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"THE POTENTIAL ATTRACTIVENESS OF UZBEKISTAN. DESIGNING STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE THE CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLIC BY ANALYSING OFFICIAL TOURISM IMAGE AND CONDUCTING AT-DESTINATION SURVEYS"

"EL ATRACTIVO POTENCIAL DE UZBEKISTÁN. DISEÑO DE ESTRATEGIAS PARA PROMOCIONAR LA REPÚBLICA CENTROASIÁTICA MEDIANTE EL ANÁLISIS DE LA IMAGEN OFICIAL TURÍSTICA Y LA REALIZACIÓN DE ENCUESTAS EN EL DESTINO"

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THE POTENTIAL ATTRACTIVENESS OF UZBEKISTAN. DESIGNING STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE THE CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLIC BY ANALYSING OFFICIAL TOURISM IMAGE AND CONDUCTING AT-DESTINATION SURVEYS

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abstract

Republic of Uzbekistan is a budding tourist destination offering huge potential. The country lies on the famous Silk Road and boasts a wealth of heritage sites, making it a hugely attractive prospect for the global market. Somewhat surprisingly, there appears to be a huge shortage of existing scientific reading on tourism and virtually no studies based on intensive field work carried out on site in Uzbekistan. To resolve this problem to some extent, this article intends to review official promotional material for the country and then analyze the results of a survey with tourists within the country and individuals working within the tourism industry within the country.. The conclusions of our study reveal a gap between what the Government is relying on to promote the country's image and the experience of the travellers.

Keywords: tourist destination, Silk Road, cultural tourism, ex-Soviet Republics, perceived experience.

resumen

La República de Uzbekistán es un incipiente destino turístico con enorme potencial. El país se encuentra en la famosa Ruta de la Seda y cuenta con una gran riqueza de sitios Patrimonio de la Humanidad, lo que le aporta una perspectiva muy atractiva para el mercado global. Sorprendentemente, parece haber una enorme escasez de aportaciones científicas sobre turismo en Uzbekistán y prácticamente ningún estudio basado en el trabajo de campo intensivo. Para resolver en cierta medida este problema, este artículo pretende revisar el material promocional oficial para el país, para posteriormente analizar los resultados de una encuesta realizada a los turistas dentro del país y a trabajadores locales del sector turístico, como agentes de viaje, guías o empleados de hoteles. Las conclusiones de nuestro estudio revelan que existe una brecha entre lo que el gobierno toma de referencia para promover la imagen del país y la experiencia de los viajeros.

Palabras Clave: destino turístico, Ruta de la Seda, turismo cultural, Repúblicas Ex-soviéticas, experiencia percibida.

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1. introduction

Tourism in new and far-away destinations is on the rise. There are a whole host of new territories with spectacular natural resources and historical and cultural sites, and which are now beginning to fiercely promote these. We are dealing with a vast region that remained hidden to potential visitors as just another part of the vast sprawl of what was the USSR. Central Asia and its five republics began to emerge on the global tourism map back in the 1990s and currently promise huge development potential. As we have already said, Central Asia offers considerable tourism potential, yet it has attracted very little attention from the academic world (Kantarci, 2007a). In fact, our thorough examination of existing reading on the subject in the main international magazines and journals on tourism has revealed only five articles on one or more of the Central Asian republics. Although all these articles are certainly of interest, they seek clearly different objectives and rely on different approaches, meaning we are still lacking a coherent and consistent basis for undertaking research on tourism in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (Thompson, 2004; Kantarci, 2007a and b; Palmer, 2009; Li, Kang, Reisinger & Kim 2012).

In this contribution to the subject, we will focus on Uzbekistan, the country with the greatest appeal in terms of heritage due to the prominence of its cities along the Silk Road. Let us remember that the Silk Road plays a dominant role in the country's cultural, historical and architectural appeal (Kantarci, 2007a) by bringing it closer to outsiders, seeing as though the vast route used to linked up Europe, and particularly the Turkish world, with China for many centuries. In fact, the Silk Road is currently one of the products the WTO is specifically promoting, as it involves the participation of numerous Governments and will ultimately help preserve and protect a rich architectural heritage.

The main purpose of this article is to provide a study of tourism in Uzbekistan based on an in-depth analysis of the aspects on which the country's image has been built, coupled with at-destination surveys to quiz foreign tourists and local operators on their travel experiences within the country. Tourists were asked to explain their image of Uzbekistan before arriving and explain how this image has changed over the course of their stay in the country. Our work is certainly different to that of K. Thompson in her study of Kyrgyzstan, who opted for a methodology that shifted between intensive field work and direct but unstructured interviews obtained during her travels across the country (Thompson, 2004). It is also different to the work of K. Kantarci, which focused on Turkish tourists and business people travelling to Central Asia (Kantarci 2007a and b), and the more recent article by K. Palmer on tourism and the construction of ethnic and national identity in these five

republics, particularly in relation to Kyrgyzstan (Palmer, 2009), and the work of Li, Kang, Reisinger and Kim on the perception of Korean tourists of their visit to the region (Li, Kang, Reisinger and Kim, 2012).

