



Facing Difficulties that Affects Destination Image at Unrecognized Island, Case Study: North Cyprus

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Abstract

This article sheds light on the how unrecognized islands such as North Cyprus have managed to deal with factors that have affected their destination images. Although the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus is an unrecognized state facing embargos and restrictions, the county has been fighting to establish a clear brand identity in the tourism industry. The country has been earning considerable revenue from tourism as a result of the efforts to create casino tourism, education tourism, sex tourism, conference tourism, and sightseeing activities among other attractions. The sector contributes significantly to the economic development of the country and is a source of employment to a considerable population.

North Cyprus suffers challenges such as a relatively small internal market, limited resource capacity, and political and economic isolation. The country has a small economy with restrictions on transport and communication system. All these challenges have hindered the country from reaping the full potential of its tourism sector. Despite these challenges, the government has tried to enforce strategies that have enhanced the marketability of North Cyprus as a competitive tourist destination. This study highlights the underlying potential of North Cyprus and how the endogenous and exogenous factors have hindered its potential.

Keywords: Destination image; Economic isolation; North Cyprus; Political isolation; Unrecognized Island.

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1. Introduction

The tourism sector is one of the most vulnerable industries. The sector is susceptible to countless risks including climate change, natural disasters, terrorism, health scares, and political instability. The industry also suffers unpredictable variations in the flight schedules, violence, and economic crises in the tourist destinations. All these factors among others influence tourists' perception of the destinations. Terrorism and insecurity rank the highest among the factors that affect tourism negatively. In 2004, the World Transportation Union conducted research that established that 15 percent of the tourists expressed concerns over the security of some tourist destinations. The September 11 incident in the U.S. was turning point for many travelers; as a result, the percentage of worried tourists has escalated today. Unknown islands such as North Cyprus have witnessed political, cultural, and social turbulences that affect the image of such destinations.

Although the Island of Cyprus became independent in 1960, the country has faced a myriad of difficulties [1]. Because of its small size, Cyprus faces difficulties such as resource scarcity, a small domestic market, and challenges in establishing and running businesses [2]. This article discusses how unrecognized islands such as North Cyprus experienced challenges that affected their destination images. The paper provides an analytic literature review that highlights the difficulties that have affected their Islands' abilities to attract visitors. The key areas for discussion include destination image regarding sex, casino, conference, sightseeing, historical places, and ecotourism.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Tourism marketing in the Unknown Islands

Tourism marketing rides on a tight line of destination branding. According to [3], the discussion on Islands such as Mauritius, Norfolk, Barbados, and North Cyprus emphasizes the development of destination branding. The structural changes and global economic transitions make change inevitable in the tourism sector. Unknown islands such as Norfolk have been on the verge of enhancing their image and rebranding their services to gain competitiveness in the ever-changing global tourism market. There has been a paradigm shift in the branding of Norfolk from Norfolk Island to the World of Norfolk. Such measures have been deliberate efforts to create points of differentiation. Mauritius is no exception in the efforts to rebrand its destinations [3]. The decline in the number of visitors visiting Mauritius Island necessitated the need to focus on branding and repositioning the destination.

In Barbados, destination marketing has benefited from the favorable brand image in the market. Barbados enjoys a competitive brand image among its Caribbean neighbors, making it an attractive tourist destination. Studies on destination branding reveal that countries that have competitive brand images express a huge traffic of foreign tourists. Unlike the other three islands (Mauritius, Norfolk, and Barbados), North Cyprus has the strongest need for establishing a clear identity [3]. North Cyprus has failed to realize the full potential of tourism's contribution to its economy because of political and economic isolation.

2.2 Background of North Cyprus

Northern Cyprus is an independent state comprising the northeastern part of Cyprus Island. Cyprus is the third largest island in the Mediterranean Sea after Sicily and Sardinia. The Northern part of Cyprus remains isolated [4]. Although North Cyprus is an independent state, it remains unrecognized. Only the mainland Turkey is recognized internationally. North Cyprus bears the characteristics of a small island economy.

The Turkish invasion and occupation of North Cyprus in 1974 led to the partition of Cyprus into Northern Cypriots and South Cypriots [5]. The culture of the island is a mixture of different cultures including Turks, Romans, Venetians, Greeks, and British cultures [6: 37-46]. Cyprus has a geographical proximity to the Muslim World. It borders Syria, Israel, Egypt, and Greece. Historically, the British period between the nineteenth and twentieth century is the most remarkable date in the history of Cyprus.

