

Research Paper

## **An Insight into Stereotypical Images and Encountered Reality of South Asia as a Tourism Destination**

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**Abstract:** Destination image is a key determinant of visitation to any tourist attraction. Images can be formed as a result of continuous learning through knowledge resources, exposure to promotional media, or on account of personal experiences. National or regional destination identities are often constructed in the minds of people as holistic impressions that represent a stereotypical mental picture based upon image associations related to unique icons, people, socio cultural, geographic, economic, political, and legal environment of a place, among others. On one hand the images can be mere illusions or stereotypical representations and on the other, they may contain an element of genuine existing realities. In tourism, images are crucial as they evoke fascination, anxiety, fear, or mixed feelings about a destination and determine visitation intention. Taking the case of South Asia as a region that is registering a strong but gradual growth in tourism over the years, this paper explores the tenuous relationship between illusionary stereotypical images and encountered reality based perceptions of selected tourism destination countries within the region. The objective of the paper is to determine if the stereotypical images of countries are in congruence with the images reported by tourists as a result of their encountered reality at the destination. The exploratory study aims at gaining a better insight into the image of South Asia as a tourism destination and discusses implications for destination marketing organisations to construct images that transcend mere stereotypical symbolism.

**Keywords:** Destination image, stereotypes, South Asia

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## **Introduction**

Tourism has been registering phenomenal growth particularly in the Asia Pacific region. The international tourism statistics published by the United Nations World Tourism report that Asia Pacific was the best performing region with a positive 7% growth in 2012 (UNWTO, 2013). The statistics of Asia Pacific region report that the top ten arrival destinations of the region (in terms of international tourism arrival in millions) for 2011 were China (57.5), Malaysia (24.7), Hong Kong (23.3), Thailand (19.10), Macau (12.9), Singapore (10.3), South Korea (9.8), Indonesia (7.6) India (6.29) and Japan (6.2). These statistics indicate that from within South Asian region, only India figures among the top ten arrivals of Asia Pacific.

On the global scenario, while a country like Malaysia, from the South-east Asian region has entered the top ten ranking international tourist arrival countries, the countries of South Asia (particularly the countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, that is, SAARC region) namely, Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bhutan (excluding Afghanistan) capture only a mere percentage of the world's tourism market share despite having an abundance of geographical attractions, a treasure of ancient civilization, and captivating religious and cultural diversity. Within the Asia Pacific region, South-east Asia ranks top in tourist arrivals, followed by North East Asia and South Asia. Most South Asian countries, being developing nations, the associated image of being economically and socially backward often overshadows the magnetism of the captivating attractions therein and becomes responsible for the relatively lesser number of tourists to the region. In addition the much publicised and at times exaggerated media coverage of adverse happenings in the region also becomes responsible for creating negative images thereby increasing the apprehensions of the cautious tourist market about visiting the countries of the region. Hence if images can account for determining visitation, it becomes vital for marketers to gain an insight into the nature of destination image present in the minds of potential and actual tourist markets. This study aims to explore the stereotype and encountered reality image of the countries of the South Asian region and compares the two to determine if there is congruence between them. A deconstruction of these images, their origin, and an identification of the extent of myth or reality behind them can provide valuable clues for developing, modifying, managing and promoting an appropriate image that is instrumental in attracting tourists.

## **Destination Image**

Images are constructs or mental representations in the minds of people that offer clues for interpretation of people, objects, environment etc. while also giving rise to expectations thereby. Images can be positive (good), negative (bad) or obscure (not

clearly identified). In tourism, a destination with a positive image draws more tourists compared to a destination that suffers from a negative image. Hence the concept of destination image has attracted keen interest among tourism scholars and substantial research has been devoted to understanding the same (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999a; Beerli and Martin, 2004; Butler, 1990; Cohen, 1993; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Gartner, 1993; Jeong, Jun, Gibson & Holland, 2012; Kim & Richardson, 2003; Kotler & Gertner, 2004; Kotler, Haider & Rein, 1993; Lopes, 2011; Pike & Ryan, 2004; San Martin & Rodriguez, 2008; Tasci & Gartner, 2007. Although destination image has been described in a number of ways, no single definition of image has been unanimously accepted by tourism scholars.

