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SIBERIA'S SHEREGESH: MOUNTAIN RESORT IMAGE IN ONLINE TRAVEL REVIEWS

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Abstract

The universally acknowledged importance of tourist destination image has led to a substantial body of research on the topic. This paper focuses on examining the key factors of destination image formation in tourists' online reviews. The study offers an integrated approach drawing on the image branding research findings and the linguocognitive methodology of the regional image formation. The authors establish the systemic correlation between the standardized set of destination image components developed in tourism studies and the cognitive categories described by applying the linguistic methods of conceptual analysis, such as key words, slots and sub-frames. The study analyses electronic word-of-mouth in the context of actualizing the destination image components, which are seen to be salient in the process of destination image formation, in online travel reviews. The qualitative techniques of textual analysis have been combined with the elements of content analysis in order to examine how the destination variables contribute to the mountain resort image formation. As the findings show, attribute-based and functional variables as well as the strategies of affective image building play more essential role in constructing online image of the Siberian mountain resort Sheregesh (Kemerovo Oblast, Russia) than it was hypothesized. The research has practical value as it contributes to the mountain resort image development. It also expands the studies of E-WOM (electronic word-of-mouth) communication, which has been engaging a dramatically growing number of participants in recent years. The findings also provide useful insights for Siberian territories research from the perspectives of linguistics and management.

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Keywords: Sheregesh, tourists' reviews, sub-frames, content analysis.



1. Introduction

With the advent of the Web 2.0 technologies, tourists' impressions and word-of-mouth (WOM) information about a place began to be communicated online (Ban, 2016; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Tourism entered the new epoch of the electronic travel. Even remote places, which previously saw no massive consumption, are becoming electronically available as increasingly covered on travel-blogs, online forums, in tourists' online reviews (Banyai & Glover, 2012; Nedelea, 2016; Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007).

2. Problem Statement

Given high degree of distribution tourist information becomes digital and the large-scale, anonymous, ephemeral nature of the Internet induces new ways of capturing, analyzing, interpreting, and managing online WOM. Litvin et al., (2008) clearly define a new form of tourism product information exchange spread through electronic means. Among the key characteristics of WOM the researchers mention the perceived independence of the source of the message, remarking that "with information technology today ubiquitous, that WOM is becoming both more pervasive and amorphous" (Litvin et al., 2008, p. 461).

3. Research Questions

Accordingly, the researchers conceptualize the construct of tourist online destination image (TODI) (Hunter, 2016; Mak, 2017; Schwaighofer, 2014). While Hunter (2016) argues that online image is a social-semiotic construction rather than the marketers' projected image, other researchers outline that the online representation of a destination's image can be defined as the online representation of the collective beliefs, knowledge, ideas, feelings and overall impressions of a destination (Gartner, 1993; Jeacle & Carter, 2011; Mak, 2017). Supporting the arguments of Oliveira and Panyik (2015), Ban (2016) notes, "in a new digital era a simple tourist or traveler is an active creator of a destination brand" (p. 15).

4. Purpose of the Study

Nowadays, tourist websites are considered to become "the main tool for consumers to organize their holidays themselves by taking advantage of pre-trip searching and post-trip evaluating the destination according to personal desires and experiences" (Held, 2018, p. 211).

5. Research Methods

Some platforms including Tripadvisor are highly relevant to the investigation into using social media to understand personal experiences of climate by tourists. This has become one of the reasons why reviews posted in a personal capacity have been suggested to hold greater value, trust and reliability than reflections collected by research professionals (Jeacle & Carter, 2011). Indeed, prospective visitors of a place prefer to form their opinions much depending on other citizens' reviews, their imagery and critics shared online. The combination of credibility and accessibility renders TGC a powerful medium in shaping the online image of a destination (Banyai & Glover, 2012; Pan et al., 2007; Mak, 2017).

6. Findings

While destination image studies are extensively covered in scientific literature on tourism management, application of linguistic analysis to the domain of the online image of a territory is under-represented. In discourse studies, latest attention is given to the analysis of tourism discourse in general, but the online destination image forming factors that have discursive nature relatively lack serious understanding (Figueiredo & Pasquetti, 2016; Gretzel & De Ascaniis, 2013; Held, 2018; Nedelea, 2016; Pagano, 2014). Besides, most existing studies have explored the online destination image through NTO-generated contents (National Tourism Organizations), leaving a gap in understanding the online destination image manifested in the tourist generated content (Mak, 2017).

