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**Comparing Destination Image of Visitors, Potential Visitors, and Residents**

The purpose of this paper is to compare the destination image of inquirers of the Austin, Texas Convention and Visitor Bureau. A number of differences were found between visitors, potential visitors, and residents. In general, residents had higher levels of agreement with each of the image items, followed by visitors. Significant differences were found between items such as Eclectic, Unlike the Rest of Texas, and Weird, providing opportunities for the destination to further promote through testimonials and trip itineraries related to these images. In addition, significant differences were found between all three groups regarding the destination being Environmentally friendly, which could be promoted more through testimonials and trip itineraries. More detail regarding testimonials and trip itineraries are discussed.

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## Introduction

The image of a tourism destination can be developed and influenced in several ways. Echtner and Ritchie (2003) suggested promoting image is one of the biggest challenges for tourism destinations. Destination image can be influenced by multiple sources. As Govers, Go, and Kumar (2007) suggested, sources include promotional materials, word-of-mouth, and media such as magazines and television, to name a few. In addition to the secondary sources of information, Beerli and Martin (2004) proposed that personal experiences with destinations will influence tourists' image and suggested it is important to recognize differences between types of visitors (e.g., first-time and repeat visitors) and their respective image formation. Models have been proposed and tested using various sources of information that help formulate destination images. For example, Baloglu and McCleary (1999) tested a model using stimuli (e.g., sources of information and prior experience) and characteristics of the travelers (e.g., age and education) as influencers of destination image.

Echtner and Ritchie (2003) indicated in order to effectively market "a destination must be favorably differentiated from its competition, or positively positioned, in the minds of the consumers" (p. 37). Therefore, the image of the destination is critical to a destination's marketing and affects travelers' decision-making (Jenkins, 1999). Tasci and Gartner (2007) suggested assessing destination image is important to academics, as well as practitioners who require the information to successfully plan, develop, and promote a destination.

Inherently each tourism destination wants to differentiate itself from competitors through their image. Echtner and Ritchie (2003) proposed a model containing functional (e.g., price) and psychological (e.g., friendly staff) attributes or characteristics, which are relevant to most destinations. In addition, the authors proposed that the real product is comprised a holistic element which is a more of a feeling, which is more unique to a respective destination.

Tourism is an “invisible” product or experience (Mill & Morrison, 2012) derived of multiple elements, requiring each destination to have different sets of items to accurately measure their respective image. As a result, destination image studies use different methods, numbers of items, and types of scales (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). Jenkins (1999) indicated a word-based approach being the most prominent, using words and phrases that describe attributes of the respective destination.

From an applied standpoint it is important for destinations to identify and compare different groups influenced by destination image(s). Research has examined differences in image between visitors and residents (Ryan & Aicken, 2010) and repeat and first-time tourists (Morais & Lin, 2010). Ryan and Aiken (2010) asked respondents to describe the study destination with short statements, reporting residents and tourists’ destination image were fairly similar. Morais and Lin (2010) found repeat visitors had higher levels of agreement on the image items compared to first-time visitors, inherently developed through their experience at the destination. Repeat visitors developed attachment to the destination, which was a primary contributor to intention to return.

## **Study Purpose**

The purpose of this study is two-fold. The first purpose is to assess of the destination image of inquirers of the Austin, Texas Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB). The second purpose is to test if visitors (i.e., inquired and visited in the two years preceding study), potential visitors (i.e., inquired, but did not visit in the two years preceding study), and residents of the Austin area have different images of Austin as a travel destination.

For differences on a series of short statements describing the destination image between three groups of inquirers of the Austin CVB, which included visitors (i.e., inquired and visited in the two years preceding study), potential visitors (i.e., inquired, but did not visit

in the two years preceding study), and residents of the Austin area who inquired with the destination's CVB.

## Methods

### *Study Destination*

Austin is located in the state of Texas and is the state capital. One of the state's largest universities, the University of Texas, is also located in Austin. Austin is promoted as the Live Music Capital of the World® and is well known for its nightlife and live music. Austin is also known for the "Keep Austin Weird" effort, which is not the work of the Austin CVB, but a group of local businesses. Austin is a unique destination and several of the image items in the study are intended to differentiate or make Austin unique.

### Sample

The sampling frame for this study included inquirers of the Austin CVB. The sample was limited to those who inquired in the two years prior to conducting the study and provided an email address ( $n = 4,619$ ) when they inquired by requesting the *Official Visitors Guide to Austin* and/or registered to receive the Austin Insiders Club: eNews. Only inquirers who made their inquiry in the two years preceding the study were included to minimize potential memory decay, which has been found in other visitor studies (e.g., King, Chen, & Funk, 2015; Zhou, 2000).