From amongst the scholars, the explanation given by Crompton (1979) is widely cited. He describes destination image to be an assimilation of beliefs, ideas and impressions that people hold about a place. The formation of images is attributed to communication received by people through general information, promotional media, word of mouth through family and friends, and personal experiences that people have had. Describing formation of images, Gunn (1988) expresses that an image is formed at two levels, *Organic* and *Induced*. Organic image is formed prior to induced image. Non-commercial sources like educational books (that provide factual knowledge), independent news, media reports and unsolicited information from friends and family, all of which are uncontrolled, unbiased and autonomous agents (Gartner, 1993) contribute to the formation of the 'organic image' that is beyond the control of the destination area (Ahmed *et al.*, 2006). This image is also termed as the 'secondary image' and is considered to be an authentic reflection of existing reality. The organic image may be appealing or may not. The induced image takes the organic image as a base and is formed in addition to it. It results from controlled, biased promotional sources (like advertising material) that are consciously tailored to create a desirable projection of a destination. The idea behind induced image is to create an appealing picture. Besides these two levels of image formation, finally the resultant 'primary image' is formed actually after personal visitation and experience at a destination. This primary image is more complex as it is a combination of both organic and induced image. The secondary and primary images are also termed as *a priori* (before visit) and *posteriori* image (after visit) respectively. Discussing the significance of images, it is argued that an image is crucial for a destination as it determines visiting intentions (Gartner 1989), facilitates destination selection process (Ahmed 1991; Andreu, Bigne & Cooper, 2000; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999b; Chon, 1990, Gartner, 1993; Gunn, 1972; Milman & Pizam, 1995; Um & Crompton, 1990; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989; Zahra, 2012) and regulates tourist behaviour (Ashworth & Goodall, 1988). Destination image thus holds a lot of importance for destination marketing organisations in order to embark upon appropriate image creation and management.

## Country Images and Stereotypes

Though studies have attempted to investigate the difference between country and destination image (Campo & Alvarez, 2010; Mossberg & Kleppe, 2005; Nadeau, Heslop, O'Reilly & Luk, 2008), a country image is often equated with destination image and no clear distinction has been identified between the two. A country image is said to reflect an 'umbrella image' or 'collective identity' of a nation based on symbolic associations arising from organic attributes of the country like history, geography, people, society, idiosyncratic culture, political and economic situation and iconic attractions of a nation. It is argued that a country image often encompasses a destination image, if the destination is considered to be a particular tourism place within the country (e.g. if the overall image of a country is of underdevelopment, that image may overshadow the unique destination image of particular city within the country that on the contrary may be developed). Explaining a destination image, Um & Crompton (1990) similarly describe it as a 'gestalt' or 'holistic' construct (based upon the concept of perception in *Gestalt psychology* that views an entity as a complete form, with the 'whole' to be greater than the 'sum of its parts'). Hence the difference between the country and destination image remains unclear and needs to be understood by identifying what a destination is implying to, that is, a city, a region within a country or a broader region that includes a number of countries.

An image of destination can be created in the minds of tourists even if they have not actually visited a destination (Mayo, 1975) and these images provide a pre-taste of the destination to the potential tourists (Hunt, 1975). However, for tourists who have not travelled to a country, the organic images combined with induced promotion may often lead to the formation of an image in the form of a 'stereotypical identity' (Lawson & Bond-Bovy, 1977) that is an over simplified reality, not necessarily accurate and which may also be difficult to govern and manage (Kotler & Gertner, 2004; Rivas 2011). Such image identities are formed from a biased selection of impressions from among a number of impressions. Kotler & Gertner (2004) indicate that stereotypes images may be dated, based upon exceptions rather than patterns, and could develop from impressions rather than facts, but are nonetheless, pervasive. Stereotyped images of destinations (Nicoletta & Servidio, 2012; Chen *et al.*, 2012) remain the primary association for non-visitors and could have a strong bearing on determining visiting intentions. Stereotypes, though stemming from an account of incidental happenings or experiences in a particular spatial and temporal context, tend to be positively or negatively generalised and also become relatively permanent. However, pervasive or outdated stereotypes as pre-defined images may lead to a continuous biased perception making the image relatively stable over a period of time and may hinder the understanding of changing realities. But, whether positive or negative, stereotypes are able to trigger an element of curiosity, fascination or awe

about a destination (e.g. China-population, Japan-development, African countries-poverty, Paris-romance, United Kingdom-expensive, India-culture, etc.) that either attracts or tends to keep tourists away from visiting the country.

Studies have attempted to examine the image of a destination prevailing in the minds of visitors and non-visitors (Ahmed, 1991; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999b; Dann, 1996; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Pearce, 1982). An image may continue long after the factors that molded it have changed (Crompton & Lamb, 1986). Therefore in order to assess its truth, it needs to be assessed in light of existing reality of the destination. For marketing and promotion purposes, it should be an imperative for destination marketers to continuously monitor the validity of images which is important in explaining the interest or disinterest of the market and can provide better clues for image creation and management. Rightly, Kotler, Haider & Rein (1993) explain the importance of Strategic Image Management (SIM) that can be adopted as an ongoing process for researching current images of the country in the minds of the target audiences, monitoring changes in these images, and trying to influence them over time.