Table 01. Sheregesh online review statistics (2011 – 2018 years)

Website	Number of reviews	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Otzovik	66	1	5	1	18	9	19	9	5
Tripadvisor	184	0	0	0	13	76	52	28	15
Nedoma	167	7	18	14	9	6	21	52	40
100 resorts	9	0	0	0	0	1	1	5	2
Total	426	8	23	15	40	92	93	94	62

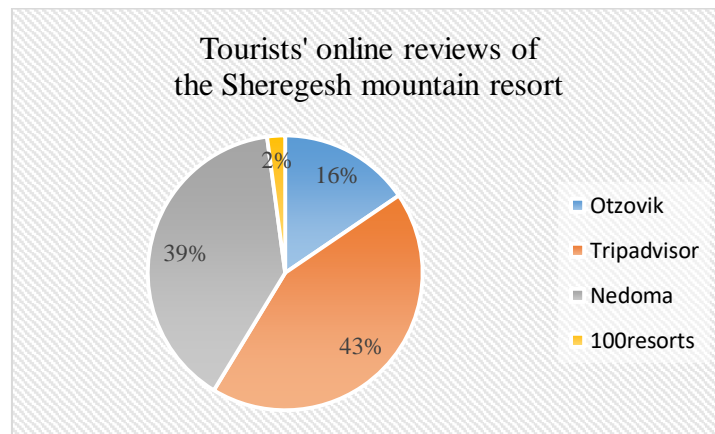


Figure 01. Sheregesh online reviews on Otzovik, Nedoma, Tripadvisor and 100 resorts Web pages (%)

Table 02. Keyword analysis results (Source: Miratext.ru); $n^1=426$ (the number of reviews); $n^2=39959$ (the word count)

№	Keyword	Word count	Frequency
1	Mountains	292	0.73
2	Sheregesh	272	0.68
3	Trails	260	0.65
4	Ride	250	0.63
5	Snow	188	0.47
6	Place	131	0.33
7	Lifts	117	0.29
8	Day	77	0.2
9	Slopes	77	0.2
10	Sector	71	0.18

Table 03. Keywords and represented subframes.

Subframe	Keyword
1. Natural-geographic characteristics	
Geography / Toponymy	Sheregesh
Nature / Landscape	Mountains Slopes
Climate	Snow
Space / Time	Place Day
2. Economic Factors	
Infrastructure	Trails Lifts Sectors
3. Cultural events	
Occupation / Sport	Ride (Ski/ Snowboard)

Table 04. Content analysis of slots with the keywords and its correlation with TDI components.

Sub frame	Keyword	Destination Image components and their representation in online travel reviews							
		Attribute-based	Holistic	Functional	Psychological	Typical	Unique	Cognitive	Affective
Landscape	Mountains	145	23	173	63	7	70	61	36
Nature	Snow	69	7	125	30	4	54	23	44
Geography	Sheregesh	61	39	95	55	13	55	43	44
Spatial-temporal features	Place	6	29	17	20	1	19	10	26
	Day	30	1	50	8	38	0	26	4
Infrastructure	Trails	89	0	110	5	39	13	44	22
	Lifts	112	0	110	19	30	7	32	12
	Slopes	46	1	65	13	12	13	17	11
	Sector	54	0	42	2	2	0	16	4
Occupation	Ride	99	20	145	52	10	38	23	52

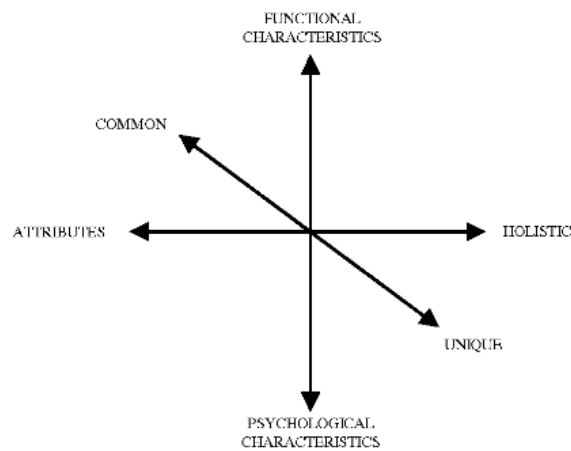


Figure 02. Destination Image Model. Source: Etchner and Ritchie (2003)

