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Niue's destination image: A perspective from the travel experiences of international visitors

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Introduction

Tourism is a significant and often dominant economic activity in many South Pacific island microstates. The industry's impacts are profound and deeply felt. Niue is heavily dependent on tourism and in an attempt to foster the tourism industry, the national government, National Tourism Office and the NZ government have put considerable effort into marketing the destination globally and developing the visitor product.

The growing focus on tourism by policy makers and donor agencies in the South Pacific has been accompanied by an expanding body of literature focused on understanding the tourism industry (Pratt & Harrison, 2015). While past and current literature has focused on issues related to the impacts of tourism (e.g., Milne, 1992a; Milne 2013), as well as sustainable development (e.g., Buckley, 2002), there have been relatively few attempts to explore the destination image of South Pacific destinations. This failing creates an important gap in knowledge for both policy makers and industry practitioners.

This paper presents an investigation into the destination image of Niue from an international visitor perspective and presents the implications for destination marketing organizations (DMOs). We first identify past and current trends in tourism development in Niue. Following this, the paper presents, through a qualitative coding methodology, the perceived image of Niue. Drawing on international visitor narratives captured by the Niue International Visitor Survey (IVS), this research discusses the resultant implications for local authorities' destination branding and product development.

Literature Review

Tourism in Niue

Niue is an island country in the South Pacific Ocean, with a small population of around 1500 in (2011 Census) and a landmass of 260 km^2 (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade 2019). Niue's economy is fragile and faces many constraints including limited land, poor soil, limited air services, a shortage of skilled professionals and entrepreneurs, and a declining population. Niue depends on imported fuel and food to supplement its subsistence agriculture and fishing, and this is reflected in its close trading relationship with New Zealand (NZMFAT, 2019). Tourism is one of the three priority economic sectors (the other two are fisheries and agriculture) identified by the Niue and New Zealand governments for economic development. Niue's income from tourism has been growing, and there is potential for more growth as air services increase and more accommodation and other infrastructure is built (NZMFAT, 2019). For Niue, a strong, positive image is believed to be important to attract tourists and achieve the goal of enhancing

visitors' desire to return in the future and enhance word-of-mouth promotion (Connell, 2007; Milne, 1992b; Singh, 2012).

Destination image

Destination image is not only important for DMOs' marketing strategies, but also for tourists' decision making (Papadimitriou, Kaplanidou, & Apostolopoulou, 2018). Destination image can be defined as a compilation of beliefs and impressions based on information processing from a variety of sources over time and via actual visits, which coalesce and result in a mental construct of destination attributes (Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Crompton, 1979; Gartner, 1993). In short, the beliefs, ideas, and impressions that individuals hold about the destination constitute a destination image (Crompton, 1979).

The measurement of the destination image is complex, multiple, relativistic, and dynamic (Ryan & Cave, 2005). Researchers have investigated the topic of destination image extensively on the issues of destination branding, destination image, tourist behavior, and online destination image (e.g., Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011; Sirgy & Su, 2000; Tseng, Wu, Morrison, Zhang, & Chen, 2015). However, there are still some substantial research gaps, including understanding the construction of destination image based actual visits, how image varies by differing market segments (e.g. different source markets) and developing and refining effective methodologies.

Methodology

This paper is based on ongoing research conducted in Niue by the the New Zealand Tourism Research Institute (NZTRI) as part of the NZ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade funded Pacific Tourism Data Initiative. This work funds an ongoing International Visitor Survey that is now well into its second year of operation. Email addresses are captured from international arrival cards and visitors are then sent an invitation and link to an online survey within a few weeks of the completion of their visit. The data collection period covered here is Oct 2017 and Sep 2018, during which 1,446 international visitor participants responding to the survey, in the absence of current statistics we estimate that this covers 15-20% of all the international visitors to Niue during the period. As for the demographic information of the participants, 60% are female and 40% are male; nearly half of them are between 50 and 69 years old.

The data presented and discussed below are drawn from open-ended questions about international visitors' perceptions about the destination of Niue, including: What did you find most attractive or appealing about Niue on your most recent visit?; and, What did you find least attractive or appealing about Niue on your most recent visit? Participants were asked to use their own words to describe Niue rather than being provided with any categories or prompts,

The responses are then clustered into four different dimensions (i.e., functional characteristics, attributes, psychological characteristics, and holistic) following Echtner and Ritchie's (1991)

method (Figure 1). There has been little use of open-ended, unstructured, conversational, and textual material used in data collection and analysis of destination image (Ryan & Cave, 2005) and this study represents an attempt to assist in correcting this imbalance.