In 1974, Turkey's peace operation led to the division of the Island of Cyprus into two with the Turkish Cypriots forming their state in the north of Cyprus, currently known as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Since its inception, TRNC is unrecognized internationally [7:1-19]. Some of the reasons North Cyprus is not recognized include its relatively small economy, limited resource potential, small international market, and its vulnerability to external economic fluctuations. The political and economic isolation of TRNC created a burden to its foreign trade with other countries.

The United Nations imposed sanctions that require all countries to route their postal and telecommunications to North Cyprus through Turkey. The sanctions also prohibit direct international flights to the North. Nadiri and Avci cited in Hussain and his colleagues [2] argue that North Cyprus faces many problems that hinder its economic development. The problems include from inaccessibility to communication and global restrictions. These challenges have made it difficult to promote tourism products and services as a tourism destination.

2.3 Destination Image

Destination image refers to the sum of the beliefs, ideas, and impressions people have about a place. The image is a mental configuration that people have towards a tourism site; the material information and perceptions about the area influence the creation of the picture [8, pp. 80-91]. Destination image also means the sum of the emotional qualities about a place. This mental picture encompasses the objective knowledge, impressions, imaginations, prejudice, and emotional thoughts about a location [9: 16, 1-10].

[10: 305-315] emphasize destination image as an important element of tourism marketing. Destination image influences the demand and supply of a region. The choice of a tourist site depends on the perceived image of the locality [11: 215-236]. From a consumer's viewpoint, destination image is the brand image of a country in the eyes of tourists as the consumers. This picture is a subjective reality based on people's perceptions of the location [12: 167-184]. Some scholars including [10:305-315] portray destination image as a complex and ambiguous set of subjective and immaterial attributes that are difficult to define.

A person organizes information about a country and the perceived value to create a mental construct that

influences the decision to visit the destination [13: 413-425]. For the last three decades, target area image has been key in tourism research. The earliest studies on tourism destination image trace back to the beginning of the 1970s with the works of Hunt that attempted to investigate the role of destination image on tourism.

Recent literature holds the view that the development of destination image stems from the consumer's rationality and emotionality. The first element of the location image is the perceptual and cognitive dimension. This dimension attributes a specific value to the items of a tourist destination. Tourists evaluate destinations based on the resources and attractions, which motivate them to visit those area [10:305-315] s. The second domain of tourism destination image is the affective domain, which focuses on the feelings and emotions that tourist destinations elicit in the consumers. This domain depends on the tourists' motivations to visit those attraction regions. The cognitive image has a significant influence on the effective assessment of the destination [10: 305-315]. In regards, location image is a combination of cognitive and affective components.

The overall destination image is an outcome of perceptual and cognitive processes stemming from reference groups, the media, and group membership among others. Anyone can form a tourism site image even before visiting the destination. According to Lopes [10: 305-315], historical information, political situation, economic background, and social conditions shape an individual's perception of a place. The image an individual creates about a destination depends on the value system of a person [14:722-728]. The country of origin of an individual also shapes the image that a person creates about a tourist destination [15]. Other factors influencing image formation about a tourist destination include the level of education and the socio-psychological motivations to travel to the destination in question.

An individual's experience with the destination has a significant influence on the image. The organic image of a destination stems from the history of non-tourism information. Individuals create such images from books, newspapers, and other sources of information about a place. Marketing and promotional material such as brochures create an induced image about a location [16: 42-48]. Colorful advertisement plays a significant role in shaping the consumers' perception of a region.

Cameron and Roberts [3] maintain that only destinations with clear market positioning and appealing attractions will remain at the top of the consumers' mind whenever they plan holidays. With the dynamic global tourism market, countries must strive to develop clear identities or brands underpinned on reality. This aspect is only achievable when a country reflects on the core strengths, personalities, and the products. Several factors have shaped the destination image of North Cyprus. Aware of the circumstances that have derailed its success, North Cyprus is now focusing on carving a niche in specific markets [3]. The island is already leveraging on nature adventure trips, ecotourism, culture, education, and health to gain a competitive brand position.

2.4 Social, Political, and Economic Environment of Northern Cyprus

Tourism has been the main economic driver of Northern Cyprus's strong economic growth over the years. Research on sustainable marketing for Northern Cyprus's Tourism found that the tourism industry is a valuable source of revenue and employment in the Island. Based on 2007 statistics, the market share of net tourism

earnings was 29% [17: 37-46]. This percentage rose to 33 percent in 2008. The economic sanctions imposed on the country in 1974 had dramatic impacts on North Cyprus. The island has faced difficulties in balancing between the major economic activities. One of the key challenges facing North Cyprus is political instability emanating from political rivalry between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots.