In an attempt to identify the image of South Asia as a tourism destination, this study attempts to examine if the stereotypical images of South Asian countries, in the minds of non-visitors are congruent or not with the encountered reality images reported by actual visitors to these destinations. With this objective, this exploratory study attempts to answer the following research questions (RQ).

RQ1: What are the stereotypical image associations with respect to encountered reality images of countries in South Asia?

RQ2: What is the overall image of South Asia as a tourism destination?

## **Methods**

As suggested by Boivin (1986), images can be measured through unstructured methods which use 'free descriptions elicited through respondents' instead of taking any pre-defined researcher identified attributes at the onset of the study. As suggested by Echtner & Ritchie (2003) that qualitative methods are conducive to measuring the holistic image components that can capture unique features, this study also made use of a qualitative approach, to identify two sets of images i.e. 'Stereotypical Images' and 'Encountered Reality Images' of selected tourism destination countries within South Asia. The approach of 'free elicitation' (Reilly, 1990) in combination with content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980; 2004) of textual data of responses that led to identification of 'themes' conveying impressions, emotional thoughts and associations related to a place, was used to identify the dominant stereotype and encountered images of each country.

## Sample

Two sets of respondents were used for the study to compare the Stereotypical Image and Encountered Reality Image, respectively.

### *Sample 1*

To study Stereotypical Image: Students studying at H.P. University, Shimla, India were taken as a non-visitor sample. All the respondents were Indian students who had not travelled to any other country of the South Asian region. In a classroom setting the respondents were asked one open ended question each, for each country (E.g. “What three images or characteristics come into your mind if I say Bangladesh?” “India?” etc.). The respondents were asked to note down their responses on a sheet of paper mentioning the first three images that came into their mind at the mention of each country in order to identify spontaneous stereotypical country associations.

### *Sample 2*

To study the Perceived Reality Image: The researcher was looking for particular views of actual tourists post visit to the countries in the study. Therefore, the travel community website *virtualtorust.com* was chosen as it provides comprehensive user contributed information in the form of post visitation comments/feedback on each county. The visitor posted comments were taken as a sample to gauge the encountered reality image. (Though the researcher came across other top travel websites such as *lonelyplanet.com* and *tripadvisor.com*, these websites were more promotional in nature, not dealing with visitor feedback and hence were not used as the sample for the study). From *Virtualtourist.com*, only the comments describing the country ‘In a Nutshell’ were taken. The aim of the researcher was to study 100 posted comments for each country. However it was noted that for the destinations of Bangladesh, Bhutan and Pakistan, the comments posted were remarkably less (than 100) hence only the available number of posted comments (n) provided data for the same.

## Analysis

Using both samples, the ‘most frequently mentioned word/s’ describing each country were extracted from the responses and noted down by the researcher to identify and compare the stereotypical image with encountered reality image. The words (noun, verb or descriptors) mentioned at a frequency of 10 times or more in the overall image association/comments for each destination were identified as the prime stereotype and encountered reality images for each country. Thereafter, the comparative tabulation of the same for each country, helped to investigate the congruency, if any,

between the two kinds of images. To substantiate the interpretation and discussion of results, the methodology also involved browsing through the introductory information of each country provided on the popular informational travel website Lonely Planet (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com>).

## Findings and Discussion

The findings of stereotypical and encountered reality images are comparatively highlighted and elaborated independently for each country in the ensuing discussion.

### Bangladesh

#### *Stereotype Images*

It is noted from the findings that when asked about Bangladesh, only two dominant stereotype images are reported by non-visitors that is, 'misery' (f-19) and 'population' (f-13). These images are primarily a result of negative publicity reported by the media. It holds true that Bangladesh has not been well promoted as a tourism destination and the little knowledge that non-visitors have about the country is restricted to what they have heard through media reports, especially coverage of disasters, natural calamities, poverty and human misery. Like any other Asian country, Bangladesh too has an image of a heavily populated country, coupled with the publicised negative media image of internal strife between factions of people and frequently occurring disasters. Even the website Lonely Planet mentions that the country is usually presented to the global community as a 'basket case of disasters.' Besides, the website mentions, that the country can be 'quite confronting and is usually dismissed as a no hope destination,' which is why she does not appeal to significant tourist markets.

**Table 1.** Stereotype *vis-a-vis* encountered reality images of Bangladesh

Stereotype image (n=100)		Encountered reality image (n=36)*		Description
Theme	f	Theme	f	
Misery ↓	19	Population ↓	22	Traffic, noise, crowded
Population ↓	13	Poverty ↓	20	Beggars
		Dirt and pollution ↓	20	Not clean, pollution,
		People	11	Warm, natural, hospitable

*Note:* ↓ indicates a negative image; \* only 36 comments were reported on *virtualltourist* website for the country; f=frequency of mention of word.

