a greater capacity for shopping as compared with the younger visitors. Furthermore, younger visitors are more adventurous and seek to explore when they visit a foreign country. Shopping and eating to them may not be a unique selling point of a country.

Significant difference ($p < 0.05$) was also discovered between different educational background for attributes 'Singapore's image as a shopping and food paradise' and 'Local Weather'. Although statistically different, there might not be a feasible interpretation. However, it is also important to note that educational background might have interactions with other demographic variables such as country of origin and age, hence making it difficult to isolate the results of just one demographic variable.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Although the overall image of Singapore is positive, it remains a challenge for the country to distinguish itself from other large cities such as Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Bangkok, Hong Kong

or Taipei. This is difficult as Singapore becomes increasingly westernised and urbansed. This point can be seen in the low scores for the 'Local Culture' items. Visitors tend to feel that there is little distinction in architectural styles of the local buildings from those of their home countries. This is especially so for visitors from the Western countries and cities such as Hong Kong, Shanghai, Seoul and Tokyo where there are many similarly styled modern buildings. The Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore should look into preserving more architectural buildings that reflect the country's unique heritage and culture, especially in areas such as Chinatown and Little India.

Furthermore, given that Singapore lacks natural and scenic beauty, strategies should be designed in a way that it does not place itself into direct competition with its neighbours. Our findings suggest that Singapore is strongly associated as being politically stable (mean = 4.5), safe and convenient (mean = 4.5) as well as clean (mean = 4.2). These can be capitalised on in the country's promotion packages. Moreover, as the respondents' perception that Singapore as a reasonably good place to shop (mean = 3.9) and to find good food (mean = 4.2) is not particularly favourable, more intensive marketing effort should be made to enhance the offerings of unique events such as the 'Singapore Food Festival' and 'The Great Singapore Sales'.

Another sustainable core competency that Singapore can work on is to promote itself as a hub of ASEAN [Association of South East Asian Nations] and a spring board to north Asia, south Asia and Oceania. To attract tourists to solely visit Singapore will be a much harder task than positioning Singapore as a stop-over destination to other countries within the region. After all, most tourists visiting Singapore usually do not spend more than 5 days here. Changi International Airport with its high connectivity within the region and around the world is also another plus point in pursuing this strategy. To implement the strategy, the Singapore Tourism Board could perhaps go into agreements with other tourism boards within ASEAN to promote the region.

From our results, it was found that tourists from different country origins have different perceptions of Singapore. Hence, it makes sense

from the marketing point of view to segment the tourist market by geographical regions. For example, for travellers from northern Asia, Singapore as a shopping/food paradise and its equatorial location should be emphasised rather than the cultural side as countries within the immediate region tend to have a similar ethnic background. However, Singapore as a melting pot of cultures can be highlighted in promotional efforts targeted at travellers from America, Europe and Oceania. Given the limited size of our sample and the relatively narrow focus of this study (perception of the country's image), more work needs to be carried out in future to ascertain the key determinants of Singapore as a tourist destination.

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