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## Research Paper

## Let the journey begin (again): The branding of Myanmar

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## ABSTRACT

This paper tracks the history of destination marketing and branding in Myanmar, focusing on the challenges associated with changing a negative destination image. Through a theoretical lens based on image theory, the paper uses a case study approach to explore how a country such as Myanmar can alter a prolonged negative destination image. The analysis shows that although marketers in Myanmar are moving beyond a cosmetic approach to destination branding, the long-term strategies in place to improve Myanmar's image could be called into question. The country faces many challenges, including a lack of trained human resources, and insufficient public services and infrastructure for tourism, so the journey to rebrand Myanmar as a competitive tourism destination will be a long one.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2012–13, two countries at completely opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of economic development, poverty and population health, launched nationally coordinated branding campaigns for the first time in decades. One was the US, whose *Brand USA* campaign was a reaction to the 'Lost Decade' (Dow, 2011), when the country's share of international arrivals declined by 36%. The second was Myanmar, a country labeled by the US government ten years ago as 'an outpost of tyranny' (Barton, 2005, p. 11), but more recently experiencing a period of radical political reforms.

The fortunes of Myanmar's tourism have been tied to various manifestations of its politics. The instability of the military regime has been a deterrent to travel, and unattractive images of its leaders, associations of political repression, and arguments that tourism is partly responsible for human rights' abuses, have represented strong disincentives for tourists. The features and actions of Myanmar's government hindered tourism for decades, and prevented the country from realizing its potential as a popular tourism destination. Even though tourism marketing strategies of the past have focused on a picturesque and idyllic landscape, imbued with spirituality as a consequence of its Buddhist traditions, and inhabited by peaceful people whose traditional culture has been preserved, this image of a country at peace denied the harsh realities that underlie such representations, with Myanmar referred to at one point as the 'land of fear' (Pilger, 2009).

These days, however, the political landscape has changed, and there are signs that the underlying political tensions are being

resolved, with new policies put in place that should lead to improvements both in reality and in perception. This paper will track the history of destination marketing and branding in Myanmar, focusing on the challenges associated with changing those perceptions: from the 1990 Tourism Law that recognized tourism as a significant economic activity, to the ill-conceived and unpopular *Visit Myanmar Year* campaign of 1996, to the most recent *Let the Journey Begin* branding campaign. Through a theoretical lens based on image theory, the paper uses a case study approach to explore how a country such as Myanmar can alter a prolonged negative destination image.

## 2. Marketing and branding of conflict-ridden destinations

As the competition between destinations has increased, so too has destination branding emerged as one of the most powerful marketing weapons available to contemporary marketers (Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2002), and the topic has become one of the fastest growing in the destination marketing literature (Pike & Page, 2014). Yet, despite the increased attention, there has been a lack of consistency in defining what constitutes destination branding, both within industry and within academia (Pike & Page, 2014). While significant progress has been made in determining the attributes underlying destination branding such as brand personality (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006), image (Cai, 2002), and elements (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005), there is still considerable confusion between the definitions of each attribute. Similarly, there is a lack of consensus amongst academic experts and industry leaders as to how these attributes collaborate to form a true destination brand (Tasci & Kozak, 2006).

Following a thorough review of the destination marketing

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literature, Pike and Page (2014) suggest that the most comprehensive definition of destination branding to date has been that proposed by Blain et al. (2005, p. 337) who define destination branding as: 'the set of marketing activities (1) that support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that readily identifies and differentiates a destination; that (2) consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience; that (3) serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; and that (4) reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk. Collectively, these activities serve to create a destination image that positively influences consumer destination choice'.

This definition underscores the critical contribution of destination image to the formation of a destination brand (Michelson & Paadam, 2016). Image formation is defined as a construction of a mental representation of a destination on the basis of informational cues delivered by the image formation agents (Lee & Bai, 2016). These agents might be organic (word-of-mouth and actual visitation), induced (promotional materials) or autonomous (news articles, movies and pop-culture). Understanding the destination image is fundamental to managing a country as a brand, as the image captures consumers' attitudes toward the destination. Such attitudes commonly include both affective and cognitive components (Zeugner-Roth & Zabkar, 2015), with the affective part usually comprising evaluative judgments such as like/dislike or positive/negative.