### *Encountered Reality Images*

The total comments reported on *virtualltourist.com* about Bangladesh were only 42 (n=42). This perhaps indicates that relatively few people dared to travel to Bangladesh as tourists compared to other neighboring South Asian countries that are comparatively more appealing. Tourists themselves have acknowledged in their comments that there are '*hardly any tourists*.' With respect to the perceived reality images, '*population*' is the prime image reported by actual tourists (f-22) as well. Tourists are taken aback by the sea of population in the country. Next to this, is the disturbing reality of '*poverty*' (f-20). The '*dirt and pollution*' (f-20) is another experienced reality that has left negative impressions on the minds of tourists who have been there. Hence for the few tourists who have ventured into this less attractive destination, the top reported images are dominantly negative. As rightly mentioned in one comment, the country is '*not everybody's cup of tea*.' Another problem experienced by tourists is that '*English is not commonly spoken*' which is also associated with the backwardness of the country. However, despite the perturbing negative realities, an interesting positive image identified by tourists, is of the *people* (f-11) of the country who have been mentioned in several comments as '*very warm*', '*hospitable*' and '*natural*'. It may be understood that people living in poverty are most unpretentious and accommodating of guests. Most negative realities reported indicate that this developing country is still at a stage of struggling with her problems and has neither geared up for tourism nor promoted it, despite having some major attractive tourism resources like Sunderbans, Cox's bazaar, beaches and wildlife. Holistic encountered reality impression of the country as reflected in comments of visitors states that this country '*set back in time*', though '*challenging*', is '*interesting*' and for '*real adventure*'.

## **Bhutan**

### *Stereotype Images*

It is noted for Bhutan too, that non visitors do not have much information, awareness or any defined image of the country as free elicitation has not generated many responses. The stereotype associations with Bhutan are of the country's '*scenic beauty*' (f-14) and of dominance of '*Buddhism*' alone (f-11). As also mentioned in the information on the website of Lonely Planet, the country is primarily identified with '*pristine scenic beauty*', '*monasteries*' and '*Buddhist Lamas*'. Among the South Asian nations, this country does not seem to be aggressively promoted for tourism. The reason is justified as the government is careful about keeping mass tourism at bay to protect the culture and rich environment. This is one country that values 'Gross National Happiness' (GNH) above Gross Domestic Product and is not aiming at pure economic returns through blind tourism development for profit. Access to the country is limited to only 'high

**Table 2.** Stereotypes *vis-a-vis* encountered reality images of Bhutan

Stereotype image (n=100)		Encountered reality image (n=45)*		Description
Theme	f	Theme	f	
Scenic beauty	14	Scenic beauty	20	Pristine, scenic, beautiful, original, unspoilt, pure, untouched Himalayas
Buddhism	11	Culture	16	Deeply Buddhist, undiluted, blend of traditional and modern
		Peaceful	14	Peace, safety, silence, few tourists
		Expensive ↓	12	Expensive, price

Note: ↓ indicates a negative image; \* only 45 comments were reported on *virtualltourist* website for the country; f=frequency of mention of word.

end' tourists who are charged a minimum of USD 200 per day, making it a rather expensive destination for mass/budget tourists. The day rate set by the government is aimed at preserving the culture and quality environment of the place. However, along with maintaining an authentic environment, the country still offers an ideal blend of '*tradition with modernity*'. Stated by Lonely Planet '*Bhutan is straddling the ancient and modern world and these days you'll find monks transcribing ancient Buddhist texts into computers as traditionally dressed noblemen chat on their mobile phones.*'

#### *Encountered Reality Images*

It is noted in the findings that Bhutan does not have many comments mentioned on *virtualltourist.com* (n=45). This indicates that the country has not been visited by a large number of tourists. For tourists who have been there, the encountered reality is of '*unspoilt*' and '*untouched*', well preserved '*scenic beauty*' (f=20). The '*undiluted*' traditional culture (f=16) of the deeply Buddhist land has also left a mark on the minds of tourists as it rightly resonates in the remarks describing the country as '*not westernized*', with '*no McDonalds, Walmart or Hard Rock Café*', and as '*one of the most original places in the world*' with '*well kept tradition and dignity*'. Besides, tourists have also found Bhutan to be a '*peaceful*' (f=14) destination that is very '*safe*' for tourists. It is true that any negative news about the country is virtually unheard of. However, the only negative image of some tourists have of the country is that it is an '*expensive*' destination (f=12) and that it is not for '*low budget travelers*'. This reality is confirmed by the fact that the government charges a minimum per day rate in USD. Regardless, a comment mentions that if anyone travels to Bhutan, it is '*worth every penny that one must pay to visit*'. Hence in nutshell, the image of Bhutan is that of an '*enigmatic country*' and a '*remote land that warrants exploration!*'

