The social construction of tourism online destination image: A comparative semiotic analysis of the visual representation of Seoul

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Seoul online destination image is explored using content and semiotic analysis.
- The online image is compared to the projected image found in print media.
- Online image is further investigated by comparing keyword image searches among Naver, Google and Baidu.
- Online, representations of the Seoul experience differ in certain ways between social-semiotic contexts.
- The online Seoul image is a social-semiotic construction rather than the marketers' projected image.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the destination image of Seoul as represented by photographs online, and compares it to the traditional projected image found in printed brochures and guidebooks by replicating a previous study. Using visual semiotics, the social construction of tourism online destination image is investigated in terms of denotative and connotative signs. Using language-specific keyword searches, 'Seoul travel' on Naver, Google and Baidu, three demographic perspectives were examined including Korean, international English speaking and, Chinese. It was found that these different online contexts represent Seoul in different ways. Naver represents Seoul in more detail; Google and Baidu represent a mix of other destinations with Seoul connoting differences in perception, or reflecting the constraints of individual or group travel. The major findings suggest that the organic online self-representation of individual travel experiences by travelers, makes tourism as a soft power more effective, by supplementing the projected image of Seoul.

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1. Introduction

Seoul, founded in 1394, is a deeply historical city that strongly relies on its structural heritage attractions for tourism destination image projection. Since the 1980's tourism policy has focused on the reconstruction and revision of city districts, waterways and monuments (Hunter, 2012) and more importantly, perhaps, in the hosting and promoting of mega-events. Synecdochical monuments include the Gyeongbok Palace Gwanghwamun Gate and the south city Namdaemun gate were completed in 1395 and 1398, respectively. The Han River and Cheonggye Stream are important physical representations of the city. And mega-events such as the 1988 Olympic Games, the 2002 World Cup, 2010 G20 Summit, and 2012 Yeosu Expo have contributed to transforming tourism into a major sector of the Korean economy and have worked to boost the image (reputation) of the country as a tourism destination (Choi, 2000).

Destination image theory continues to stand as one of the basic modes of inquiry in tourism research. In spite of claims that destination image is a 'nebulous concept' (Hughes & Allen, 2008), more might agree that it is, rather, a 'multidimensional concept' (Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002) that includes three constructs: 1) destination imagery or the whole touristic landscape; 2) the projected destination image or destination marketing campaigns; 3) and the perceived destination image or the combined effects of marketing and real destination experience on the visitor(s). In the context of expensive high quality promotional materials such as guidebooks and brochures in print form, the distinction between projection and perception is relatively clear as the expense of publishing such materials imparts a certain degree of authority on

the marketers' behalf. However in the increasingly dominant online destination image online, the distinction between marketers' intentions and the visitors' uses of social media to communicate or share their experiences breaks down. The purpose, therefore, of this paper is to replicate the methodology and compare Hunter's (2012) analysis of Seoul destination image (as projected through traditional print media) with the Seoul destination image as it appears in photographic representations, online.

Online tourism destination image is a more dynamic social construction than the traditional projected image found in print guidebooks and brochures. It is accumulative — or generative — as users continuously upload and share photographic representations of the destination and of their perceptions and experiences in relationship to it. Therefore, it requires a more critical ontological and empirical analysis to determine to what degree destination image theory is a fixed concept or an accumulative process. To accomplish this, the constructivist paradigm is employed to examine online Seoul destination image as an irreducible and accumulative reflection of dynamic social-semiotic systems. Further, this study employs constructivism to examine how destination image is a reflection of online sign systems and may vary dependent upon those systems as evidenced in the context of language, and search engine choice. In this sense, destination image is dependent upon its 'situatedness' (Hall, 2004).