While the concept of destination image has been widely discussed in the literature (Zhang, Fu, Cai, & Lu, 2014), there is a clear shortage of studies and theoretical models that focus on destinations suffering from long-term and continuous negative images (Avraham & Ketter, 2008, 2013; Gertner & Kotler, 2004). Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) in these destinations often face difficulties combating the prolonged negative stereotypes and prejudices associated with their destination. One can, however, draw on the mainstream marketing and business literature. In the last few decades, research focusing on the media's role during crisis situations and image restoration of companies or places, has led to a variety of models, definitions and concepts, including reputation management, recovery marketing, trust repair, situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and image restoration. Benoit (1995), for example, lists five communication strategies that can be used in response to a crisis: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of events, corrective action and mortification. Coombs (1999) recommends a similar response, although his list extends to seven strategies: attack the accuser, denial, excuse, justification, ingratiation, corrective action and full apology.

While destinations that have suffered from an immediate crisis can employ several of these strategies, those with a prolonged negative image cannot promise that they will change overnight, blame someone else or take responsibility for a problematic image created by various factors over the course of many years. Avraham and Ketter (2013), however, have proposed a theoretical model for such destinations based on the destination's willingness to either: (a) generate an in-depth change in the destination's reality, or (b) make a cosmetic change only, without changing the factors that caused the destination's negative image. The strategic versus cosmetic approach for altering prolonged negative destination images is illustrated in Fig. 1.

Strategies in the strategic approach are aligned according to the extend of change in the reality: hosting spotlight events, hosting events that spin liabilities into assets, tackling the problematic reality and branding contrary to stereotypes. Such an approach for DMOs involves many factors, including inclusion of residents, vision formation, strategy design, defining long- and short-term goals, enhancing local pride, employing research tools and target

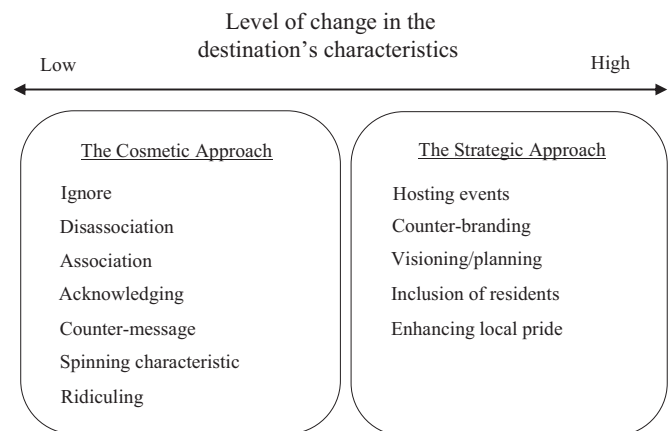


Fig. 1. The Strategic versus cosmetic approach for altering prolonged negative destination images (adapted from Avraham & Ketter, 2013).

audience analysis. Strategies within the cosmetic approach include ignoring the image crisis problem, disassociation from the problematic location, association with prestige locations, acknowledging a negative destination image, delivering a counter-message to the negative stereotype, spinning the negative characteristic to positive and ridiculing the stereotype. To create the continuum between the cosmetic versus the strategic approach, the authors define the two edges of the cosmetic approach. On the extreme end, there are campaigns that totally disregard the image problem; while on the moderate end (the one closer to the strategic approach), there are campaigns that acknowledge the negative image, confronting it directly.

The authors developed the model after studying several destinations with prolonged image problems, but they acknowledge that future research should test the model with more real life examples (Avraham & Ketter, 2013). Avraham (2015) has also suggested more recently that future research should concentrate on which marketing initiatives, public relations strategies and advertising campaigns actually work to restore a place's positive image following a crisis caused by the demands for social and political change. The strategic versus cosmetic approach for altering prolonged negative destination images is therefore used as a foundation for this case study.

### 3. Research design

As Wheeler, Frost, and Weiler (2011, p. 17) explain, a case study 'sits within an interpretative paradigm and thus employs a qualitative research methodology'. This involves data collection from secondary documents and participant interviews (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Firstly, to gain an understanding behind the structure of the case, secondary data was reviewed from various sources including media articles, marketing strategies, campaign materials, websites and social media channels. More specifically, data was extracted from these sources that related to the model presented above – i.e. Myanmar's willingness to either: (a) generate an in-depth change in the destination's reality, or (b) make a cosmetic change only. Data was content-analyzed and key aspects that demonstrated the application of these marketing practices from the literature were extracted.

Secondly, 15 participant interviews were conducted to gain a more holistic perspective of the case. The participants included destination marketers from Myanmar, key government officials, tour operators promoting tourism to Myanmar, professional guides on the ground, hotel managers, destination branding

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