## India

### *Stereotype Images*

The most striking and dominant image association of India is of *'history and culture'* (f-56). People identify India with a landmass that embraces an amazing diversity of cultures, history, religions and attractions. Visitors or non-visitors, everyone associates the country with a *'rich history'* and *'architecture'*. People seem to be well aware of the iconic attraction of *'Taj Mahal'* with the image of the monument flashed in all promotions of the country. The other stereotypical image of India is of a country that has great *'food'* (f-45) with a wide *'variety'*. This indicates India offers great gastronomical delights. However, even Indian respondents acknowledge and report that the negative stereotype related to India is of *'dirt and pollution'* (f-44). Word of mouth experiences shared with others, and images captured in visual media seem to have been instrumental in building this negative stereotypical image of *'traffic, smog, filth and animals on streets'* country.

### *Encountered Reality Images*

The top perceived reality image reported about India is of *'history/culture'* (f-78) congruent with the dominant stereotypical image. It is definitely the fascination of deep rooted civilisations, history, composite cultures and religions that attracts tourists to India. Comments state that India provides a *'vibrant', 'pulsating'* ambiance that sparks a *'soul stirring'* feeling and the country is the land where there is *'never a dull moment'*. The country is reported to be so captivating that it gives the feeling that *'you are travelling through National Geographic.'* In addition, another positive image reported by visitors is of the *'scenic beauty'* (f-46) that the country abounds in and it is rightly said that the country has *'too much to offer'* being a *'universe in itself'*, abounding with a treasure of

**Table 3.** Stereotypevis a vis encountered reality images of India

Stereotype image (n=100)		Encountered reality image (n=100)		Description
Theme	f	Theme	f	
History/Culture	56	History/Culture	78	Diverse, pulsating, Taj, architecture, temples, colorful, vibrant
Food	45	Scenic beauty	46	Exotic, fascinating, diverse
Dirt/Pollution ↓	44	Food	42	Variety, curries, spicy
		Dirt/Pollution ↓	42	Not clean, pollution
		Poverty ↓	40	Beggars, touts

Note: ↓ indicates a negative image; f=frequency of mention of word.

natural attractions of mountains, meadows, forests, deserts and coastline beaches. In addition to this, is the amazing variety of flora and fauna found in different parts of the country. 'Food' (f-42) too is reported in several comments as a unique identity of the country. Tourists love the 'variety' of Indian cuisine. Among the negative realities that tourists have realised in India are 'dirt and pollution' (f-42) and 'poverty' (f-40). Tourists who have been to India find the dirt, pollution and poverty of this populated nation very confronting and unsettling. Tourists report to be 'chased by beggars' everywhere. Lack of cleanliness and particularly 'no hygiene' has been found very disturbing too. The country is referred to as 'challenging' and a 'difficult' destination that requires 'tolerance and patience' and it is rightly advised by one visitor to 'go with an open mind'. But in essence, India has too much to offer (both good and bad). As a comment states, India is 'more than beaches and elephants, more than just curries and sacred cows'. The tourists who have been to India mention that they have had an 'unparalleled' travel experience here, 'an experience that will change you'. India is definitely a country that 'has character, you may not like it, but you cannot deny'. A nutshell comment that ideally describes the country states that India is 'like an old lamp that looks dirty, but rub it and it shines!'

## Maldives

### *Stereotype Images*

The results show that Maldives does not have any particular stereotypical image other than of 'scenic beauty' (f-24) of the island country. Most respondents do not seem to have much knowledge about the country. This probably also accounts for the fact that media has promoted the island only as a pure leisure destination, particularly for

**Table 4.** Stereotype *vis-a-vis* encountered reality images of Maldives

Stereotype image (n=100)		Encountered reality image (n=100)		Description
Theme	f	Theme	f	
Scenic beauty	24	Scenic beauty	35	Paradise island, picture perfect, stunningly beautiful, turquoise waters, marine life
		Beaches	35	Gorgeous, pristine, empty, blue ocean, clean, sunshine, snorkeling
		Peaceful	29	Tranquil, remote, quite, secluded, no noise
		Boring ↓	13	Not much to do, boring
		Expensive ↓	13	Expensive paradise

Note: ↓ indicates a negative image; f=frequency of mention of word.

honeymooners. The scenic beauty in the minds of non-visitors is visualised through clear ocean waters, beaches, palms and sunshine. Even *Lonely Planet* promotes the ‘blue waters’ and ‘coral reefs’ attractions through images of the same.