Online, destination image is embedded in cultural semiotics to the point that representations of the destination work to virtually replace the destination itself. Working as visual cues, representations might guide users and audiences to the identity of Seoul and other globalizing cities and its various developmental and political agendas. Simultaneously, representations will also connote certain kinds of experiences and spaces without imposing any particular type of authority. Online, the destination image works as a form of soft power, inducing sympathetic sentiments and brand image 'trust'. Based on this premise, the purpose of this study is to explore the social construction of destination image by conducting an online semiotic analysis of the visual representation of Seoul. This study is also designed to compare the online destination image with the projected destination image of Seoul as found in print brochures and guidebooks as identified in a previous study (Hunter, 2012). The goals of the study, therefore, are as follows:

- To identify differences in perceptions between demographics via three search engines and three language keyword searches regarding the destination image of Seoul, Korea.
- To identify and compare the representation of touristic experiences of said three socio-cultural outlooks through connotative and denotative semiotic analysis.
- To compare online destination image with the projected image found in print brochures and guidebooks generated by government and highly empowered corporate interests by replicating a previous study's methodology and research context (Hunter, 2012).
- To identify the implications of the emergent and socially constructed realities of the online destination image in contrast to the marketers' traditional projections of Seoul as a tourist destination.

2. Literature review

2.1. Tourism destination image

Destination image is one of the most popular themes in tourism research but researchers still struggle with its most basic definition (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 2000). Instead, the theory has been

described by some researchers as a "nebulous concept" (Hughes & Allen, 2008, pp. 30). Other researchers have worked on identifying causal relationships between destination image and the visitor's experience (Pritchard & Morgan, 2001). Beyond the lack of consensus problem and the positivist-causality problem, there are researchers who have been working towards a more constructivist take on destination image theory. They recognize destination image as a dynamic and circular process of negotiation between promotion and experience (Gilbert & Hancock, 2006) or as messages circulating in a "hermeneutic circle" (Ryan, 2002, pp. 965).

Destination image, in this sense, has evolved into a multidimensional concept (Gallarza et al., 2002). Its dimensions include: 1) destination imagery or the real or potential topography of the touristic landscape (Wolcott, 1995); 2) the projected destination image or the purposive generation or packaging of verbal or visual representations for marketing or commentary (Pritchard & Morgan, 2001); 3) and the perceived destination image or the effects of individual or collective audiences' encounters with the destination (Hunter, 2012). It is difficult, however, to be fully satisfied with these dimensions when each is examined individually.

Destination imagery refers to a complete yet non-specific place that is potentially all things to all people. It includes any number of fragmented and generative versions of a destination. This understanding is both irreducible and unidentifiable in any real sense. Projected destination image is also problematic. As shown by Hunter (2012) it is unclear if destination marketers are not already influenced by their own perceptions when generating a projected image. It is also possible that the projected image might be connoting certain political and economic interests involved in the showcasing of development projects. The perceived image, then, seems to be nothing more than an artifact of projection. In other words, traditionally, the only quantifiable or identifiable version of the perceived image is the projected image as found in print media — and the accompanying guesswork and projections on how that might affect tourist motivations and behavior.

The constructivist view recognizes the benefits of working comparatively with the three dimensions of destination image theory for certain research purposes. This view opens up ways to work with multiple dimensions as a complexly confluent whole. Destination image in this sense, is recognized as a cumulative phenomenon rather than some final or total synecdochical representation that is perceived by the audience just as its projectors anticipated. Constructivism is used to investigate the convergence of perceived and projected destination image in relation to the destination's total panorama of imagery. In addition, constructivism represents the bricolage and time dependent evolution of a destination's 'brand image' in pace with political, economic, technological and resultant cultural developments.

2.2. Online image and cultural semiotics

In constructivism, the projection and perception of destination imagery are theoretically mingled. In no context is this more pronounced than online. The internet has completely changed the rules of cultural semiotics by transforming the representation of place and experience into hyperreal simulation. Baudrillard (1988) suggested that the discourse of advertisers and the analysis of consumption, like any other discourse, is accessible only to those within that professional circle. And by extension of this suggestion, the destination tourism marketer is disconnected from the needs and wants of her or his target market. Baudrillard (1988, pp. 16—17) further observed that via the internet, smart phones and mobile connectivity and, social media, the individual has been endowed with "telematic power" or, the ability to "regulate everything by