2. the importance of Uzbekistan to tourism in the ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia

Uzbekistan spans 447,000 km² and was home to 30,241,000 inhabitants in 2013. It boasts the most clearly defined and prestigious tourism image of the entire region since four of its cities are included on the UNESCO World Heritage list (Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva and Shakhrisabz), all of which lie on the ancient Silk Road route. The images and photographs of Uzbekistan included in the travel supplements of the leading western newspapers and magazines and also in the advertisements broadcast on certain global TV channels (CNN, Al Jazhira, Euronews, etc.) are nothing short of breathtaking. It can come as little surprise that this has aroused the interest of international tour operators (Kantarci, 2007a) and is doubtlessly shaping the political and economic priorities of the nation's Government in support of tourism. In this regard, Uzbekistan receives a significant contingent of foreign tourists estimated 975.000 for 2011 and 1.969.000 in 2013. It is of official statistic supported and published by the WTO, but that seem to be the result of estimates general and also express discontinuities in the series annual.

Yet despite its greater relative visibility and allure, Uzbekistan has a number of features and attributes in common with the other post-Soviet republics of Central Asia in terms of their tourism appeal. Firstly, promoting tourism helps project an appealing and idealised image of a country seeking greater exposure. An image rooted in ethnic and cultural aspects to offer a friendly and welcoming vision of nations that often conceal serious political problems associated with authoritarian rule. Secondly, the tourism industry can provide a huge boost to the economy and drive development in regions rich in resources, but which are still reeling from the loss of the subsidies and aid they used to receive before the break-up of the USSR (Palmer, 2009). In fact, all Governments have rolled out plans to create free trade zones in tourist areas with the aim of encouraging the construction of new hotels, camping sites and related activities (Kantarci, 2007a). Thirdly, the tourism trade is focused on natural sightseeing destinations and, in particular, on the historical cities lying along the Silk Road and the same can be said for the four other republics in the region. As it happens, both Central Asia and Uzbekistan traverse various bioclimatic regions, ranging from Alpine-like mountains and vast open spaces to extremely dry steppe regions (Kantarci, 2007a). Together with these

resources, the wealth of monuments and the spectacular sense of how life used to be dominate the experience of travellers to the country. Lastly, the entire region has deeply-rooted cultural and historical ties with Turkey and above all with Russia (or better said with the rest of the post-Soviet region), enabling it to target two major nearby sources of tourism. There are a total of 14 flights a week from Istanbul to Tashkent, in comparison to 28 from Moscow to the Uzbek capital, five to Samarkand and three to Bukhara, without forgetting the other flights from Saint Petersburg and other Russian cities to Uzbekistan, thus indicating that the Central Asian Republic has closer ties to its neighbour than to the former Ottoman Empire, now of course Turkey (in fact, Russia receives a significant number of immigrants from Uzbekistan). On this particular point, a number of experts and investors have stressed the need for all Central Asian countries to partner up to promote tourism (Kantarci, 2007a) by harnessing the strong ties they already have with their biggest neighbours.

In relation to the prominent role played by World Heritage Sites in luring tourists to Central Asia and to Uzbekistan in particular, we would make the following classical observations. The UNESCO World Heritage label is invariably used for both national aggrandisement and to secure a competitive edge against other global competitors vying for tourists (Ashworth & Turnbridge, 1990; Drost, 1996). These sites must not only be promoted but also protected (Drost, 1996), thus heavily enhancing the identity of the country in question and playing on its historical appeal, while also providing an immediate economic return, something the authorities rarely shy away from.

3. the pillars of tourism in Uzbekistan: identity, history and economic development

As already mentioned, the surge in tourism to new countries such as Uzbekistan also allows them to strengthen their identity as an independent territory, project an alluring image beyond their frontiers and stimulate growth in a sector offering huge future potential. For this reason, the Government and a whole host of private players have been pushing strongly to boost visits to the region since the 1990s.

Without doubt, in Uzbekistan and the other Central Asian republics their historical past as independent nation states is extremely diffuse. Uzbekistan only became a republic when the Soviet Union came together, making it the fatherland of the Uzbeks, although it also has significant minorities groups of Russians, Tajiks, Koreans and Kazakhs. In 1991, with the break-up of the USSR, the country faced the fresh challenge of presenting itself to the world as an independent nation and one clearly mapped out on the world atlas. In this regard, tourism has played a decisive

role in helping the country forge its own national identity (Palmer, 2009); an identity forever linked to cultural and ethnic heritage that embraces its pre-Soviet past. The new nation stands out on the world map and has also been busy promoting itself in the mass media as an intriguing place to visit. We would single out two new ideas that bring together identity, tourism and nation-building. Firstly, these countries maintain extremely close ties with Russia. As already mentioned, it was the Soviet Union that assigned ethnic meaning to each of the Central Asian republics and it is widely agreed that their independence and new identities can be put down to the emergence of nationalism following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Kolossoff, 1999; Palmer, 2009). Secondly, the political and economic changes in Central Asian countries over the years have coincided with a marked increase in their demand as holiday destinations, with tourists looking for nostalgia for the past, heritage, spirituality and to learn, among others (Kantarci, 2007a). Therefore, the appeal of the region's historical heritage rooted in the Silk Road has become the main magnet drawing people to Uzbekistan and, to a lesser extent, to its neighbouring republics.