### *Questionnaire Design*

The destination image items included in this study were derived by reviewing literature related to measuring destination image (e.g., Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Jenkins, 1999). Echtner and Ritchie (2003) indicate that destination image can be derived of the attributes of the destination (e.g., scenic, historical) that are general and can be applied to most destinations. Adjectives such as sincere, intelligent, family oriented, and exciting used in this study have also been found in destination image research such as

that conducted by Ekinci and Hosany (2006). In addition, destination information sources such as the *Official Visitors Guide to Austin* and the Austin CVB website ([www.austintexas.org](http://www.austintexas.org)), Facebook, and Google searches were examined to ensure such images were portrayed and continue to develop the list of images identified through such sources. Jenkins (1999) suggests reviewing materials such as visitor guides, brochures, and other sources of information provide the projected image of a destination and a means to develop such a list. At several stages along developing the image items the list was shared with Austin CVB staff members for feedback to ensure a valid representation of images portrayed by Austin. This helped develop a general agreement about the image of Austin and face validity (Babbie, 2004). Such items as weird, Unlike the rest of Texas, and stereotypically country were added to the list based on a series of conversations.

The questionnaire first asked respondents if they had visited Austin in the last two years (i.e., visitors) or not (i.e., potential visitors), or were an Austin resident (i.e., residents). A two year timeframe for visitation was used to minimize recall issues, which has been found to occur in visitor studies (e.g., King et al., 2015; Zhou, 2000) as well as the list of inquirers used to conduct the study was the same timeframe. Those who did not visit were not asked if they had visited prior to the two year timeframe. Austin resident was included as an option because the list of inquirers provided for the study included zip codes with a sizable portion of which were in the Austin area. Responses to this question directed respondents to one of three questionnaires, which had some similar and some different questions. This paper reports on a series of items where all three groups were asked to report their level of agreement on a scale of 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree with the short phrases generated to describe Austin as a tourism destination (e.g., eclectic, exciting, diverse). All items can be found in Table 1 with the results and represent the exact wording to which respondents indicated their level of agreement.

### *Pilot Test and Data Collection*

Using a random sample ( $n=200$ ) of Austin CVB inquirers, a pilot test was conducted to ensure the online questionnaire was working properly, estimate response rate, and determine if changes were required (e.g., order of items). The sample for the pilot test was randomly selected using the Select Cases function of SPSS that allows a random number, in this study 200 of the 4,619 total provided, to be selected randomly. The pilot test also helped assess the clarity and acceptability of questions (Rea & Parker, 2005), with no concerns being identified by the results of the pilot test. Only minor changes were made, such as order of some sections of questions.

After the pilot test, a modified Dillman (2007) procedure was utilized to collect responses from the remaining 4,419 inquirers, which represents the total provided ( $n = 4,619$ ) minus the 200 used for the pilot test. The responses to the pilot test were not included in the final analysis for this paper. Inquirers received an initial email stating the study purpose, required Human Subjects approval statements, and a link to the online questionnaire as well as incentives to participate (i.e., first 400 received free music downloads and random drawing for an Austin Rock Star Weekend Getaway). Two reminder emails were sent to inquirers who had not completed the online questionnaire at the time of the reminders.

## **Results**

A total of 769 inquirers clicked the link on the invitation email to view the online questionnaire. Once respondents with large portions (i.e., 50% or more) of non-response to questionnaire items were deleted there were a total of 627 cases for data analysis and a 14.25% effective response rate. Respondents were comprised of 48.5% of respondents who visited the destination, 17.2% potential visitors, and 34.3% residents.

### *Respondent Demographics*

The majority of respondents were female, with 66.6% for visitors, 61.3% potential visitors, and 82.5% residents. Visitors ( $M=49.23$ ,  $SD=11.88$ ) and potential visitors ( $M=49.94$ ,  $SD=11.60$ ) were six years older than residents ( $M= 43.02$ ,  $SD=12.69$ ). Respondents were fairly well educated with 66.5% of visitors, 58.0% of potential visitors, and 71.2% of residents completing a four year college or higher degree. For each group two-thirds or slightly more were employed full-time with 66.0% for visitors, 67.9% potential visitors, and 70.1% residents. Almost two-thirds or more of visitors (40.8%), potential visitors (34.4%), and residents (34.6%) all had a household income of \$100,000 or greater.

### *Destination Image Comparisons*

Initially a Principal Components Analysis (PCA) was conducted to identify the components of destination image in the study. However, scree plot and parallel analysis both indicated the items were one dimensional. Therefore, to test for differences between groups, the items were analyzed individually.