FUNCTIONAL
CHARACTERISTICS

ATTRIBUTES ←——————→ HOLISTIC (Imagery)
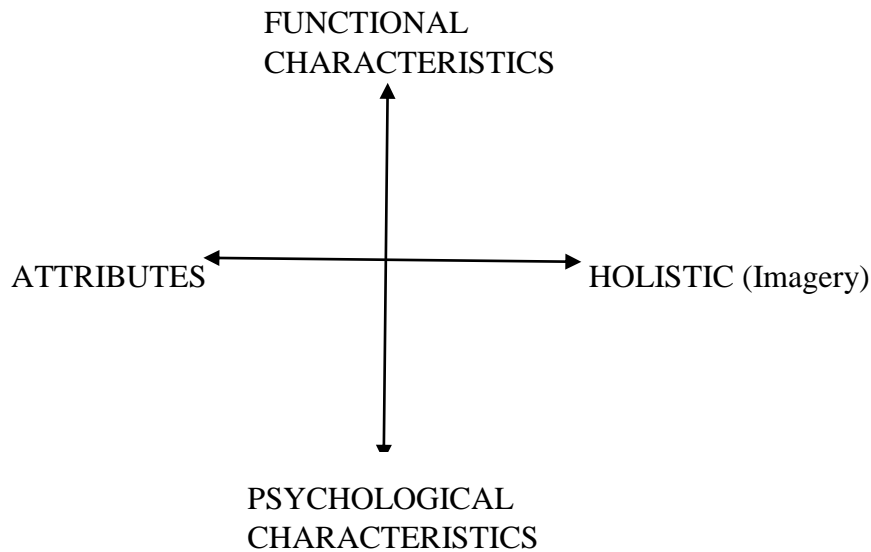
PSYCHOLOGICAL
CHARACTERISTICS

Figure 1 Characteristics of destination image (Source: Echtner & Ritchie, 1991)

Due to the exploratory nature of the research questions, a qualitative method was deemed appropriate for the data analysis. All the text data from the online survey were analyzed thematically by coding with the facilitation of NVivo. Various codes, categories, and themes were identified. To ensure the reliability and validity of the data analysis, member checking was adopted: researchers in the team double check the coding results and compare the differences during the whole coding process, with consensus eventually being achieved (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

Results and Discussions

Based on the constant comparison of the text data, seven categories have been identified that depict the different aspects of the destination image of Niue. For a better understanding of the destination image of Niue as perceived by international visitors, the coding spectrum from the survey is presented visually in tables. The destination image attributes are analyzed from the questions relating to the most appealing and least appealing aspects. For the most appealing aspects of the destination image, the following four categories are identified (Table 1). Each aspect is presented alongside the number of discrete references that were made to that topic.

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Table 1 The coding spectrum of most appealing aspects of Niue

Categories	Codes	No. of references
Environment and cleanliness	Beautiful scenery	768
	Unspoiled/untouched natural environment	
	Cleanliness	
	Nice weather	
Activities and attractions	Water activities (e.g., Snorkeling, swimming)	539
	Walks	
Local people	Friendliness and welcoming	522
	Helpful	
Atmosphere	Laid back lifestyle	520
	Un-commercial	
	Safety	

Environment and cleanliness. Comments about environment and cleanliness emerge as the most commonly mentioned from among the data. The beautiful scenery, untouched natural environment, cleanness, and nice weather are mentioned in particular by international visitors. Consequently, the natural environment, its overall pristineness and relative lack of development form an essential part of the destination image of Niue. Examples of such comments include:

How natural and unspoiled it is. The dramatic scenery.

The land, the environment - it is all pretty much untainted and untouched - caves, arches, coast still very much in its natural state...

The scenery and that it was not all built up and 'flash'. That it was not overrun with people. It felt very laid back and authentic. I really hope it does not outgrow itself as this is Niue's point of difference and what would make me return again!

Activities and attractions. Water-based activities such as swimming and snorkeling along with land-based activities such as hiking or cycling are widely mentioned by participants. Based on the results of our survey, 93% of the visitors visited a beach /sea track, 91% participated in swimming, 82% participated in snorkeling, and 64% engaged in reef walking. Visitors perceive Niue as the ideal place for water-based activities especially snorkeling and for walking activities that are adventurous without being arduous. The following quotes demonstrated this:

> *The land & things to see/do. The island and everything on it is like nowhere else in the world and it is the most amazing place.*

> *Snorkelling, water clarity, abundance of sea life.*

> *The natural activities were fantastic. The caves and sea tracks were all unique and beautiful.*

Local people. It is recognized that the positive experience of interaction with local people in Niue is an essential component in shaping the perceptual map generated among international visitors. The friendliness and welcoming nature of Niueans, and their willingness to engage with and assist the visitor make create a significant impression on visitors, which becomes part of the destination perception and image:

> *The beautiful people of Niue...very welcoming and friendly.*

> *Met some very friendly locals who were happy to share their knowledge of Niue.*

> *The friendliness of the people - as always. They make you feel welcome without being in your face and there are plenty of places to go and things to do without feeling you are impinging on their lives too much, and also without meeting hordes of other visitors.*

> *The friendly and warm smiles of the Locals when being greeted at the Airport.*

Atmosphere. The last major category to emerge from visitor feedback on most appealing features of their visit relates to the general atmosphere found on Niue. The laid-back, relaxing atmosphere, un-commercial nature of the industry and the high level of perceived safety are key elements of the image of Niue. Five hundred and twenty references were identified for these themes. Participants appreciate the slower pace of local life and used the words "relaxing", "calm", "chilled", "tranquility", and "laid-back" to describe the overall atmosphere of the destination. The notion of "island time" and "laid-back vibe" is also mentioned. Comments included:

> *Enjoy the laid-back lifestyle of Niue as well as the scenic views of the coastline.*

> *Peace and quiet. Little traffic. Nature at its most natural.*

> *I loved how isolated and quiet it felt in Niue, how it wasn't too touristy (Also loved the wonderful people, the fresh food and the incredible snorkeling!).*

> *I even liked the fact that there were chickens and dogs happily wandering around although it wasn't great to see sick, unwell dogs.*

In addition to these positive perceptions of Niue, participants are also asked also to highlight any negative or least appealing aspects of Niue (Table 2). This feedback constitutes an important element in truly understanding the destination image of the nation.

Table 2 The coding spectrum of least appealing aspects of Niue

Categories	Codes	No. of references
Facilities and infrastructure	Poor condition of roads	614
	Tourism-related infrastructure (e.g., airport, ATM)	
	Bad internet access	
Food and beverage	Availability of fresh produce	213
	Restaurants opening hours	
	Quality and cost of food	
Animal-related issues	Noisy roosters	100
	Flies and mosquitoes	
	Roaming dogs	

Facilities and infrastructure. Poor facilities and infrastructure are identified as the most evident aspect of the negative perception of Niue as a tourism destination. Over six hundred references emphasized the poor road conditions and potholes, airport infrastructure, limitations to tourism-related infrastructure such as the lack of ATM, toilets, and wifi connectivity:

> *The roads! Riddled with pot-holes!*

> *Lack of clear signage to some areas. More handrails on sea tracks, and boardwalks to improve access for the less able-bodied in some areas. Maintenance/upkeep of tracks and stairs.*

> *Felt the toilets at the sea tracks could have been cleaner. Roading needs improving.*

> *We couldn't get any information at all while we were there. With very limited internet access, it was challenging to find any information to help us with our holiday while we were there.*

Food and beverage. Many participant comments focused on the lack of available fresh local food in Niue, especially fresh fruit, vegetables, and fish. The quality of food is not always viewed positively and prices are often considered to be relatively high. The opening hours of restaurants are also highlighted by international visitors. The following comments are indicative of these themes:

> *No fresh fish!! Limited tropical fruit. Would be lovely to have more local produce but understand the challenges of environment, and people leaving Niue to live elsewhere. We brought almost all of our own food.*

> *I would have like to have sampled more local food.*

> *In the restaurants and cafes (ate out around 8-9 times at 5 different restaurants and cafes over the week) we struggled to find food suitable for young kids but mainly Nena and Pa who are in their 80s now and it's hard for them.*

Animal-related issues. One hundred quotes are provided about animal-related issues in Niue, and these can clearly influence tourists' travel experiences. Visitors widely comment that they find the crowing of semi-feral roosters in the morning to be annoying. Roaming dogs also disturb visitors that are hoping to cycle or walk in villages. Flies and mosquitoes also receive a mention:

> *Potholes in the road, aggressive dogs, roosters early in the morning!*

> *Flies and mosquitoes!*

> *Some of the dogs look very sick and unhealthy.*

> *The stray dogs running out at you when you run or cycle.*

> *Stray animals begging for food at our accommodation.*

> *Roosters crowing at all hours of the day and especially waking you up in the morning crowing right outside your door repeatedly when you wanted a sleep in.*

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper investigates the image of Niue as a tourism destination, and is based on the analysis of responses of a large sample of international visitors that visited Niue during October 2017 to September 2018. Built on Echtner and Ritchie's (1991) destination image components and attributes, this study proposes a conceptual framework of the destination image of Niue. Figure 2 portrays a number of features that summaries visitors' perceptions of Niue as a destination. It is evident that the relatively non-commercial, laid-back and relaxing atmosphere of Niue creates a generally positive image. The friendly local people and generally safe environment provide visitors with good psychological feelings. More specifically, the beautiful scenery and good water activities are attractive to international visitors. Visitors perceive that infrastructure, wild animals, and food are aspects that need to be improved. The findings confirm previous studies that show that tourists entertain simultaneously both positive and negative components of the destination image (Papadimitriou et al., 2018; Ryan & Cave, 2005).

