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**Is It the Same Country? Representation of  
Cambodia on Official Tourist Sites and in Tourists'  
Comments**

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# Is It the Same Country? Representation of Cambodia on Official Tourist Sites and in Tourists' Comments

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## Abstract

This paper explores how a certain country is described on official tourist sites whose main aim is to achieve more tourists (formal communication sources) and in informal tourists comments, who want to exchange their opinions. It shows that the difference in aims impacts the construction of country image as a set of different items reflecting real aspects of a certain country. The semantic and contextual analyses of Russian and German formal and informal tourism related sources shows the predominance of cognitive items (compared with affective ones) in both sources types, but cultural items colored positively prevail in formal sources (and thus an elaborated image is developed) whereas different cognitive and affective items are common for informal sources.

*Keywords:* Country image, cognitive items, affective items, formal communication, informal communication, tourists' comments

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## Introduction

Due to globalization processes and the growing popularity of tourism, it is not surprising that many people decide to go for short trips or choose different destinations for educational, academic or recreation purposes. When choosing their destination, they rely on formal information from tourist companies or city guides, and on informal reviews made by tourists on social network sites on the Internet. Formal information sources provide the most attractive information about the country. But informal reviews are more objective, compared to formal information, as their authors do not have economic interests in attracting others and usually show a real situation concerning a certain destination. It is important therefore to investigate not only the country branding, especially developed for attracting more people, but also the image of the country in informal tourist reviews.

Until today the country branding and country image are terminologically and scientifically described, mostly from economic points of view, to reveal the marketing and promoting strategies of places, f.e. [5]. The other possible research fields are social, political, communicative or linguistic, and there is no consequence in terminology and methodology in all these cases. That is why Alexander Buhmann proposed an interdisciplinary approach in investigating country image, and developed an original image model aiming it at promotional strategies .

Some of the recent papers focus on using social media in developing the country image for marketing purposes. Leung et al. gave a detailed overview of such papers and classified them

as consumer, supplier or product centered [8]. This classification demonstrates the marketing focus of such papers. The difference between the county image, provided in social media, and the brand image consciously constructed by official organizations, has not been yet considered.

It is further interesting to learn if the country image is the same, when aimed at tourists from different cultures. Each image component of a destination country can be estimated in a different way depending on the traditions and values of both interacting cultures: What is estimated as positive in one culture may be not corresponding to the values of another culture and thus may be estimated as negative.

The aim of this paper is consequently to give a linguistic analysis of a certain country image, represented in formal and informal tourism related Internet sources in Russian and German. The investigation is based on the analyses of the interaction of three cultures: Cambodia, Russia and Germany. Germany represents a Western culture type, Cambodia is an Eastern culture and Russia is placed between these culture types [4]. This may show the differences in estimating certain image components. One more reason for choosing Cambodia as an analysis object is that exotic and rather new countries such as Cambodia are especially interesting for tourists.

Therefore, the country image is a popular investigation object currently, seen mostly from a marketing point of view, but new locations have not yet been studied, owing to new aspects of country image description (e.g. the comparison of formal and informal sources in country image building) and new text genres (tourists' companies websites, tourists comments), which provides the actuality of my research.

The objective of my research is to explore lexical units naming the most typical features and peculiarities of Cambodia, emphasized in Russian and German official tourist sites and in informal tourists reviews, and to provide a comparative analysis.

My hypothesis is that the core concepts of country image are similar in formal and informal text sources, but include such components which are regarded as negative. There are also some differences in the predominance of certain image components in different image receiving cultures.

The significance of this paper concerns the need to understand the deep mechanisms of image building strategies considered with respect to the formality/informality of communication and the culture in which the image is demonstrated. The paper results can be used in future research and in practical activities of tourist companies and in decision making by tourists.

## **Theoretical Background**

The country image is traditionally seen as a wide set of beliefs, ideas and impressions that people have about a certain country [6, 141]. In research, the notions of image and of branding have been distinguished and the notion of image has been accordingly précised: The image of a country is understood as a different opinion by foreign public to those of own country, estimated by adjectives or qualitative differences, which are positive or negative [11, 66].

Gert-Jan Hospers defines the correspondence of the term "image" to other relative terms in the following way;

- what an area really is ("identity"),
- what outsiders think about it ("image"),

- how the location wants to be known by the outside world (“brand”).

I find the distinction of image and brand in this theory very useful and convincing, but I do not agree with using the notion of identity in such a meaning, as I understand identity as people’s sense of identifying themselves with a certain nation, region, ethnic, social or gender group etc., cf. [1, p. 4]. In the process of identifying themselves with people of a certain country, people usually develop an image of the country’s typical features, which could be named as the home country image, but may not fully correspond to ‘what a country really is.’

It is important to mention that the term “image” (pronounced in Russian as *izobrazheniye*) has in some way changed its meaning during the word borrowing process, to often mean “brand” as a desired and consciously constructed location image in Russian scientific discourse. The phrase ‘what the outsiders think about a certain area’ is associated with the term “obraz” (‘picture, representation’).

