Marketing spiritual tourism: qualitative interviews with private tourism operators in Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper presents a study on marketing of spiritual tourism based upon in-depth interviewing of a sample of the tourism operators in Pakistan. A qualitative approach was adopted; in-depth interviews were conducted with those tourism operators who offered some spiritual experiences in their travel packages. The operators were asked for details about the behaviours, attitudes and experiences of the spiritual tourists in Pakistan. This paper discusses the findings of the interviews regarding the spiritual tourists’ group or individual preferences and the influence of reference groups or opinion leaders on their tourism decisions. The main conclusion of this original study was that Pakistani spiritual tourists prefer to travel with families or friends and are strongly inspired by historical and religious leaders. This can help craft appropriate product and promotion strategies.

Introduction

In this post-modern and high technology era generally people seem to apparently not loose their fascination with spirituality (Goldberg 2007; Raj & Morpeth, 2007; Hill, 2002). Spirituality has become an increasingly important area in social, health and business research (Kiat, Jantos, & Weyden, 2007; Pesut, 2003; Delbecq, 2000). Several industries have accepted the influence of a rise in spirituality (Kale, 2004; Mitroff & Denton, 1999), including the tourism industry (Cohen, 2006; Timothy & Olsen, 2006; Gladstone, 2005; Cohen, 1979).

The tourism industry of Pakistan has been somewhat in disarray and various Governments have been imposing their contrasting philosophies on the tourism industry and have consequently failed (Ahmed, 2004). The People’s Party under the Bhutto regime in the mid seventies tried secularism and opened casinos and dancing clubs in Karachi to attract foreign tourists. In the early eighties, the religious Government of General Zia-ul-Haq tried to lure Islamists throughout the world to come to Pakistan for religious education and training, and/or fight the war against the communist Soviet Union in Afghanistan (Ahmed, 2004; Shahab, 1999). All these Governments failed to realise the more complex needs of their customers and could not present their tourism products according to customers’ needs. Richter (1999) commented that Pakistan had no shortage of cultural/religious/spiritual attractions and some magnificent scenery, yet it has not seen an era of sustainable growth in tourism due to the geopolitical barriers to development.

When the Ministry of Tourism (2005) presented their latest report on tourism in Pakistan, it indicated a 29.4% rise in foreign tourism; from 501,000 in 2003 to 648,000 in 2004. Earlier, various authors described the negative affects of the American invasion of Afghanistan on the Pakistani economy and foreign tourism, which dropped to 70% in 2002 (Ahmed 2004; Khurshid 2003). Currently the tourism market is down due to
political unrest and security crisis; hence the government is looking for some special interest tourism ventures to bring back the tourist dollars in Pakistan. The focus of this paper is the findings from interviews with the tourism operators regarding the preferences of spiritual tourists in Pakistan for individual or group journeys and the influence of reference groups and opinion leaders, in their decision making about spiritual tourism.

**Literature Review**

Spiritual tourism seems to be a newer academic concept but it is certainly not a new phenomenon (Straitwell, 2006; Brown, 1998; Cohen, 1979; Burton, 1855). Based on a review of the literature, interviews with stakeholders in Australia and Pakistan, and the research work of Haq, Wong and Jackson (2008), and Haq and Jackson (2006 a, b & c, 2007), this research defines a spiritual tourist as someone who visits a specific place out of the usual environment, with the intention of spiritual meaning and/or growth, without any overt religious compulsion, which could be religious or non-religious in nature, but within the Divine context, regardless of the main reason for travelling.

In tourism marketing, almost all authors agree that tourists play the most significant role, hence marketers always try to learn the attitude and behaviour of tourists to effectively design and offer their tourism packages (Kotler et al, 2008; Morgan et al, 2004; Morrison, 2002). These researchers have identified several characteristics of tourists that help in designing better marketing strategies. Notably, the preference of travelling alone or in groups; and the influence of reference groups and opinion leaders in making travel decisions (Smith 2007; Moliner et al, 2007; Morais, Dorsch, & Backman, 2004) are the two vital ones that are most relevant to this paper and were frequently mentioned.

**Methodology and Data Analysis**

The ontology of critical realism was effectively adopted for this qualitative study on tourism marketing (Healy & Perry, 2000; Hunt, 1990). Twenty six (26) tourism operators were interviewed in Pakistan by the first author during his visits in August 2007 and April 2008. In-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted where some questions were semi-structured. These tourism operators included the private travel agents and tour operators offering some religious or spiritual tourism products and services. Purposeful snow-ball sampling was adopted where personal links were used to identify suitably knowledgeable respondents (Browne, 2005; Marshall, 1996). The sample size for this study was determined by using the criterion of ‘saturation’, as defined by Patten (2007, p.152): “at the point at which several additional participants fail to respond with new information that leads to the identification of additional themes, the researcher might conclude that the data collection process has become saturated”.