Table 1 provides the item wording, as presented to respondents on the questionnaire, along with the mean and standard deviations for the aggregate sample (i.e., all three groups) in parentheses under each individual item. Each of the 19 items were tested for differences between inquiry groups using ANOVA. For the aggregated responses, items with the highest level of agreement include Creative ( $M=4.48$ ,  $SD=0.58$ ), Eclectic ( $M=4.45$ ,  $SD=0.69$ ), and Friendly ( $M=4.44$ ,  $SD=0.68$ ). Items with the lowest level of agreement include Family oriented ( $M=3.97$ ,  $SD=0.85$ ), Fashionable ( $M=3.91$ ,  $SD=0.84$ ), and Stereotypically country ( $M=2.70$ ,  $SD=1.13$ ). In general, residents had a higher level of agreement with each phrase, followed by visitors, suggesting personal experience at the destination helps develop destination image.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) models were run to assess group differences. Of the 19 items, 12 were significant at  $\alpha = .05$  or lower. Tukey HSD post-hoc tests were conducted

to determine which groups were significantly different, except when the Levene's test was significant, Tamhane T-2 tests were used. Tamhane T-2 tests make a conservative adjustment for unequal sample size and violation of the assumption of equal variances between groups (Tamhane, 1979). The Tamhane T-2 reduces the chance of a Type I error.

Visitors are identified in group comparisons with a superscript V, potential visitors P, and residents R. Letters are used to indicate when a group is significantly different from another group. For example, for the first item, Creative, the <sup>P, R</sup> under the visitor column indicates visitors' level of agreement is significantly different than potential visitors and residents.

Nine of 12 significant models resulted in all three groups being significantly different, residents having the highest level of agreement, followed by visitors. In the other three significant models, two (Relaxing and Sincere) resulted in potential visitors being significantly lower than residents and visitors. The other model (Scenic) resulted in residents being significantly higher than visitors and potential visitors. Potential visitors being significantly lower on all three items compared to visitors and residents supports the notion that people need to experience Austin to understand the destination offers more than the live music and entertainment for which it is well known.

Austin is fairly well known as a unique destination, as the slogan "Keep Austin Weird" indicates. A number of phrases resulted in interesting differences regarding this notion. The terms Creative, Eclectic, Unlike the rest of Texas, and Weird resulted in differences between all three groups with residents having the highest level of agreement, followed by visitors, suggesting the importance of experiencing the destination to understand its image. Another phrase, Stereotypically country, resulted in the lowest level of agreement for all three groups.