Focusing on the four main hubs of Uzbek tourism, namely Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva and the less internationally known Shakhrisabz, these can be interpreted using the two classical approaches to tourism in respect of historical centres to have risen in prominence in recent years (Chan, Milne, Fallon & Pohlmann, 1996). Thus, adopting a top-down approach to focus on these specific examples, we can discern a certain homogeneity between these cities and their scapes and scenery with other similar examples (Chan et al, 1996). The remnants of their medieval past can still be felt in these Uzbek cities, reflected in their main buildings and architecture, as can their intercultural ties (through the Silk Road), exoticism and the attributes of a secular community of inhabitants used to receiving curious visitors, pilgrims and, in a nutshell, tourists. On a different scale of things, the bottom-up approach focuses on describing the unique and attractive elements of each city (Chan, Milne, Fallon and Pohlmann, 1996). Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva are "unique", where demand for the cities, their perception in the eyes of tourists before arriving there and their experience once at the World Heritage Site are all studied on-site from the information gleaned from tourists, so enabling local and national authorities to improve their tourism planning.

Without a shadow of a doubt, all these interpretations of tourism, such as the urban treasures Uzbekistan has to offer thanks to its Silk Route past, have a significant economic undercurrent, starting out with the fact that such attractive and unspoilt destinations promise enormous future development potential (Palmer, 2009). It was estimated a few years back that there were in the region of 500 tourism firms operating in Uzbekistan, meaning the creation of a specific cluster

has become a priority for both the country's Government and the private players involved (Kantarci, 2007a and b). Some studies have explored the presence of foreign investors in the country, mainly Turks and Russians. Their decision to back Uzbek tourism can be put down to the forecast growth for the country in the mid term, the relative stability it offers and the conditions foreign capital can expect to receive, including cheap and relatively well-trained labour (Kantarci, 2007b). To create a favourable climate for further developing the sector, the country has also rolled out specific measures aimed at bringing in foreign capital. Specifically, it should be remembered that to entice visitors a number of large projects have been developed, including the modernisation of Tashkent airport and the work to improve regional airports; the construction of tourism hotels along the Silk Route; the construction of hotels and infrastructure for visitors to the Chimgan mountains; and the opening of theme parks across the country (Cabrini, 2002; WTO, 2005a and b; Kantarci, 2007).

This commitment to tourism, which involves a large number of local and foreign players, is linked to the relatively isolated and peripheral location of Uzbekistan. Indeed, various authors have stressed the fact that territories such as Uzbekistan present certain accessibility problems in that they are located far away from the main markets; demand fluctuations between seasons; an economic context wherein traditional industries are on the decline, plus an underdeveloped economy with limited future options beyond investment in endogenous resources; a preponderance of small- and medium-sized enterprises; heavy reliance on decision-making centres and the existence of imitated infrastructure (Weaver & Elliot, 1996; Wanhill, 1997; Baum & Hagen, 1999; Pearce, 2002); all aspects observable in Uzbekistan and which are also apparent from the results of our surveys conducted in the country. A final factor surely influencing the tourism experience within the country is the near-total dependence on air connections and tour operators located in urban hubs, which ultimately control and choose which international connections are to be set up between markets and destinations (Lundgren, 1972; Pearce, 2002).

Before we analyse the tourism image of Uzbekistan and the results of our work in the country, it is worth pointing out that destination image is a fluid concept (Litvin & Mouri, 2009) because the different segments of the market appear to be affected by the individual and personal experience and by the efforts made by the destination to enhance self-satisfaction (Li et al, 2012). In this regard, it has been insisted that general travel conditions to Central Asia include barriers and decision influencers so as to shape the satisfaction of tourists with their experience (Kantarci, 2007a). It is therefore extremely important to find out directly how their perceptions have changed during their visit, while also analysing the image that private tourism players (workers

and owners of inbound tourism firms and hotels) have of international tourism. Applying this approach we can learn more about tourism in Uzbekistan, including its enormous potential and the steps that should be taken to ensure that visits to the Jewel of the Silk Road are an unforgettable and genuinely unique experience.

4. the promotional image of Uzbekistan

Destination image plays a significant role in destination choice. There is no definitive meaning of destination image. Lawson and Baud-Bovy (1977) defined destination image as the expression of all knowledge, impressions, prejudices and emotional thoughts an individual or group has of a particular object or place. Similarly, Oxenfeldt (1974-75) and Dichter (1985) viewed image as an overall or total impression.