My further remark concerns the term ‘brand.’ I agree with it signifying ‘how the location wants to be known in the outside world’. However, this study investigates how outsider institutions (tourist companies) represent the country, and who are interested in promoting this country, as their ‘image’ obviously differs from beliefs and ideas, which ordinary people have about the country. This is also consciously constructed with a certain aim, but not by the representatives of each respective place. It is not yet described and must be considered in future, if the country is represented in the same way by the location itself and by outsider institutions. It is not consequently clear, if we can speak about a brand in both cases. I limit my research to how outsider institutions represent the destination, and I will name this country representation “elaborated image” to mark differences from the image in common sense.

Thus, the following terms are relevant for my research purposes:

- Image: what outsider tourists think about a certain country,
- Elaborated image: what outsider tourist companies write about a certain country (they have economic interests in promoting it).

The first one (image) is explored on the basis of informal communication in social networks, where the users communicate as individuals and not as institution members, and feel free to choose what they speak or write about and how they do it. They normally have no financial interests in their communicative activities and do these with recreational aims. The second one (elaborated image) refers to formal communication, which is understood as function-related communication that follows prescribed norms. The function of tourist companies’ communication to their clients is to sell their services. Developing an elaborated image of the country is a part of these activities. It is provided in oral (in company’s office, by city guides and in some other situations) and in a written way (printed and electronic texts, e.g. tourist company’s sites, catalogues, guidebooks etc.). In my study, I will look only at the most recently appearing genres, which have developed on the Internet; tourist companies’ sites and Online catalogues.

The next important question in image studies is: What constitutes the country image, elaborated image and country brand? This question is answered differently by several theorists according to their research aims and research objects. Still, there are often repeated ideas of the country’s peculiarities and types, which attract interest and are memorized. Particularly, Svitlana Larmolenko and Paige Schneider regarding travel related websites considered the following

components of the Ukraine image: attractions, culture, food, history, hotels, shopping, tourism, travel, travel information. Another image concept list of Natalia Polkanova and Sergey Kazakov bases on several classifications and includes 9 categories: (1) safety and security, (2) well-developed infrastructure, (3) information availability about tourism destination, (4) prices, (5) natural resources, (6) cultural heritage, (7) entertainment and leisure, (8) quality of hospitality services, (9) friendliness of locals.

According to Alexander Buhmann, image components can be combined to more global groups. His image model includes cognitive (with functional, normative and aesthetic dimensions) and affective components (emotional appeal for the country). The most items which have been discussed above belong to aesthetic dimension: cultural heritage, history, culinary, landscapes. But as the recent investigations show, also functional items (infrastructure or prosperity and wealth) and normative beliefs (environmental protection or respect to other nations) attract more and more attention of tourists. Conducting actual studies a scientist must consider these trends of image construction.

Concluding this section, I list questions of the image studies generated by my research aims: (1) are there some differences in country image and its elaborated image, reproduced in certain outsider countries? (2) Do the images of the same country differ, represented in different cultures? (3) What main items do Russian and German tourists and tourist companies name in developing Cambodia (elaborated) image?

## **Empirical Data and Research Methods**

To find answers to the questions above I conducted a pilot study of formal and informal tourism related sources developing the Cambodian image for German and Russian cultures. Tourist companies' sites are regarded as formal and tourists' comments on social networks are informal communication sources. In general, the following tourism related sources are used:

- formal: official tourist companies' sites (<https://www.bgoperator.ru>, <https://vand.ru>, <https://www.meiers-weltreisen.de>, <https://www.thomascook.de>);
- informal: travelers' forums on Tripadvisor (<https://www.tripadvisor.ru>, <https://www.tripadvisor.de>) and Instagram messages (<https://www.instagram.com>).

The empirical data were gathered and analyzed in the following way.

1. Texts of each source type representing Cambodia were found (in site menus and through search engines).
2. Items which represent different categories of a country image were manually selected from each text. To make a comparison more objective, the same word count of analyzed texts was set (900 words for each source in both formal and informal source types).
3. Selected items were classified and adapted to Buhmann's image model as representing affective and cognitive image components. Cognitive items were classified into representing functional, normative and aesthetic dimensions; the last ones were regarded as concerning culture, nature, leisure, the culinary, shopping and other country image motifs. Tables with statistical data were prepared.
4. The occurrence and correlation of the items of the same type were compared: (1) in formal sources in different cultures, (2) in informal sources in different cultures, (3) in formal and informal sources of the same culture.

In general the following methods were used when conducting the research. The texts were

randomly selected. The identification of items and the definition of their type was carried out through semantic and contextual analysis of each word in the text. Comparative analysis and elements of the statistical method helped to compare and interpret the findings.

## Results and Discussion

The analysis shows that all mentioned image motifs are used when representing Cambodia in tourism related sources, both formal and informal. Cambodia is presented as famous for its cultural heritage (first of all for Angkor Wat and other ancient temples), and for its nature and white beaches. But there are some differences in developing its country's image. These differences concern mainly formal and informal tourism related texts, but some concern showing Cambodia in German and Russian cultures.