All the interviews were conducted in the offices of the respondents and the time duration ranged from 35 to 70 minutes. The earlier respondents were asked if they would allow the interview to be recorded and they all refused, some harshly. For this reason, all records of the interviews were maintained as written notes. Within these an added emphasis was placed on the critical statements to be used as quotations in this study. The language used
was a mix of English and Urdu, but the quotes were restated again and reconfirmed in English to make sure what the respondents were stating in English. Later they were provided a transcript of the interview for their approval. All interviews were conducted as natural discussions in a less formal environment (Griffee, 2005).

For the purpose of analysis and to preserve the anonymity of response, the respondents were divided into three groups. Content analysis was used to categorise the patterns in the data and the respondents were divided into three groups of operators (Alam, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 2003). The groups and their features are described in the following:

- **Group 1:** Thirteen (13) private tourism operators successfully selling a diverse range of tourism products and services. These agents had an element of religious tourism in their business and offered spiritual tourism packages around Islamabad to shrines belonging to Sufis such as Golra Sharif and Imam Bari.

- **Group 2:** Eight (8) private tourism operators concentrating on pilgrimage and religious tourism in Pakistan and overseas. These companies were the Hajj and Umrah license holders from the Government of Pakistan who marketed these packages further to the Pakistani public. These companies are respected as experts in pilgrimage tourism; they claimed to offer exclusive spiritual tourism packages to shrines of popular Sufis such as Ali Hajveri and Baba Farid in Lahore.

- **Group 3:** This group of five (5) operators offered specialised cultural, religious and spiritual tourism products and services to foreigners specifically. These operators offered special packages to Hindu, Buddhist and Christian destinations that included historic Temples and some Churches built during the British reign.

For data analysis, following the process of Charmaz (2005), Miles and Huberman (1994) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) the interview transcript of each respondent was read many times to identify examples from the story that exemplified the phenomena described. In studying the transcripts and during the process of coding there was a search for patterns of meanings, including the assumptions and interpretations or judgements made by the respondents about spiritual tourism and tourists. The basis for initial coding were the specific concepts and ideas described by the respondents. Therefore the analysis was drawn from the way in which each respondent explained the experiences and understanding of spiritual tourists in terms of their group or individual preferences and the influence of reference groups or opinion leaders on tourism decisions. The detailed responses of the operators regarding these concepts are discussed in the next section.

**Discussion & Analysis**

Two significant categories and themes emerged from the twenty six interviews that were congruent with the literature review (Kotler et al, 2008; Morgan et al, 2004; Kale, 2004). These two categories are discussed and analysed below:

**Social and individual spiritual tourism**

The discussion on the social and individual aspect of spiritual tourism was very dominant in the interviews. Most operators discussed the significance of the number of tourists required to specifically design and offer a tourism package. Ten operators belonging to Group 1 looked at spiritual tourism as a dimension of special interest tourism and
expressed their expertise in tailoring their tourism products and services for all the needs of their customers. All thirteen agreed that spiritual tourism in Pakistan was a social practice and Pakistani people almost always participated in spiritual tourism in groups with families or friends. A manager of a travel company said: “here people travel in groups for religious and spiritual tourism so that they could be seen as pious and religious” (Aug, 2007). He thought that the in-bound spiritual tourists always came in groups, “they (foreign tourists) seem to like to stay close together here (in Pakistan)”.  

A lady who owned her own agency agreed with the group preference for spiritual tourists but she had a different reason, saying that “the group tours are cheaper and that is why families of spiritual tourists prefer to travel in groups” (Aug, 2007). The General Manager of an agency, another lady, thought that “safety and security” was the reason behind the preference for group travel among spiritual tourists in Pakistan (Aug, 2007).  

All eight members of Group 2 differed in their opinion from Group 1 based on the gender of spiritual tourists. These specialists in pilgrimage tourism agreed that Pakistani men did travel as individual spiritual tourists but women always travelled in groups with their family or friends. An operator claimed: “I have never seen a lady travelling alone as a spiritual tourist in my sixteen years of experience in this trade” (Aug, 2007). A young owner of his travel agency and recent business graduate also expressed the significance of group travel among Pakistanis especially women: “I think that it is a cultural thing and let me tell you that it is changing” (Apr, 2008). He was planning with associates in his travel business to introduce tourism packages offering spiritual tourism targeting professional Pakistani women, for domestic and foreign destinations. Five other operators of this group agreed and suggested that the overseas packages for women might include stop-overs at popular shopping destinations.  