Destination image plays two important roles in behaviour: to influence destination choice in decision-making process and to condition the after-decision-making behaviours including participation (on-site experience), evaluation (satisfaction) and future behavioural intentions (intention to revisit and willingness to recommend) (Ashworth & Goodall, 1988; Mansfeld, 1992; Cooper, Fletcher, Gilbert & Wanhill, 1993; Bigne et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2005). Those destinations with strong, positive images are more likely to be considered and chosen in the travel decision process (Goodrich, 1978; Woodside & Lyonski, 1989).

There are undoubted competitive advantages of the national tourist product of Uzbekistan, which has a significant number of historical, archaeological, architectural and natural sites, including those associated with the Great Silk Road, which has attracted major flows of foreign tourists into the country. The unique cultural heritage of Uzbekistan, its various forms of art and traditional crafts, the mentality of the people, its folklore, gastronomy and other factors all distinguish the country from its nearest neighbour. The country is becoming increasingly competitive in the international tourist market.

Based on the offer of travel agencies and own experience the following insights can be made: there is a large variety of tourism packages organized by local tour operators. However, the cities included in a standard tour in Uzbekistan tend to be Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, which preserve many historical places of interest, with a tour typically lasting eight to ten days (around two to three days per city). The city Shakhrisabz is also frequently included in the itinerary. Therefore, tourism in Uzbekistan is traditionally associated with these cities; all listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Specific kinds of tourism such as ecotourism, geotourism, extreme tourism, medical and cultural tourism, horse riding, camel riding, driving, skiing, fishing and rafting are actively being promoted here, but have

yet to receive much demand from international visitors. The country of Uzbekistan is not a well-known tourism destination despite having a lot to offer.

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish the uniqueness of Uzbekistan, especially in relation to its geographical position in the heart of the Silk Road. Moreover, almost all the countries lying on the Great Silk Road and especially those located in the same region are promoting their tourism product based on the "Silk Road" brand, which partially blurs and obscures the uniqueness of each country (UNDP, 2007).

Why is Uzbekistan so attractive and what distinguishes it from other hundreds of tourist destinations? We might say that visitors to Uzbekistan are mainly interested in historical and cultural tourism. This presumption can be explained by the presence of some of the most ancient cities in the world and by the fact that the country was the hub of the Great Silk Road, plus the fantastic architectural masterpieces of different historical periods of Central Asian development.

That said, there are no empirical studies enabling us to reliably identify the elements that mark the country apart and define its image. Many authors have researched the formation process of tourist destination image. The perception of a tourist destination is based on the processing of information over a period. This information is organized into a mental concept full of meaning for the individual.

From the research of Balogly & McCleary (1999) we can group factors that form image in the minds of customers, detecting stimulus (information sources, previous experience, distribution) and personal (socio-psychological) factors. Variety and type of information sources used about destinations and tourists' socio-demographic characteristics all influence the perceptions and cognitions of destination attributes. Somewhere in the process, these perceptions, together with travellers' socio-psychological motivations, form feelings towards destinations.

Some of the relationships tested confirmed the findings of Holbrook (1978) regarding the relationship between information sources and perceptual/cognitive evaluations and those of Stern and Krakover (1993) in terms of the relationship among perceptual/cognitive, affective, and overall image. Because of the positive contribution of the variety (amount) of information sources to perceptual/cognitive evaluations, destinations should find ways to make tourists use multiple information sources. In light of all this, and to facilitate strategic decision-making to promote tourism and ensure coherent and effective communication and exposure of the destination, it would be wise to explore our knowledge of the elements involved in the process whereby tourists form their mental image: their

characteristics, motivations and the sources from which they obtain their information.

According to Crompton (1979) and Balogly & McCleary (1999) the major source of influence when choosing a destination is information from the social environment, formed by friends and family. Therefore, destinations should keep in mind that providing a pleasant experience for their tourists has a major effect on the development of positive images for non-visitors. However, not all potential tourists have access to such word of mouth information. As we are dealing with an emerging destination, information availability is conditional on geographical, historical and cultural proximity to the destination. The more remote the tourist's home country is, the more important impersonal means of communication become.

In this regard, NC "Uzbektourism" has relied on pull-type communication systems in the conventional mass media. An advertising campaign was launched in May 2013 on the Euronews TV channel devoted to the economic, investment and tourist potential of Uzbekistan. A 35-second promotional video titled "Welcome to Uzbekistan" was broadcast in English and Russian languages three times a day during prime-time television in the morning and evening hours. In October-December 2013, Euronews started to broadcast programmes on the historical centres of Uzbekistan – Samarkand, Shakhrisabz, Bukhara and Khiva. In December 2013 Euronews began to broadcast a 30-second advertisement on the tourism potential of Uzbekistan. Most recently, in December 2013 the following slogan was created for Uzbekistan: *"Uzbekistan – the symbol of the magic east"*, although Uzbektourism has yet to use this slogan at any tourism fairs.