Table 1: Comparison of Inquirers on Adjectives and Phrases to Describe Austin

|   | Potential                        | Residents <sup>R</sup>     |                            |
|---|----------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
|   | Visitors <sup>V</sup>            |                            |                            |
|   | <u>Mean (Standard Deviation)</u> |                            |                            |
| Creative<br>( $M=4.48$ ; $SD=0.58$ )***                 | 4.42 (0.64) <sup>P,R</sup>       | 4.22 (0.64) <sup>V,R</sup> | 4.68 (0.58) <sup>V,P</sup> |
| Eclectic<br>( $M=4.45$ ; $SD=0.69$ )***                 | 4.41 (0.71) <sup>P,R</sup>       | 4.18 (0.67) <sup>V,R</sup> | 4.64 (0.63) <sup>V,P</sup> |
| Friendly<br>( $M=4.44$ ; $SD=0.68$ )***                 | 4.40 (0.70) <sup>P,R</sup>       | 4.16 (0.67) <sup>V,R</sup> | 4.64 (0.60) <sup>V,P</sup> |
| Scenic<br>( $M=4.41$ ; $SD=0.68$ )**                    | 4.37 (0.67) <sup>R</sup>         | 4.24 (0.65) <sup>R</sup>   | 4.54 (0.68) <sup>V,P</sup> |
| Outdoorsy<br>( $M=4.39$ ; $SD=0.70$ )***                | 4.34 (0.71) <sup>P,R</sup>       | 4.06 (0.70) <sup>V,R</sup> | 4.62 (0.61) <sup>V,P</sup> |
| Exciting<br>( $M=4.36$ ; $SD=0.71$ )                    | 4.33 (0.72)                      | 4.25 (0.67)                | 4.44 (0.71)                |
| Relaxing<br>( $M=4.30$ ; $SD=0.71$ )***                 | 4.31 (0.69) <sup>P</sup>         | 4.03 (0.71) <sup>V,R</sup> | 4.41 (0.72) <sup>P</sup>   |
| Environmentally friendly<br>( $M=4.25$ ; $SD=0.75$ )*** | 4.20 (0.76) <sup>P,R</sup>       | 3.96 (0.70) <sup>V,R</sup> | 4.46 (0.69) <sup>V,P</sup> |
| Intelligent<br>( $M=4.25$ ; $SD=0.76$ )***              | 4.18 (0.76) <sup>P,R</sup>       | 3.97 (0.74) <sup>V,R</sup> | 4.48 (0.69) <sup>V,P</sup> |
| Historical<br>( $M=4.22$ ; $SD=0.73$ )                  | 4.25 (0.71)                      | 4.13 (0.70)                | 4.22 (0.77)                |
| Unlike the rest of Texas<br>( $M=4.22$ ; $SD=0.90$ )*** | 4.12 (0.92) <sup>P,R</sup>       | 3.79 (0.88) <sup>V,R</sup> | 4.57 (0.75) <sup>V,P</sup> |
| Charming<br>( $M=4.17$ ; $SD=0.77$ )                    | 4.21 (0.76)                      | 4.03 (0.72)                | 4.19 (0.81)                |
| Diverse<br>( $M=4.13$ ; $SD=0.85$ )                     | 4.15 (0.84)                      | 4.08 (0.67)                | 4.13 (0.95)                |
| Clean<br>( $M=4.12$ ; $SD=0.79$ )                       | 4.17 (0.75)                      | 3.95 (0.69)                | 4.14 (0.86)                |
| Sincere<br>( $M=4.06$ ; $SD=0.80$ )**                   | 4.05 (0.79) <sup>P</sup>         | 3.83 (0.73) <sup>V,R</sup> | 4.20 (0.83) <sup>P</sup>   |
| Weird<br>( $M=4.00$ ; $SD=1.04$ )***                    | 3.89 (1.09) <sup>P,R</sup>       | 3.55 (0.99) <sup>V,R</sup> | 4.39 (0.85) <sup>V,P</sup> |
| Family oriented<br>( $M=3.97$ ; $SD=0.85$ )***          | 3.91 (0.84) <sup>P,R</sup>       | 3.67 (0.81) <sup>V,R</sup> | 4.19 (0.82) <sup>V,P</sup> |
| Fashionable<br>( $M=3.91$ ; $SD=0.84$ )                 | 3.88 (0.85)                      | 3.93 (0.70)                | 3.95 (0.90)                |
| Stereotypically country<br>( $M=2.70$ ; $SD=1.13$ )     | 2.75 (1.14)                      | 2.82 (0.98)                | 2.57 (1.19)                |

Significant at \* $\alpha=0.05$ ; \*\* $\alpha=0.01$ ; \*\*\* $\alpha=0.001$

## Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to compare the destination images between three inquiry groups. Prior research compared visitors and residents (Ryan & Aicken, 2010) and repeat and first-time visitors (Morais & Lin, 2010). The current study expands on prior studies by including three groups of inquirers: visitors (i.e., inquired and visited in the two years preceding study), potential visitors (i.e., inquired, but did not visit in the two years preceding study), and residents of the Austin area.

In general, residents had the highest level of agreement with image items, followed by visitors (i.e., inquired and visited in the two years preceding the study), and potential visitors (i.e., inquired but did not visit in the two years preceding the study). A number of the items resulted in significant differences between all three inquiry groups. Results provide practical implications for promoting to potential visitors in an effort to convert them to visitors. In particular, some of the items where potential visitors had the lowest levels of agreement, such as Weird being second and Unlike the rest of Texas the fourth lowest ranked items for potential visitors. A similar item, Eclectic, was also significantly different between all three groups with a similar pattern. However, Eclectic was not as near the bottom of the ranking for any of the three groups. In fact, it was second when pooling and ranking all three groups' level of agreement for the 19 items in the study. Visitors also had a significantly lower level of agreement than residents, but significantly higher than potential visitors with these three items (i.e., Eclectic, Weird, Unlike the rest of Texas).

Eclectic, Weird, and Unlike the rest of Texas could be used to create a series of testimonials (e.g., short videos) by residents and frequent visitors to highlight why they feel Austin is such a destination and others should visit. Testimonials could highlight not only businesses (e.g., retail stores, restaurants, attractions) that reflect this image of Austin, but also areas of the city. Such testimonials could also be written pieces in materials such as the

visitor guide. In addition to local residents, frequent visitors could also be recruited to provide testimonials. Frequent visitors could highlight the reasons they continue to visit the destination and the variety of attractions and things to do that make the destination unique and keep such visitors returning frequently. Visitors could also highlight areas and/or venues they explored over time as they became more familiar with the destination. From a residents' perspective, the testimonials could portray a "staycation" theme of why they would rather stay in Austin and experience the Eclectic, Weird, and Unlike the rest of Texas images than visit other destinations. The testimonials are more general, but might be complimented by frequent visitors and residents developing itineraries that potential and other visitors might utilize to plan their own trips.