### *Encountered Reality Images*

The results indicate that for tourists who have been to Maldives, the stunning ‘*scenic beauty*’ (f-35) of the not much explored beautiful island regarded to be the ‘*last remaining paradise on earth*’ is the most significant image that is congruent with the stereotypical image. This is reflected through a comment that says that the island is ‘*a real paradise for beach lovers, snorkelers and divers*’. The pristine ‘*beaches*’ (f-35) that offer ‘*clear waters*’, ‘*sunshine*’ and the ‘*best snorkeling*’ opportunities are another reality experienced by tourists. The country is also regarded as a ‘*peaceful*’ (f-29) destination for people seeking pure relaxation and seclusion, especially as mentioned, ‘*if you want to do nothing in the sun, the place is for you*’. However the peaceful environment can get ‘*too quiet*’ as there is lack of other entertainment opportunities and activities. Remarks state that the island can get ‘*boring for long*’, as it is ‘*lacking variety*’. It seems that the country is capitalising on her scenic attractions alone and not putting in much efforts to develop some alternative activities for tourists to keep them engaged. On a negative tone, tourists have mentioned Maldives to be an ‘*expensive*’ (f-13) destination. As mentioned in one comment, ‘*you need to get a loan from your bank*’. Yet the country is ‘*expensive but worth it!*’

## **Nepal**

### *Stereotype Images*

Considered as an ideal Himalayan destination, the main stereotypical identity of Nepal is of the iconic attraction of ‘*Mt. Everest*’ mentioned with the highest frequency (67). It

**Table 5.** Stereotype *vis a vis* encountered reality images of Nepal

Stereotype image (n=100)		Encountered reality image (n=100)		Description
Theme	f	Theme	f	
Mt Everest	67	Himalayas	43	Mt. Everest, majestic, best trekking, ‘some’ mountains
Scenic beauty	46	Scenic beauty	32	Breathtaking, stunning landscapes, architecture
Maoists ↓	10	People	22	Warm, friendly, generous, authentic, amazing, wonderful

*Note:* ↓ indicates a negative image; f-frequency of mention of word.

is realised that everyone, even not having been to Nepal, knows that the country is the home to the tallest peak of the world. Ranking as the second stereotypical identity that people associate the country with is ‘*scenic beauty*’ (f-32). The third mentioned stereotypical image, though by a small number, (f-10) is of the negative association of ‘*Maoist*’ rebels and internal political instability, perhaps on account of the adverse media coverage during troubled times of the country.

### *Encountered Reality Images*

For tourists who have been to Nepal, the prime image of the country is of the ‘*Himalayas*’ (f-43) and of ‘*Mt Everest*’, an image congruent with the top stereotype identity. The mountains are one of the main motivations for people to visit. The ‘*scenic beauty*’ (f-32) comprising ‘*stunning landscapes*’ and unique Nepalese ‘*architecture*’ too have left impressionable images in the minds of actual tourists. It is interesting to note that the ‘*people*’ (f-22) of Nepal have also struck a very positive image in the minds of actual tourists. The people are described as ‘*warm*’, ‘*friendly*’ and ‘*generous*’. Usually mountain people are regarded as very simple and friendly. It is even mentioned that the country is the ‘*land of myth, culture and mountain trails*’. In a nutshell, a comment remarks Nepal to be a land of ‘*more than just the Himalayas*’. Allaying the safety concerns of prospective tourists, one comment states ‘*don’t be put off by the Maoists, they are not targeting tourists*’. Ideally summarised in a few words by a tourist, Nepal is ‘*a great introduction to Asia for the first timers*’.

## **Pakistan**

### *Stereotype Images*

Pakistan has not been able to carve out a tourism destination identity in South Asia. Also acknowledged by *Lonely Planet*, despite the country’s resources, ‘*tourism in Pakistan has always been a hard sell task*’. She is projected and understood by non-visitors as a ‘*country living in difficult times*’ and surrounded by tough neighbours like Afghanistan and India. It seems that not many tourists are attracted to Pakistan. For non-visitors, the images formed of the country are largely a result of negative media coverage. Because of the existing reality of long standing internal political instability in the country, and association with extreme ‘*Islamic fundamentalism*’, people have easily come to associate ‘*terrorism*’ (f-47) with Pakistan as a prime identity. *Lonely Planet* mentions, ‘*every time the country seems to be gearing up to refresh the palates of travellers jaded with last year’s hip destination, world media headlines send things off the rails – again*’. Others who do not have much knowledge of the country tend to associate ‘*poverty*’ (f-16) with this developing South Asian nation. The ‘*food*’ (f-15) of Pakistan, particularly ‘*non vegetarian*’ holds a positive stereotype image for non-visitors.