Starting in September 2014, Euronews began broadcasting a commercial video about tourism in Uzbekistan. Moreover, the international channel has launched the new City-tour programme, which presents the city of Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. A series of "Uzbek Life" video reels is being broadcast to showcase the country's main tourist destinations, such as Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva. The TV commercial is the product of the negotiations between the state-owned company Uzbektourism and Euronews held in May 2014 and is a further example of the drive to offer information on the rich historical and cultural legacy of Uzbekistan across the global market, starting with European countries, reports Uzdaily.com. One of the leading European channels, Euronews has 24-hour news broadcasts, plus cultural and scientific programs in 155 countries worldwide and in 13 different languages. Channel viewers total 370 million. This will help the world find out more about Uzbekistan and its ancient cities, which the Great Silk Road once passed through (Annual Press Release of Uzbektourism, 2013).

The use of conventional pull media is further supplemented through online information sources. The main tourism website in Uzbekistan is www.welcomeuzbekistan.uz; available in three languages (should be nine languages from early 2015), the site offers information on tourist activities in Uzbekistan. Apart of this generic website, all the individual provinces of Uzbekistan (there are 12 provinces in total) are currently bidding to attract more tourists. Work has got under way to improve local infrastructure and the regions have been setting up their own websites with more detailed information on their province. Two of them have already launched their websites: Kashkadarya and Khorezm provinces (www.visitkashkadarya.uz; www.visitkhorezm.uz) (Annual Press Release of Uzbektourism, 2014).

Involvement in tourism fairs is the chosen path for push communication. To promote domestic tourism in the country, the Tashkent International Tourism Fair (TITF) "Tourism on the Silk Road" is held every year. In 2014, the 20th annual TITF was held. One of the main aims of NC "Uzbektourism" is to promote Uzbekistan across international markets. NC "Uzbektourism" takes part in numerous international tourism fairs, including the likes of "FITUR" (Spain), "ITB Berlin" (Germany), "EMITT" (Turkey), "MITT" (Russia) and "Baltour" (Latvia), among others. (Uzbektourism database, 2014).

Apart from tourism fairs, press trips and fam trips are also staged. In accordance with the decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, NC Uzbektourism and local travel agencies hold a guest program called the "Mega-info-tour" four times a year. The purpose of the project is to introduce the tourist potential of Uzbekistan to the global community by staging no-cost welcome tours for leading foreign tour operators and mass media representatives in Uzbekistan (Regulation of Council Cabinet no. 110-f, Tashkent, 2011).

To help fortify the country's image as a tourist destination, an effective brand is of crucial importance. The tourist community of Uzbekistan believes that a successful tourism brand not only helps strengthen the position of the national tourist product in overseas markets, but also enhances the overall image and credibility of the country as a tourist destination.

In May 2014 the country's tourist logo received official status (Fig. 1), although it had already been actively used in tourist activities. According to Marat (2009), Uzbekistan's Government has to this point monopolized the process by limiting the participation of domestic audiences in the development of the country's brand image.

Figure 1. Official Logo of Uzbekistan



Source: <http://www.welcomeuzbekistan.uz>

Essentially, the Government of Uzbekistan treats tourism as a key sector in the country's development and in projecting an appealing image. The striking images of the World Heritage cities located along the Silk Road are ultimately intended to present the country as a magical and exotic destination steeped in history and charm. The process of marketing and selling the destination has followed traditional channels, with a clear preference for exposure through global television channels and the Internet. Uzbekistan is widely known in Russia, and somewhat less so in the Turkish world. For this reason the message must also be sent out to the European and Asian markets, where the future growth potential is undisputed.

5. empirical study

As already discussed, there are no empirical studies tackling the tourism phenomenon in Uzbekistan from the standpoint of visiting tourists, nor have there been any aggregate figures published showing the opinions of tour operators following their contact with the tourists. The following empirical analysis attempts to bridge this gap by providing a descriptive and exploratory investigation of the opinions of tourists and those working in the tourism industry in Uzbekistan.

5.1. sample

Two surveys were conducted in Uzbekistan. Tourists who visited Uzbekistan in 2012 form the target group of the first survey. The survey was conducted among returned tourists who had visited Uzbekistan only once. The results were obtained from a sample of 51 international tourists, who rated various aspects of the destination, including their satisfaction. The survey was carried out in two languages: English and Russian. The questionnaire consisted of ten questions. The tourist survey was conducted through the Internet via personal emails sent out to tourists who had visited the country in 2012 taken from the database of an Uzbek travel agency. The results of the survey show that 17 respondents are citizens of the Russian Federation while 34 are citizens of other countries, mostly European, but also a number of Asian countries such as India, Pakistan, Singapore and Malaysia. The questionnaire contained an open-ended question in order to study the holistic component of the destination. In any case, to improve the results of this small sample selected tourists representative of those

who tend to visit Uzbekistan. This representation is based on a direct knowledge from its features and in the fact that we have shared to them a conventional tour of the country.