As an unrecognized state, North Cyprus faces challenges in marketing its tourism. The sector generates revenue and is a source of employment for many people in the country. The tourism industry provides a foreign currency that influences the balance of trade for North Cyprus. Statistics on tourist arrivals in North Cyprus indicate that the number of visitors in the region has risen significantly since 2011. The Tourism Planning Office of North Cyprus estimates that North Cyprus has over 140 accommodation establishments with approximate bed capacity exceeding 19,300 with an occupancy rate of about 48 percent [2]. A majority of tourists visiting North Cyprus come from Turkey, Britain, and Germany. In 2013, the foreign tourists visiting North Cyprus exceeded 1.2 million with more over 2 million overnights translating to US\$ 750 million tourism receipts [2]. Notwithstanding the projections for the increased number of foreign tourists visiting North Cyprus, fears of security influences the destination image of the island.

Over the years, the tourism industry has faced challenges from the unrecognition of the Northern part of Cyprus. North Cyprus has two airports, which are not recognized internationally because of political conflicts. All the flights, both domestic and international flights, to North Cyprus pass through Turkey. This country is a closed state that cannot establish any economic or political relations with other nations apart from Turkey. The challenges to tourism marketing in North Cyprus stem from the unsatisfactory process and outcome accession.

Many factors have influenced the destination image of North Cyprus. Tourists consider various factors before visiting any destination. Although tourists seek comfort and cleanliness in any destination, the perceived security of the region influences the choice to visit the destination. Hussain, Ekiz, Bouchon, and Kumar [2] argue that pre-arrival factors influence the tourism site selection. In their study, the scholars found that terrorism, natural disasters, and other security threats hurt tourism because they reduce arrivals. Although the UN has lifted some restrictions on international travels, security concerns limit tourist destination selection. The political and economic segregation of North Cyprus makes it less inaccessible.

Tourism is sensitive to political instability and a fluctuating political environment. Political instability has influenced the tourism sector in North Cyprus negatively. The international political and economic isolation of North Cyprus have handicapped the economy of the country. Despite the contribution of tourism to the GDP of North Cyprus, the sector is lagging behind its competitive strength relative to its rivals [18]. Compared to South Cyprus that has established itself as a competitive tourist destination, North Cyprus continues to struggle to achieve economic growth and escape from political and economic dependence on Turkey [19: 25-39].

2.5 Overcoming the Difficulties

As mentioned, the tourism sector is sensitive and susceptible to political, social, and economic crises. Because of the value attributed to tourism in the island, crises preparedness and recovery is critical to the revival of the

industry. Cameron and Roberts [3] assert that islands must have comprehensive preparedness plans to manage crises that hit their tourism sector. North Cyprus has responded effectively to the problems that affect its destination image. The response strategies revolve around strategic destination marketing [3].

The poor performance witnessed after 1974 resulted from institutional weaknesses that failed to establish a comprehensive tourism marketing plan. The government prioritized agriculture, which resulted in the decline of tourism. After realizing that the Republic of Cyprus to the South witnessed better development opportunities, North Cyprus embarked on elevating its tourism. The government of North Cyprus made the tourism sectors a priority for economic development. The government accepted the lack of commitment to tourism and begun improving the transport infrastructure to elevate the tourism industry.

North Cyprus proposed Casino tourism as a compliment vacation tourism. The pace for Casino tourism grew from the 1990s following the closure of Turkish casinos by the Islamic-led government in 1998. North Cyprus envisaged that casinos would provide extra leisure opportunities for vacation tourism translating to increased demand for hotel accommodation. The government also projected that casinos would create employment chances for some people in North Cyprus. This effort also led to increased demand for other tourism-related activities including entertainment, food, and beverages. The strategy materialized and the region received foreign tourists who visited North Cyprus to engage in legal gambling [20:411-424]. Bookings from Turkey increased as people sought to participate in gambling.

North Cyprus also responded to the problems of unrecognition in the international arena by expanding educational opportunities for international students in higher education. Five institutions of higher learning in North Cyprus started accepting students to their campuses to promote education tourism. The population of international learners has been increasing in North Cyprus since 2006. Consequently, the country has been receiving increasing foreign revenue in the form of tuition fees from international students, which contribute to the country's GDP.

