



Research note

Multisensory image as a component of destination image

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ABSTRACT

Destination image involves the use of all five senses: vision, sound, smell, taste and touch. This research note applies the literature on sensory inputs to the concept of ancient towns, in a case study of Phoenix, Hunan Province, China. The results from 16 depth-interviews with tourists illustrate the five senses' importance in tourism. Tourists noted all five senses, with visual image receiving the most attention and tactile image the least. The results support the existence and significance of a 'multisensory image'. The results contribute to the nascent 'sensory' literature and research into the appeals of an 'ancient town', while adding implications for destination management.

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1. Introduction

Destination image, integral to destination positioning, has been popular since the 1970s and continues to grow as a body of literature (Son & Pearce, 2005). Yet after four decades, research is inconclusive on the components of destination image construct. Most studies view destination image as a tri-construct of cognitive, affective and conative images (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Pike & Ryan, 2004; Vaughan, 2007).

In 2005, Son and Pearce proposed adding multisensory image to the destination image construct, subsequently supported by Huang and Gross in 2010. Both studies used qualitative methods to focus on Australia's multisensory images. The two studies agreed that, for instance, Australia's top three visual images were the kangaroo, Sydney Opera House and koala, respectively. Touching native Australian animals, followed by sand and trees were the most memorable tactile images.

Multisensory image – individual destination insights based on representations of vision, sound, smell, taste and touch (Son & Pearce, 2005) – forms through tourists' storage and interpretation of sensory stimulations of the destination. Research argues that multisensory image increases the understanding and knowledge of a destination (cognitive image), affects tourists' inner feelings and emotions (affective image), and later, influences their travel intentions (conative image) (Agapito, Mendes, & Valle, 2013).

The two Australian studies support multisensory image's significance in destination image (Huang & Gross, 2010; Son & Pearce,

2005). Yet compared to the traditional three constructs, multisensory image receives little attention. To the authors' knowledge, no research extends multisensory image to other regions. Furthermore, most destination image research focuses on large-scale European–American destinations, countries, states and cities (Pike, 2002), supporting the need for destination image research of small-scale destinations in Asia and developing countries.

This century, Chinese tourists are increasing their attention to heritage towns, also known as ancient towns (Zeng, 2010). Yet with more than 200 towns, China's ancient towns suffer from product homogenisation, over-commercialisation, and environmental deterioration due to rapid tourism development (Zeng, 2010). Hence, creating and marketing a unique, recognizable and sustainable destination image that increases an ancient town's awareness and reputation is vital (Wang, 2010; Yuan, 2010). Ancient town research, however, tends to focus on conservation and sustainable development, with little attention to destination image (Lv & Huang, 2012).

To help address the above research gaps, this research note applies the multisensory image concept to Phoenix, a 450-year-old ancient town in China's Hunan province. Based on in-depth interviews with 16 tourists in Phoenix, this study will a) identify the multisensory image of Phoenix based on vision, sound, smell, taste and touch and b) verify the importance of multisensory image.

This research note extends the limited discussion of multisensory image in four ways. First, it illustrates and elaborates the importance of the five sensory elements: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile. Second, the study extends the limited multisensory image literature by identifying and describing the multisensory items for an ancient town. Third, this is the first study to apply multisensory image in an Eastern and under-developed environment. Finally, this study

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Table 1
Multisensory images of Phoenix.

Sense	Images	Frequency	
Visual	Ancient architectural complex (Fig. 1)	15	
	Tuo River (Fig. 1)	15	
	Souvenir shops and booths (Fig. 2)	15	
	Bamboo boats (Fig. 1)	11	
	Neon lights at night (Fig. 3)	10	
	Washing clothes in Tuo River (Fig. 4)	10	
	Clubs and bars at night (Fig. 5)	10	
	Green mountains and river (Fig. 1)	9	
	Bridges (Fig. 6)	8	
	Auditory	Traditional folk songs	14
		Rip-roarious bars and pubs at night (Fig. 5)	14
Hubbub of voices from numerous tourists		12	
Tuo River flowing		11	
Sellers and tourists bargaining		10	
Knocking sound of washing clothes by wooden mallet (Fig. 4)		10	
Voluntary singers under the Tuo River bridge (Fig. 7)		7	
Gustatory	Local alcohols and wines (Fig. 8)	12	
	Hunan noodles (Fig. 9)	10	
	Mu Chui Su (local dessert)	10	
	Ginger candy (Fig. 10)	9	
	Kiwi	9	
	BBQ	8	
	Xu Ba Ya (cooked duck)	8	
Olfactory	Miao cured meat	6	
	Traditional snacks	10	
	Local cuisine	10	
	Fresh air	8	
	Local alcohols and wines (Fig. 8)	7	
	Evening BBQs	6	
	Unpleasant gutter odours	5	
Tactile	Water of Tuo River (Fig. 1)	14	
	Ancient wall (Fig. 11)	12	
	Ancient alley	10	
	Wind at night	9	
	Original Miao silver ornaments (Fig. 12)	8	



Fig. 2. Souvenir shops and booths.

concludes with research findings, implications, limitations and recommendations for future research.

suggests possible industry applications of multi-sensory image in today's competitive environment.

The note begins by introducing the theoretical background of destination image, and reviewing how the five senses enrich tourist experiences. After describing the research methodology, the note

2. Literature review

Destination image is “the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination” (Crompton, 1979, p.18). Destination image is multifaceted, typically with cognitive, affective and conative images



Fig. 1. Green mountains, Tuo River, bamboo boats, and ancient architectural complex.

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