The second survey was conducted among employees of the tourism sector in Uzbekistan. Workers of the tourism sector completed the same number (51) of questionnaires. The survey posed similar questions so as to be able to compare the assertions of both sides and to understand the opinion of potential opinion leaders and contact staff. The survey was carried out in person. We tended to target tour guides for our interviews as they have direct contact with the travellers, making the information more reliable. If the services of a tour guide are included in the tour package, the tour guide typically accompanies the group over the duration of their trip. Therefore, tour guides always maintain direct contact with visitors and therefore have a better idea of the different types of tourist, along with their preferences and expectations. Finally, it should be noted that the selection of interviewees has been made from a direct knowledge of receptive what professionals working in this Central Asian nation,

5.2. methodology for compiling the information

The members of the sample responded to a questionnaire containing ten questions on their reasons for travelling to Uzbekistan, their pre-trip image of the country and its appeal, the sources of information they consulted when preparing for the trip and their satisfaction with the experience. Many of the questions related to these topics were dichotomous in nature, with zero meaning no characteristic and one meaning presence of characteristic in the subject. This approach was chosen with two goals in mind: simplifying the questionnaire while obtaining solid, reliable responses.

The questionnaire was self-administered. Although in certain cases it was given in person, we mainly relied on e-mail to send out and retrieve the information.

5.3. analysis and results

The information obtained from the 102 individuals was treated with the IBM SPSS Statistics 21 statistical package. The responses were subjected to univariate statistical analysis: means and deviations (to summarise the numerical variables) and frequency tables present the categorical answers.

Of the 102 participants, 51 were tour operators. A little over half were tour guides (52.9%), followed by hotel or travel agency managers (27.5%) and hotel receptionists (7.8%). Tour operators of travel agencies made up the smallest group. On average, respondents

have been working in the sector for 16.19 years, although this figure is not particularly representative, as 12 years of standard deviation were nearly reached. The values range from two years' experience for the least experienced worker to 39 years for the longest serving worker. The age group is similarly broad, with respondents aged from 23 to 62 and with an average age of 40. By gender, the sample was well balanced, although women make up the majority (55%).

The same picture emerged in our sample of tourists, although in this case women accounted for even more of the total (67%). The age gap is greater than for our sample of professionals, with the tourists aged between 25 and 75, with an average age of 43. In the tourist sample, information was gathered on their country of origin. As these origins are far and ranging (the majority being European - Russian, French, Italian, Spanish and Belgian - but with the sample also including Pakistanis, Malaysians and Singaporeans), and with the aim of fencing off the "most proximate" tourists, the decision was reached to separate the Russian tourists (a third of the total) from the others.

Following the same chronological order of their experience when ordering the information, respondents were quizzed about their initial knowledge and awareness of the country. Friends and family turned out to be the most important source of information (32.9%), followed by Internet (24.7%), books (21.2%) and college or university (21.2%). Magazines came in considerably lower in order of importance (3.5%).

In relation to the sources of information that tourists rely on when preparing for their trip, travel guides claimed top spot (70.6%), just ahead of word of mouth from friends and family (68.6%). Travel agencies and the Internet were used by 62.7% of respondents, and so despite lying last can still be considered relevant resources of information ahead of the trip.

To gauge the pre-trip image of the country, respondents were asked about the attributes with which they associated the country as a tourist destination. The Silk Route (26.5%) and architectural beauty (25.5%) led the way in relation to the destination's organic image, closely followed by the presence of historically interesting cities (21.6%).

In addition to the leading attributes, we wished to obtain a closer look at how the destination is perceived holistically. Respondents were therefore asked to score their pre-trip image of Uzbekistan on a Likert five-point scale. The average score (3.4) is slightly positive and represents the opinion of the sample, given that the standard deviation is not high (0.707).

With these sources of information and pre-trip conceptions, the motivations that prompted the tourists to make the trip were largely cultural (67.6%). The

percentage of tourists that visited Uzbekistan to spend their holidays there is much higher than the percentage that travelled to the country on business (41.2% vs. 11.8%). Gastronomy and religion were also present, albeit to the lesser extent (13.7% and 5.9%, respectively).

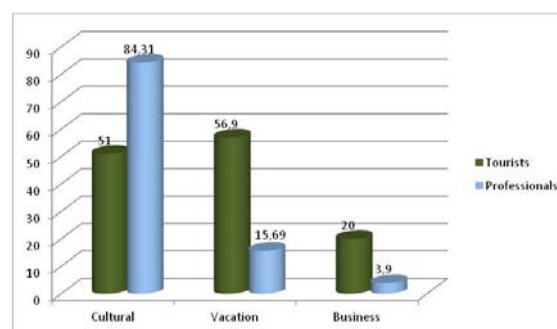
To gauge post-trip satisfaction, respondents were asked if they would revisit the country. The response was affirmative in 94.1% of cases, pointing to a high degree of post-trip satisfaction.