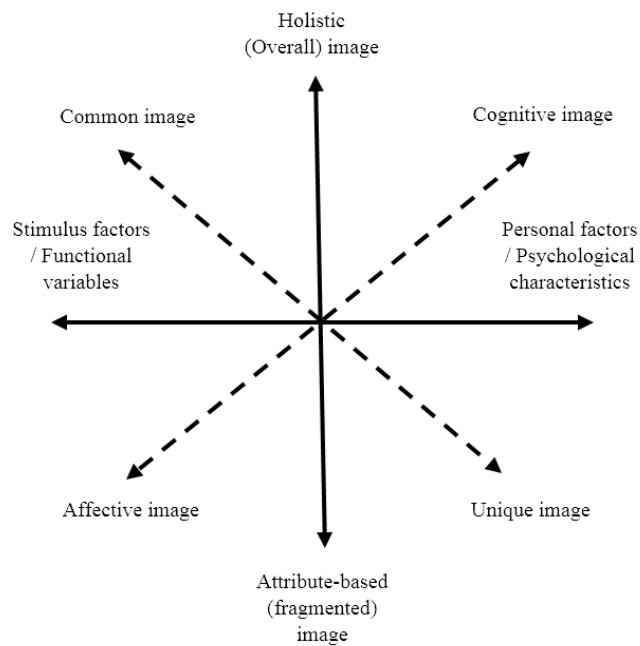


Figure 03. Destination Image Model expanded by the authors.

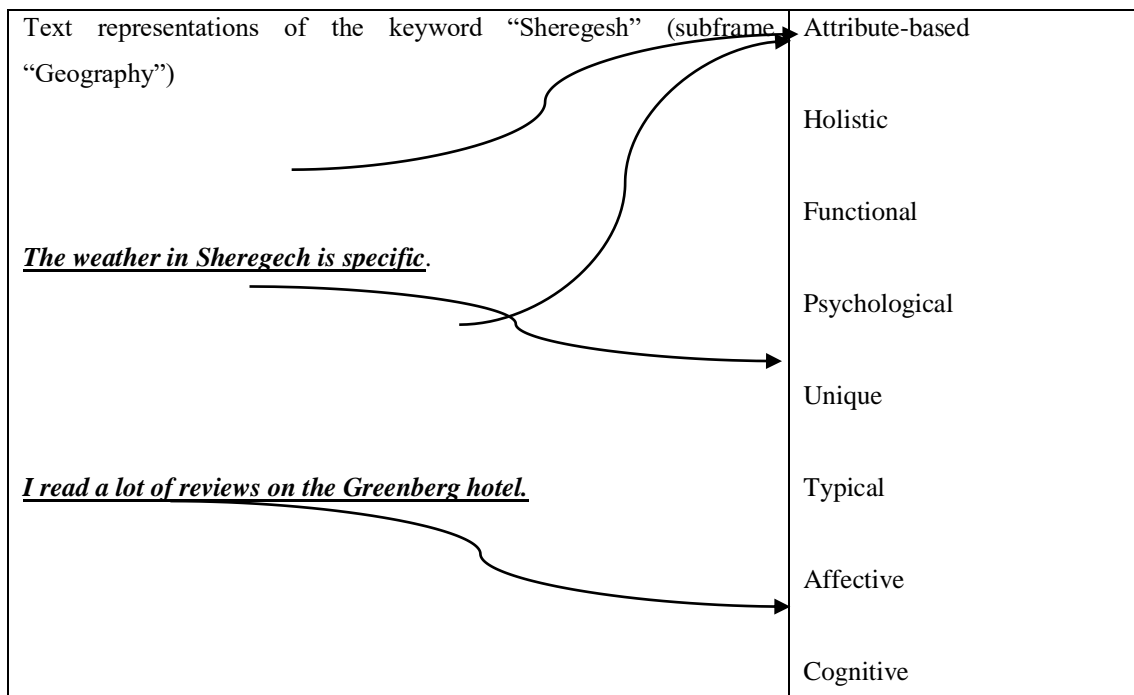


Figure 04. Destination Image components actualized in the reviews

7. Conclusion

Destination Image studies in Marketing and Tourism

The studies investigating the formation of Tourist Destination Image (TDI) promoted by Websites as well as printed advertising sources have been of great importance recently. In the earliest studies of TDI scholars identified three major segments in the formation of the concept of image: the organic, the induced and the modified induced image (Dann, 1996). The development of these ideas has led to an understanding

of TDI as necessarily divided into primary and secondary images. The information acquired through personal experience or visitation of the destination contributes to the formation of primary image. In contrast, secondary image is formed by organic, induced and autonomous information sources, to which the consumer is exposed (Beerli & Martin, 2004). Together with these observations, it was found that destination image is shaped by the images that are evoked by a place, and by the atmosphere and the attractions that the consumer expects from it (Etchner & Ritchie, 2003).