**Table 6.** Stereotype *vis-a-vis* encountered reality images of Pakistan

Stereotype images (n=100)		Encountered reality image (n=48)*		Description
Theme	f	Theme	f	
Terrorism ↓	47	People	33	Friendly, hospitable, fascinating, helpful, wonderful, welcoming
Poverty ↓	16	Mountains	31	Stunning. Picturesque, one of the highest mountains
Food	15	History	24	Civilization, archaeology, heritage
		Scenic beauty	22	Amazing, landscapes. picturesque
		Conservative ↓	15	Male dominated, no beer
		Dirt and pollution ↓	14	Traffic, pollution, dirty

Note: ↓ indicates a negative image; \* only 48 comments were reported on the *virtualtourist* website for the country; f-frequency of mention of word.

### *Encountered Reality Images*

Not many comments are reported about Pakistan on *virtualtourist.com*, probably signifying that people usually shy away from visiting the country. However, from the limited comments it is surprisingly apparent that the few tourists who have travelled to the country, seem to have had a very good experience with the local population of the country. The ‘*people*’ of Pakistan are the prime image (f-64) and have been referred to as ‘*amazing*’, ‘*nice*’ and ‘*some of the most friendly and hospitable people on the earth*’. The second reality based image is of ‘*mountains*’ (f-31) of the country. The country is described as the ‘*home to the second highest mountain peak in the world, Mt. K2*’. As rightly mentioned by one tourist, the world seems to be oblivious that ‘*all good trekking is not just in Nepal*’ and that Pakistan too has great trekking routes. The history of the country has captivated the tourists as well, as Pakistan is the home to the Indus Valley Civilization, archeological ruins of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa and has a treasure of monuments relating to Mughal times. The country also leaves impressions of amazing ‘*picturesque*’ ‘*scenic beauty*’ (f-22). One of the negative realities experienced by actual tourists is that Pakistan is mentioned as ‘*conservative*’, (f-15) particularly ‘*male dominated*’ and ‘*rigidly Islamic*’. In Pakistan, according to one comment, ‘*women may find it hard going*’ and the country may be ‘*difficult for single females*’. It is also mentioned by one tourist that ‘*some areas are not culturally open*’. Another negative reality encountered by visitors is that of ‘*dirt and pollution*’ (f-14) which is common to most South Asian nations. The nutshell comments by real visitors mention statements like ‘*it is a destination for those who dare*’, is ‘*generally considered a dangerous place*’, but in reality is ‘*not too dangerous*’ as hyped by media. It is stated in an interesting remark by one tourist that the images of the country are

shaped by *'the western media's view of this country'*, perhaps confirming the truth that the western nations and media due to their own differences and sour relations with Pakistan have played a major role in projecting a biased negative image of the country around the globe. However an encouraging comment mentions *'look beyond the media image of Pakistan and you will find some of the world's most beautiful people and scenery'*. A daring tourist further comments for Pakistan, *'give it a chance you won't regret it'*. A remark states that *'a traveler will be particularly surprised at the touristic resources of the country'* and that the country is *'underestimated, underrated and undiscovered'*. Pakistan is indeed an *'eye opening'* country and *'is one of the world's best kept secrets!'*

## Sri Lanka

### *Stereotype Images*

Non-visitors do not have much knowledge of Sri Lanka besides identifying her with an *'island'* (f-15) destination. Very few responses have been elicited for image association with the country. Others have only mentioned *'cricket'* (f-10) as a prime association, acknowledging the famous Sri Lankan cricket team to be one of the fiercest in South Asia.

### *Encountered Reality Images*

Tourists who have been to Sri Lanka seem to be quite fascinated by this Asian destination. The topmost remarks by actual tourists have been on Sri Lankan *'people'* (f-42) being mentioned as *'friendly'*, *'welcoming'* and *'smiling'*. Appreciative remarks mention Sri Lankans as one of the *'nicest people you will ever come across'*, having *'best smiles'*, *'infectious smiles'* and the *'biggest smiles'*. Rightly remarked by a tourist who is humbled by the

**Table 7.** Stereotype *vis-a-vis* encountered reality images of Sri Lanka

Stereotype image (n=100)		Encountered reality image (n=100)		Description
Theme	f	Theme	f	
Island	15	People	42	Friendly, lovely, great, welcoming, smiles, English speaking
Cricket	10	Beaches	21	Beautiful, great, deserted, golden, exotic,
		Scenic beauty	20	Amazing, beautiful, tropical island, landscape, clean, tea plantations, animal life
		History	13	Architectural wonders, historical sites, cultural sites, ancient ruins, unending history

*Note:* ↓ indicates a negative image; f-frequency of mention of word.