FUNCTIONAL
CHARACTERISTICS

- Beautiful scenery
- Good water activities
- Poor facilities
- Roaming animals

- Uncommercial

ATTRIBUTES

HOLISTIC (Imagery)

- Friendly local people
- Generally safe

- Laid back
- Relaxing and quite
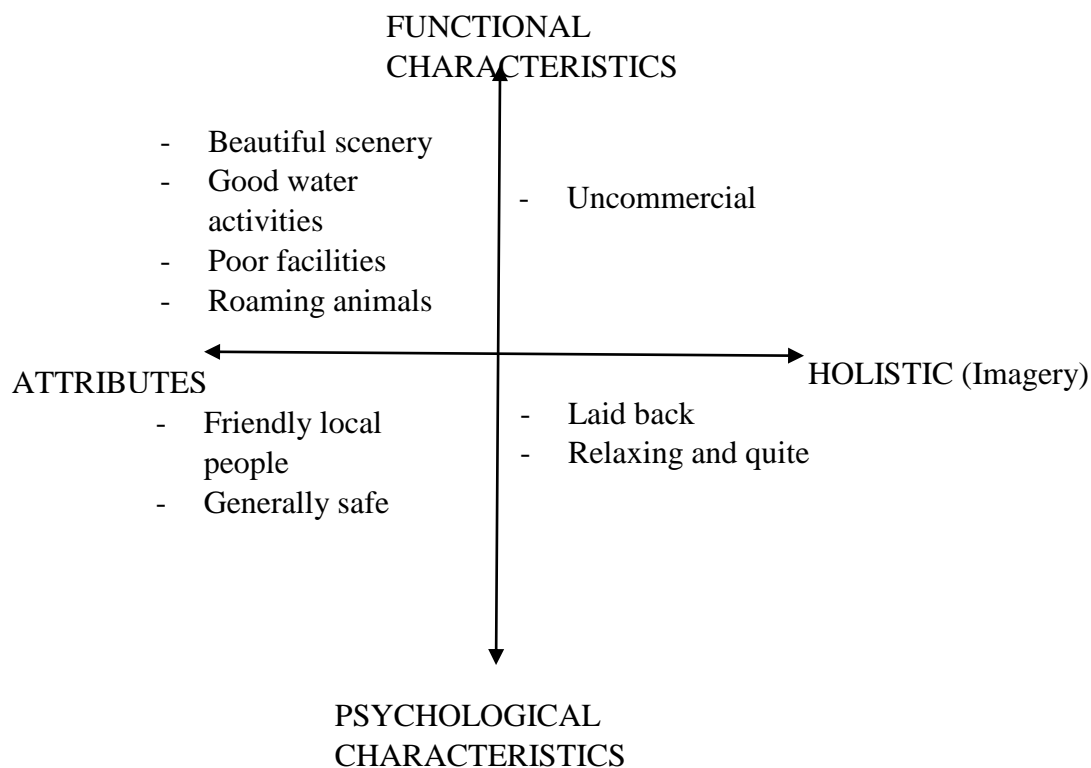
PSYCHOLOGICAL
CHARACTERISTICS

Figure 2 Destination image of Niue

From a destination marketing perspective, the findings in this study offer the Niue government, the Niue Tourism Organization and other related stakeholders (e.g., NZ Governmentt) a number of useful insights to assist in guiding marketing and product development strategies. The unspoiled natural environment and water-based activities represent the key building blocks for the industry and there is a good opportunity to further develop and market land based soft adventure activities such as hikes. It is clear though that local people also play a big part in the formation of positive visitor perceptions and this is an area where there is considerable opportunity to develop and market community created visitor experiences. In order to achieve the goal of sustainable development of the local tourism industry, the government also needs to improve tourism-related infrastructures especially local roading and foot access to core environmental attractions. In addition, comments on the local food supply suggest the importance of enabling tourists to access local fresh produce and developing new supply options.

Although unique insights were gained, there are unavoidably some limitations related to this study. The main one in this study is that the data collected were in one-year period (i.e., between Oct 2017 and Sep 2018). International visitors' perceptions of Niue image could change. Hence, it would be a future revenue for the scholars to investigate the consistence or changes of Niue destination image from a longitude research.

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