In addition to and/or as a complement to the testimonials, the study destination could expand their "ITINERARY IDEAS" portion of the website to include more specific itineraries that highlight the Eclectic, Weird, and Unlike the rest of Texas images. Currently, the "ITINERARY IDEAS" link of the destination's website highlights individual businesses that reflect themes such as "Fresh for Foodies", "Get Outside", and "Flavors of Austin". Developing itineraries that include multiple facets of the visitor experience (e.g., attractions, restaurants, accommodations) would help provide a more holistic view of why the destination is Eclectic, Weird, and Unlike the rest of Texas. For example, frequent visitors could provide their "Ideal weekend getaway" including accommodation, restaurants for specific meals, daytime activities, and nighttime entertainment venues. Frequent visitors might also highlight their favorite event(s) to attend in Austin along with their ideal accommodation and restaurants to complete the trip to participate in the event. Local residents could provide an itinerary based on a "staycation". Residents' "staycation" itineraries could highlight how they prefer to spend a day or few days in Austin when they have free time. In addition to the itineraries of frequent visitors and residents, the profiles (i.e., demographics, interests,

preferred activities/hobbies) could be included in the testimonials. The profiles could help potential visitors identify with the individuals providing the testimonial and/or itinerary.

Given the impact the visitor industry can have on the environment of a destination, it is important to note the significant differences between residents, visitors, and potential visitors regarding this item in the study. All three groups had significantly different levels of agreement with Austin with the Environmentally friendly image item, with residents having the highest level of agreement, followed by visitors. Currently, the destination's website does not have a specific listing of environmentally friendly businesses and practices. To allow visitors and potential visitors to learn more about such businesses and practices, a specific page could be generated that lists area businesses by sector that are environmentally friendly. In addition, to add to the "ITINERARY IDEAS" offered on the destination CVB's website, one or more itineraries could be developed that highlight environmentally friendly businesses. These type of efforts would provide more awareness of such practices in the study destination for potential visitors, as well as recent visitors. Such a program could also motivate other businesses to promote their environmentally friendly practices and/or incorporate more such efforts into their business practices to be listed on such a webpage. To further educate visitors and potential visitors of the importance of being environmentally friendly in Austin, residents could be recruited to provide testimonials that encourage visitors to act in environmentally friendly ways and reasons it is important to behave in such a manner to sustain the quality of life of residents, which visitors also enjoy. This could help inform visitors and potential visitors that the visitor industry is important to local Austin residents, but doing so in an environmentally friendly manner is good for local residents and visitors.

## Conclusion

A destination image is essentially what a destination is trying to create by marketing, with the goal of positively affecting potential travelers' decisions (Jenkins, 1999). As a result, creating and promoting a destination image(s) is one of the biggest challenges (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003) and is of interest to not only practitioners, but also academics (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). This study took an approach to build upon prior research that compared visitors and residents (Ryan & Aicken, 2010) and first-time and repeat visitors (Morais & Lin, 2010) by comparing three groups: residents, visitors, potential visitors.

The study and its results are not without limitations and opportunities for future research. First, the scree plot and parallel analysis of principal components analysis indicated the items in the study were one dimensional. As a result, the image items were analyzed as items rather than reduced to components that represented the items. Future research should examine development of additional image items and/or complementing the existing list from other studies, such as more general items. Future research could also include testing additional items unique to the study destination. It would be interesting to identify which general and unique items load on the same component or factor.

Second, the study utilized a convenience sample of inquirers of the study destination's CVB. This was done to ensure the respondents had expressed an interest in the study destination and would be able to respond to the questionnaire appropriately. Inherently, there are numerous information sources from which potential and actual visitors, as well as residents, can be informed of travel destinations. Identifying additional sources of potential and recent travelers to the study destination would be beneficial in a few ways. First, the sample would become more representative of the population potentially interested in and having actually visited the study destination. Second, the results of including other information sources as possible sources for a sample will enable destinations to compare their

own marketing and promotional materials with the images received from other sources to determine if they are consistent.

While much research has been conducted regarding destination image, it is important to continue to monitor for destinations from an applied perspective. The results of such studies are imperative for destinations to make informed decision as to the image potential and actual visitors have a respective destination and the modifications to the destination's efforts that may be necessary.

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