So as to detect possible discrepancies between, on the one hand, the opinions of the professionals working in the industry as to the motivations of the tourists and, on the other, the motivations actually expressed by the tourists, the responses of both groups were compared by analysing contingency tables through a chi-squared test. The chi-squared obtained was significant ($p < 0.05$) and the make-up of the table: 43 professionals believed that tourists were motivated by cultural aspects, compared to the 26 tourists who stated as much, clearly showing that the professionals overscore the importance of cultural motivations following the visits (Fig. 2).

Using the same procedure we observed a significant discrepancy ($p < 0.5$) between the weighting of holiday tourism gleaned from the tourists and that perceived by the professionals. Only 13 professionals considered holiday motivations in the visits, compared with the 29 tourists who stated as much. Accordingly, holiday motivations are significantly undervalued by sector professionals.

The procedure was then repeated to verify perceptions in relation to business travel. In this case, although the chi-squared was significant ($p < 0.05$), an analysis of the cells of the contingency table revealed insufficient sample size to be able to make proper use of this procedure, as only two professionals mentioned business tourism (whereas five are required to meet the minimum sample size). This problem was resolved by treating the dichotomous variables involved in the analysis as numerical variables, enabling us to introduce them into a correlation analysis. The analysis corroborates the existence of a negative (-0.248) and significant ($p < 0.05$) correlation between being a professional from the sector and considering the country a business destination. Therefore, professionals indeed undervalue business as a motivating factor for tourists.

Figure 2: Differences in motivation between tourists and tourism professionals (%)

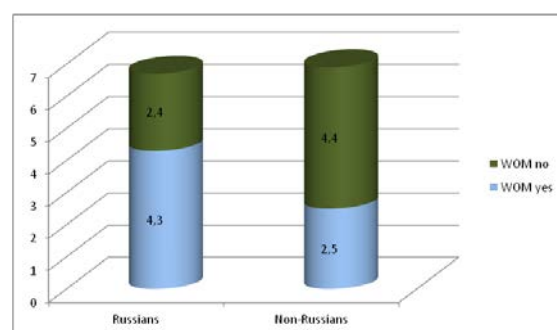


Source: Own development.

To confirm the notion that tourists from “closer” countries could show different behaviour, the analysis of contingency tables with a chi-squared test was once again relied on (more orthodox than the correlation analysis when the variables are categorical). The hypothesis test produced a significant result ($p < 0.05$) and the cell composition enabled us to corroborate that the weighting of word-of-mouth information received from friends and family was greater among tourists hailing from Russia (52.9% of Russian tourists used this channel, versus 20.6% of tourists from other countries) (Fig. 3). Given the results, the same test was conducted with other sources of information but without any further significant findings apart from the interesting fact that no Russian tourists relied on travel guides when preparing for their trip, whereas 44.1% of non-Russians did so.

In line with this, the possibility was raised that the pre-trip image of the destination might be more documented among Russian tourists, given their purportedly greater knowledge of the country plus their greater reliance on word of mouth. To test this, a mean difference t-test was conducted. The difference observed was not significant ($p < 0.05$). Moreover, the mean score of the destination's image among the non-Russian group (3.62) is slightly better than that observed among Russian visitors (3.47).

Figure 3. Different sources of information between Russians and non-Russians



Source: Own development.

Lastly, we analysed how the pre-trip image of the destination was rated by comparing tourists with professionals working within the sector. In this case, the mean difference t-test revealed significant differences ($p < 0.05$), enabling us to conclude that the pre-trip image of the destination is significantly better among tourism professionals (3.57) than it is among tourists (3.24), or, put differently, the tour operators overscore the image that tourists have of the country before arriving there.

Table 1. Differences between tourists and professionals in perceived image of Uzbekistan

Image	Tourists	Professionals	T-Student
Mean	3.2353	3.5686	-2.438*
Standard deviation	0.65079	0.72815	

* significant $p < 0.05$. Source: Own development.

We were unable to conduct any analysis of the relationships between the elements used to build the image and the satisfaction among the tourists. As we already mentioned, satisfaction was measured by asking whether the respondents would revisit the country and all but one claimed they would.

6. discussion and conclusions and implications for tourism planning

In terms of promoting the destination, the figures indicate that segmentation by country of origin has clear benefits to offer when addressing potential demand for tourism. This need to segment would be impossible to deduce from the promotional images of Uzbektourism or the leading private companies operating in the sector. Clearly the markets of the former Soviet Union are the most proximate from a perceptive, cultural and historical standpoint (Kubicek, 1997; Kolossov, 1999). In the specific case of Russia, its proximity is further supplemented with added accessibility (primarily air routes), allowing for a greater flow of traffic. These circumstances entice visits from potential tourists already aware of the destination and who obtain considerable information on Uzbekistan through word of mouth. This makes Russians and the citizens of the ex-Soviet republics a prime target for campaigns based on in-person and online word of mouth. Visits to the destination are of sufficient importance and scale to generate a flow of information capable of building an image, insofar as this information is suitably promoted through the social networks (mainly the viral effect) and through community management actions.