The first difference concerns the image “density,” i.e. the frequency of image motifs calculated in relation to the total count of words in each type of text. Tourist companies’ sites aim at showing Cambodia and thus developing its image in a promoting text, and so the “density” of image items in such texts is about 17–19%. Tourists’ comments on travelers’ forums have other pragmatic characteristics. It is not the main function of such texts to show the country. Rather, tourists aim mainly at expressing the own experience and giving advice to others. This results in the fact that country image here is not so full and various as compared with official tourist companies’ sites. Instagram messages have again their own pragmatic peculiarities. Some are devoted to describing the country and some aim at self-expression or reflections. Image 'density' of Instagram messages is placed in between official site texts and forum comments, but informal sources in general have fewer image motifs compared to formal sources: Their image 'density' is about 10%. Statistical data showing this are presented in Table 1.

The second difference between formal and informal tourism related sources concerns the relation of items themselves. Table 2 presents this relation.

The most frequent item in developing Cambodia’s image in formal and informal sources is its culture as an important component of aesthetic dimension. Cultural items concern mentioning Angkor Wat, Cambodia’s museums, its language, etc. Although pragmatic peculiarities of analyzed texts differ, the cultural heritage of Cambodia is so rich that both promoting the country’s image texts and texts devoted to free discussion pay much attention to cultural items.

Table 1. Cambodia image motifs Frequency in tourism related sources, Total

Element	<i>German formal sources</i>	<i>Russian formal sources</i>	<i>German informal sources</i>	<i>Russian informal sources</i>
Items	307	342	171	189
Words (total)	1804	1800	1804	1803
Image “density”, %	17%	19%	9,5%	10,5%

Functional dimension (country’s infrastructure, accommodation, prices, (lacking) prosperity etc.) is also often mentioned. In formal texts, it occurs only in a positive context (‘developing infrastructure’, ‘many new hotels’), and in informal sources it often goes together with negative connotations, e.g. ‘poor people.’

Table ii. The image of Cambodia in German and Russian tourism related sources: the most frequent items

Item type	<i>German formal sources</i>	<i>Russian formal sources</i>	<i>German informal sources</i>	<i>Russian informal sources</i>
Affective	55	39	45	30
Functional	50	61	6	15
Normative	1	10	3	11
Culture	<b>97</b>	<b>63</b>	47	<b>38</b>
Nature	54	52	15	36
Culinary	10	55	8	6
Other	40	62	47	53
Total item count	307	342	171	189

Normative dimension of cognitive type is the least among other items, it concerns the friendly and open character of Cambodians and is more common for Russian texts, both formal and informal.

A relation of affective items in German and Russian formal texts is rather surprising, as Russians believe to be and usually are scientifically described as a rather emotive nation. This is possibly the consequence of the fact that Russian travel companies are at the very beginning of acting on big tourist markets and are hence learning to write such promotional texts. Their texts lack many “promoting” words, such as “a mysterious country” or “a cozy accommodation,” which are common in German formal texts.

Informal sources express with affective words the real tourists’ impressions about the country. As a result, affective words in such sources include not only names of positive, but also of negative, emotions from visiting the country. We can thus find among affective items such words as “exciting,” “tempting,” but also “dangerous,” “dirty,” or “fake.” However, such ‘negative’ words are personally colored and do not reflect the opinions of most travelers.

Other less important differences between formal / informal and German / Russian text sources could be investigated in further research on more representative data.

As my research was planned as a pilot study to observe some main trends in image development and to evidence the methodology of its research, it has a limited character. Its limitations concern mainly its quantitative elements and a reversion to objective facts. Cambodia is a rather new tourist destination for Russian and German tourists. As a result, not all tourist companies offer tours into this country, and here, only the biggest ones do. Tourists’ comments following impressions of this country are well underrepresented on social networks as compared with other directions. This explains the fact that a researcher must spend time to find relevant texts.

Sample texts differ further in their length: Russian formal texts are much longer than German ones. They include subsections, and only several of these may be regarded in the study. As such, some aspects (e.g. culinary aspects of Cambodia) are described in detail, whereas other aspects could not be analyzed, so as to maintain an equal word count for each source. More precise text sampling and more extended data collection may provide stronger results in future research.



## Conclusion

Together with country image (what outsider think about a location) and country brand a notion of elaborated image can be distinguished. It concerns how outsider institutions (tourist companies) represent the country.

Country image, elaborated image and country brand all reflect the reality ('what the country really is'). They can be described in terms of image constituents (image motifs or image items), which include cognitive and affective items.

Country's real image can be found in informal travel related sources (the users communicate as individuals and not as institution members). Elaborated image is developed in formal communication (the text authors represent an institution, f.e. a tourist company, and have economic interests in showing the most attracting aspects of a certain country).

The findings of this study provide evidence of the current Cambodia's image in two European countries and show the dependence of the country's image or its elaborated image from pragmatic text features. Formal sources tend to show an attractive country image and prefer cognitive items of aesthetic type (cultural, natural or culinary peculiarities of the country). Informal sources show among aesthetic also affective items, which name different positive and negative emotions concerning Cambodia image.

Future research may show if and to what extend elaborated country images matches up with country brand ('how the location wants to be known in the outside world').

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