Importantly, tourist destination image is mostly seen as a “set of expectations and perceptions a prospective traveller has of a destination” (Gallarza, Gil, & Calderón, 2002, p. 17). The researchers discuss the dynamic nature of the concept, arguing that TDI refers to perceptions of tourists at a destination, corresponding to the perceived contribution of various services to be found there, such as for example accommodation, food or transport. Baloglu and McCleary (1999) proposed a model which takes into consideration: a) stimulus factors (functional variables, which can be directly observed and /or measured); b) personal factors, (psychological characteristics not directly observable). Additionally, the bipartite nature of the phenomenon presupposes that image is shaped by the consumers’ reasoned as well as emotional interpretation (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). To sum up, destinations are perceived in the form of stereotypes, which exist in human minds and form “tourists’ mental constructs” (Pagano, 2014).

A conceptualization of image encompassing all of these components is provided by Etchner and Ritchie (2003), who found that destination image research can be seen as a subset of the broader field of imagery research, which principally belongs to the field of psychology. In this perspective, a destination image should be perceived in terms of both individual attributes (e.g. climate, accommodation facilities) and holistic impressions (e.g. mental pictures or imagery of a destination) (Etchner & Ritchie, 2003). The scholars draw a model of TDI based on the standardized set of components: attribute-based vs holistic image, functional vs psychological image, typical vs unique image (Figure 01, Table 01).

According to the proposed model, the image of a travel destination (Figure 02, Table 02) is not only based on the perceptions and ratings of various functional (physical world objects, which have tangible nature) and psychological (personal perceptions, often intangible) attributes but also on the way a destination can be differentiated from the previous experiences of tourists, that is, the unique and common features of a place (Etchner & Ritchie, 2003).

In the 2017 study, Mak (2017) gives an overview of the previous image types, indicating that the final continuum, common-unique, highlights that DI can range from those perceptions based on common characteristics to those based on unique features or auras (Figure 03, Table 03).

Gartner (1993) further distinguishes three interrelated components: cognitive, affective and conative, assuming that cognitive component is an antecedent of the affective component, and the combination of these two components leads to an overall image of a destination (Mak, 2017). Furthermore, the measurement of destination image should reflect both cognitive and affective aspects (Byon & Zhang, 2010; Gartner, 1993; Mak, 2017).

In general, destination image is seen as an important component of tourism discourse marked with its intangible and heterogeneous nature (Holloway, 2004). However, the research line is characterised by its integrative nature, meaning that there are many different approaches to studying destination image (Gallarza et al., 2002).

Linguistic insights into the Destination Image

Texts are essential parts of most social events (Figueiredo & Pasquetti, 2016). However, for a few decades, destination image has been one of the dominant areas of tourism research (Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006). Until mid-nineties little has been done to settle a dialogue between scholars who primarily study discourse (language in particular) and communication, and those whose primary focus is tourism (Jaworski & Pritchard, 2005). As tourism discourse is an area of intense semiotic and symbolic production, discourse and communication are considered to be vital prisms through which we can examine tourism (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Therefore, interrelationship between tourism, discourse and communication offers a useful transdisciplinary techniques that help to explore the possibilities, tensions, conflicts and representations (Figure 04, Table 04), which characterize a globally observed phenomenon of tourist destination discourse (Hunter, 2016; Jaworski & Pritchard, 2005; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2011).

According to Dann (1996), tourist communication nonetheless is supposed to constitute a discourse of its own. Urry 1990 introduces the concept of “the tourist gaze” conceiving tourism as a bundle of discursively skilled practices of vision. In Held’s (2018) view, the focus has to be put on the various ways of language performance and how they are evidenced in tourist discourse.

Siberia’s Image studies in cognitive science

The concept of an image is seen as a mental construct and should be analysed within the methodology of cognitive sciences (Bolshakova, 2016; Sushnenkova, 2011). As far as Siberia territory image studies are concerned, much has been done in terms of language and cognition based research, namely the insight into the phenomenon of stereotyping in image formation (Bolshakova, 2016; Kondrat’eva, 2018; Orlova & Ivanova, 2014; Sushnenkova, 2011; Terskikh & Malenova, 2015a, 2015b). In the works, Terskikh and Malenova (2015a; 2015b) attempted to reconstruct the image of Siberia within the framework of cognitive analysis. The authors assumed that over a long time, the perceived image of Siberia was shaped by negative, ironic attitudes and descriptions captured at the times of Stalin’s Russia. By applying language-based approach to the study of regional image-making the authors argue that current perceived image of Siberia needs urgent reframing and more global dissemination (Terskikh & Malenova, 2015a; 2015b).

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