In the case of potential markets further afield, there are insufficient visitor numbers to generate any real or virtual word of mouth, meaning the promotional campaigns and actions of NC Uzbektourism are of

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considerable value and utility. One option would be to promote the country at renowned international tourism fairs, such as FITUR in Spain, or ITB in Germany, and to arrange press trips and fam trips; all push approaches already being used. However, in the mid term these will require support from one or more pull approaches, which will have an immediate effect on how potential tourists view far-away destinations. If we indeed conclude that the Silk Road is the country's greatest draw, it could well be a good idea to engage in destination placement actions to promote the country not only through documentaries (as the country has already been doing), but also through cinema showings, television series and programmes, videos, and even novels. The "Silk Road message" could be a good common theme for joint action by all the emerging destinations of Central Asia. On this point, the WTO's initiative to promote the product as a bridge uniting western and Asian destinations - paying special attention to China's potential - might well prove to be a solid platform from which to come up with a more international, modern, multicultural and integrationist promotion (WTO, 2014). A bet by the promotion of the Silk Road together with the UNWTO and them impressions on its attractive provided by wester travelers, can constitute new elements of an efficient image promotional in the foreign.

Apart from the origin of the tourists being an important factor, our results reveal the need to segment them based on their travel motivation. It goes without saying that cultural motivations are shared by most tourists, yet moving beyond these we spotted two different travel perspectives that are under-appreciated by tour operators, namely holiday travel and business travel. To reach out to these groups it might be wise to carry out an *ex-post*, or after-the-event, segmentation: we know the segments exist, but we cannot clearly identify them. We must therefore reach them by selecting a suitable message and carefully choosing the media to be used. Business tourists could be contacted through joint efforts with international intermediaries, primarily MICE forums. Holiday tourists, on the other hand, are more sensitive to pull systems in building their image of a destination, whether through word of mouth or by ensuring suitable sites are present at the destination. In fact, the country's exotic allure, plus the feeling of security it offers and the desire among many to visit new places might well be sufficient in themselves to bring in a significant volume of tourists to Uzbekistan, the jewel of Central Asia. In the specific case of Uzbekistan, it has again been shown that the country's culture-based approach to tourism and ongoing commitment to promoting the country are more the product of the good and healthy image associated with cultural and leisure holidays among the central motivations of travellers than of the actual importance of being able to visit world renowned monuments, historical cities and museums (Nuryanti, 1996; Antón & González-Reverte, 2007). In

this aspect, is very important for Uzbekistan strengthen the feeling of destiny quiet and well connected by plane

In this regard, and as a final point, let us not forget that Uzbekistan's image was overvalued by those working in the tourism sector. There is a clear and undisputed gap between the country's self-image and the external image is projects. Existing studies on country image have indicated as much and acknowledge differences against and in favour of both aspects. In the case of Uzbekistan, it would appear that the country is veering from the right path, entailing added risk when reaching decisions on how to promote the country. If a country's self-image is overly optimistic, there will be delays in implementing measures to correct aspects perceived externally as negative. Although the data supporting this finding is not enough to make this official, this initial idea is being worked on and should be corroborated in future investigations.

7. limitations and proposals

Our study suffers from the limitations typical of most descriptive, exploratory and transversal studies. The aim of obtaining an initial and measurable approximation has required us to simplify the scales for estimating the variables. Latent variables, such as image or satisfaction, are quantified through a single indicator, detracting somewhat from the value of the results. The task of updating already tested scales to measure these complex constructs has been put off to a later date. That said, we believe the preliminary data obtained will prove very useful when it comes to carrying out this task in future research studies. All the more so when we remember that we are dealing with one of only very few analytical studies into the country's tourism sector designed by a western team; one based on the study of original promotional material and surveys conducted directly in Uzbekistan.

We also believe this limitation to be of little relevance when compared with the limitation associated with the transversal nature of the data. Building the image of a destination is, as we have already mentioned, a dynamic process. Completing the questionnaires at destination clearly lessens the value of the respondents' answers in relation to their pre-trip perceptions and behaviour, which might easily have been swayed or adulterated due to their time already spent in the country and the subjective nature of memory. Yet we also estimate that this study will provide more accurate information available on Uzbekistan. It might be a wise move in future to introduce a longitudinal analysis of the perception process, the decision making on whether to make the trip and the experience at the destination. We would therefore need to find a panel of potential visitors willing to complete a questionnaire both prior to their trip

and upon their return. This type of analysis would surely allow us to deduce causal relationships between variables and to complete in future the analysis we have embarked upon in this initial contribution to the subject.

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