Promotion of sex tourism in North Cyprus has also brought this unknown destination into the limelight with the number of prostitutes with legal permits increasing. North Cyprus issues legal permits to prostitutes to work in the licensed nightclubs and bars [21:239-240]. These night clubs and pubs with prostitutes offering sex tourism contribute over US\$ 4 million annually to the economy of North Cyprus. The revenue is from the payment of permits, taxes, passports and visa fees, social security, weekly health checks, and reserve funds [21:239-240].

The country has also ventured into conference tourism. North Cyprus has increasingly focused on creating conference centers to regenerate its urban destination image. Conference tourism emerged as a tool for increasing the longevity of tourism when occupancy rates decline. This tourism activity creates a market for hotels in North Cyprus. Residents of Turkish Cypriots seek conference facilities in North Cyprus albeit the availability of such facilities in the South. In 2008 alone, the number of conference tourists who visited North Cyprus exceeded 20,000 [20:411-424]. The recognition of the product and service attributes that increase customer satisfaction will continue making conference tourism a lucrative opportunity in North Cyprus.

The government of North Cyprus understands the benefits of promoting ecological tourism. The country has been in the process of attracting environmentally conscious and high-income tourists. North Cyprus has invested in facilities that are environmentally friendly. The state has established luxury senior care centers that offer health centers for retired persons from the expensive European countries who seek friendly climate areas. These facilities make TRNC an attractive destination.

3 Methods Used

This paper adopted the meta-analysis method, a methodology that evaluates and summarizes the results from a number of individual studies. This method of research involves a careful evaluation of different studies on the topic to develop a synoptic reasoning on how North Cyprus has coped with the difficulties affecting its destination image. The articles' year of publication and the relevance to the topic formed the basis of the selection criterion for choosing the studies for analysis. The analysis considered for review the articles published after 2005. The meta-analysis sought to gain a synoptic insight into the measures that North Cyprus embraced to deal with the challenges that influenced its destination image negatively.

4 Findings and Discussion from the Literature Review

North Cyprus has rich natural and cultural attractions that make it a marketable tourist destination in the world. This country has the most beautiful and unique beaches. The shores are clean and have an exceptional atmosphere. The island has sites that can support interesting water-sport activities. Additionally, North Cyprus has stunning historical memorials and archaeological ruins and monuments. Tourists who visit North Cyprus have an opportunity to enjoy the natural beauty. Besparmak Mountains is one of the attraction sites that give the island a magnificent look.

The region has luxurious 5-star hotels, holiday villages, casino tourism, golf tourism, scuba tourism, and bird watching among other tourism opportunities. The island also offers potential tourism alternatives such as health tourism, eco-agro-tourism, conference tourism, and yacht tourism. All these activities and features make North Cyprus an attractive tourist destination globally.

Although North Cyprus has a comparative advantage of rich geographical and natural resources, the country has not harnessed its potential fully to enhance its competitiveness in the tourism industry globally. The embargoes, restrictions on transportation and communication, and competition from recognized countries make it difficult for an isolated state like North Cyprus to establish a clear brand identity for its tourism sector.

Marketing North Cyprus as a tourist destination remains a challenge albeit the attractiveness of the destinations. In 1968, the country established the State Planning Organization to create planned economic programs. The effort did not yield significant success. State Planning Organization could not make a broad plan because of the inability to control economic indicators that the struggle between the two communities imposed. Turkish Cypriots had 5% of the GNP of Cyprus. The Turkish community remained pessimistic and embarked on attempts to defend its rights against their Greek counterparts.

With the numerous attractions, the government of North Cyprus declared tourism as an engine for stimulating economic growth and development. In the mid-1980s, the government declared tourism as the leading sector for developing the economy of North Cyprus. Since that time, the Island has witnessed dramatic growth in the hotel and service industry.

5 Conclusion

Although North Cyprus is an unrecognized state, the country has made commendable strides in dealing with the factors that affect its destination image. The state has focused on six destination images (Sex, Casino, Conference, sightseeing, Historic Places, and Ecotourism) to boost its performance in tourism. For sex tourism, North Cyprus has encouraged the issuance of legal permits to prostitutes to allow them to operate in the licensed nightclubs and pubs. The country also took advantage of the ban on gambling in South Cyprus and established casino tourism that has continued to an increase in the number of Turkish visitors seeking such opportunities. The creation of conference facilities in the country has also increased the number of visitors to North Cyprus for conference services. While casinos only attract visitors during the summer months, conference tourism generates revenue throughout the year. The country also promotes activities that lure environmentally conscious tourists to spend their time in North Cyprus. Despite being unrecognized, North Cyprus has managed to enhance its destination image and has witnessed a considerable increase in the hotel occupancy rates.

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