warmth of the people, a comment reads, *'they all smile back at you, Amazing!'* It is noted that for foreign tourists Sri Lanka is a rather comfortable country to travel in because of the fact that *'English is widely spoken'* and tourists do not face any communication problems. A satisfied tourist happily remarks *'lots of English spoken'*. *'Beaches'* (f-21) are rated as another top identity of the country being described as *'deserted', 'beautiful'* and *'golden'*. The *'scenic beauty'* (f-20) of the country too has captured the interest of actual visitors through greenery, *'landscape', 'tea plantations'* and *'animal life'*. The country has further been appreciated for her rich (but lesser known) *'history'* (f-13), being the home to several UNESCO world heritage sites, ancient ruins and temples. In a nutshell, Sri Lanka is ideally described through comments as *'a country that has overcome colonisation, civil unrest and natural disasters', 'an untouched and remarkable jewel of the orient', and 'the pearl of the Indian ocean.'*

### **Overall Image of South Asia**

In essence, for both visitors and non-visitors, the identity of South Asia is dominated by several positive images of *'history, culture, scenic beauty, people and Asian hospitality'*. The negative image associations about the region can be summarised in the words of *'intimidating population, pollution, poverty, political instability, economic and social backwardness and safety concerns'*. The region has complacently and easily succumbed to these negative images rather than capitalising on its rich tourism resources and diversity to create a compelling attractive identity. Non-visitors particularly are oblivious to parts of South Asian countries that are developed and modernised and are at par with developed and progressive cities of the world. Though captivating, interesting and fascinating, the South Asian region is viewed as *'quite challenging'* by both actual and prospective tourists. The encountered reality confirms certain stereotypes, both positive and negative, but conveys a strong undertone that regardless of the drawbacks that the destination countries in the region suffer from, South Asia no doubt is unique in offering an unparalleled *'experience'* for tourists, who despite the negative images, have dared to travel to the region. Reality also confirms that South Asia largely remains *'unexplored'* because of the few negative stereotypes hyped by media that easily influence the views of people and overshadow the power of innumerable attractions that abound in the region. Perhaps this remains the major reason as to why South Asia receives the lowest number of tourists within the Asia Pacific region compared to South East and Northeast Asia.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This study has investigated the image of South Asia as a tourism destination through an assessment of the stereotypical and encountered reality images of the South Asian nations as perceived by non-visitors and visitors, respectively. From the study it is

found that South Asian nations share a unique identity being associated with culture, history, poverty, chaos, dirt and pollution. The countries of the region are also recognised under the banner of 'developing nations' which limits the ability of the region to attract a good share of tourists from the international tourism generating market. Though the countries of the region embarked upon promotional campaigns in the past like coining the tagline "Magic that is South Asia" and even having declared "South Asia Tourism Year" in 2005, such efforts have not yielded positive results in terms of increasing international tourism arrivals significantly. This suggests that a lot is still desired of the countries to build a strong appealing image.

Hunt (1975) supports the view that a tourist as a decision maker acts upon his images, beliefs, and perceptions of the destination, rather than his objective reality of it. Fakeye & Crompton (1991) have also emphasised the importance of images, suggesting that images have the power to change and rearrange the tourists' impressions and perceptions of a destination and also give people a 'pre-taste of the destination.' (p. 10). In light of this, it is suggested that in order to promote the region as an attractive destination, the marketers of the South Asian nations need to continuously monitor, assess, and if need be, reinvent their destination image. As stereotypical imagery held over the years may overshadow understanding of changed or existing realities, outdated images (that often become stereotypes) need to be continuously dealt with by the marketers and promoters. From the perspective of image management and destination marketing, this research also establishes that an insight and understanding of images held both by 'non-visitors' and 'visitors' is crucial for developing successful marketing strategies. It is also an important and challenging task for marketers to create images that are believable and based on reality (Kotler & Gertner, 2004), even though some may be disturbing.

The researchers acknowledge that due to time and geographical limitations, only available Indian respondents were taken as sample for assessing the stereotype image. Such stereotypes images could be studied by sampling other countries too. In studying the encountered reality image, although *virtualtourist.com* provided the ideal required data, the origin country of the respondents was not mentioned in the comment postings. Thus, origin had to be neutralised taking the perceived reality through comments of 'tourists who had visited the country (regardless of the origin)'. The knowledge of origin of respondents could be valuable in future studies for assessing biases in image perception. As computerised content analysis was not performed, human errors may have arisen in the frequency analysis of textual data which further adds to the limitation of this study.

However, the results of this study can be valuable for the tourism marketers from the particular countries to gain an in-depth understanding of the destination image from the perspective of actual and potential tourists and thereby devise strategies for future image management. As images are not static, for future research it is suggested

that such similar studies with larger samples should be conducted repeatedly from time to time to gain a better insight into country images that can provide clues to marketers for identifying the need to continuously mould images in accordance with changing realities at the destination.

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