The five operators from Group 3 thought that group or single tourism was not a big issue for domestic spiritual tourism in Pakistan. The Methodist Bishop and organiser of Christian tourism said “our local guys do not mind travelling alone or in groups” (Apr, 2008). However these operators agreed that for in-bound foreign tourists, group packages were more effective. This particular operator had studied in Japan and had established his agency in Islamabad with a “sales office” in a friend’s house in Tokyo. He was not interested in local tourists and used to go to Japan twice a year to organise a group of about twenty Japanese tourists and arrange transport, accommodation, food and guidance for their 2-3 weeks spiritual tour to Northern Pakistan. He claimed: “in my business if I do not have a group of at least fifteen Japanese then I drop the tour since I know that I will not make enough money” (Aug, 2007). Another member of Group 3 belonged to a Hindu business family more focussed on the handicraft business. He himself had some secondary interests in tourism for foreign tourists who were interested in Hindu and Buddhist relics in Pakistan. He only offered his travel services to groups of “at least six people already in Pakistan for any reasons and who like to see remains or sacred sites for Hindus and Buddhists” (Apr, 2008).  

**Reference groups and opinion leaders**

The overwhelming majority of all twenty-six respondents emphasised on the significance of reference groups and opinion leaders in spiritual tourism. Eleven members of Group 1 expressed the dependency of their business on referrals. The manager of one agency said:
“we are in the business of happily knowing people for so many years and hence we are successful” (Aug, 2007). Nine operators talked specifically about using celebrities such as movie and sports stars as opinion leaders to promote their tourism packages. The lady owner gave a good example, saying that “in partnership with Golra Sharif I am trying to get some music celebrities to visit and endorse the shrine as spiritual and blessed, then my business will target the younger tourists” (Aug, 2007).

Comparatively, all operators of Group 2 seemed quite narrow with their views, they only expressed Prophet Muhammad and a few Sufis as authentic opinion leaders. A popular operator said: “for so many years we have used Prophet Muhammad and his companions as the only opinion leaders that have motivated millions of Pakistanis and Muslims around the world to visit Mecca and Medina for Hajj and Umrah” (Aug, 2007). In a view that was different from other respondents in this group, one operator said: “recently we have been promoting international spiritual tourism by using the names of Muslim scholars and travellers like Ibn Battuta (the Morroccan) and Sufi Rumi (the Turk) and it is working” (Apr, 2008). A Chief Executive of his travel consultancy also said that the opinion leaders in the Pakistani society have been changing and “one hero is soon replaced by another one” (Apr, 2008). He thought that for spiritual tourism no current personality would fit into the picture, “I think that historical heroes of Pakistan or Islam could be used as the opinion leaders, for example I will myself buy a spiritual travel package to a site attached to Sufi Rumi or Sheikh Saadi (Iranian Sufi poet).

The operators from group 3 were pragmatic in their approach and talked about the dynamics of an opinion leader. One operator from his media experience thought that in the modern world opinion leaders changed frequently and “nowadays every brand has a specific opinion leader, gone are the days when one person could endorse every product from a car to a shaving cream” (Aug, 2007). The Bishop and the Hindu operator were similar to Group 2 and referred to Jesus Christ, Buddha and Rama as the eternal opinion leaders. Yet they also talked about using famous Pakistanis like Imran Khan as opinion leaders to promote spiritual tourism in Pakistan.

Conclusion

This paper supports the significance of ‘knowing your customer’ in marketing of spiritual tourism. The interview analysis and the discussion indicate that local and foreign spiritual tourists in Pakistan prefer spiritual tourism in groups for various reasons, and the locals are more influenced by the historic and religious figures as the reference groups and opinion leaders. This paper implies that product and promotion strategies could be effectively crafted by following the discussion on the two themes presented in this study.

Suggestions for further research

One worthwhile study would obviously involve an attempt to quantify each findings of this qualitative study on spiritual tourism. Another dimension of this study could be to interview the spiritual tourists and other stakeholders, then cross-check their responses on similar angles to the responses of the tourism operators. Further studies could be conducted to apply this paper’s findings to craft product and promotion strategies.
References


