

# Is It the Same Country? Representations 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. The paper suggests that the difference in aims of tourists impacts on 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 indicates a predominance of cognitive items (compared with affective ones) in both source types, but cultural items shown as positive 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, 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 opt to travel for short trips, or choose different destinations for educational, academic, or recreation purposes. When choosing their destination, these people 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 on the country. However, informal reviews are more objective, compared to their formal information counterparts, as their authors do not have economic interests in attracting others, and usually expose a real situation concerning a 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, country branding and country image have been terminologically and scientifically described, mostly from economic points of view, to reveal the marketing and promoting strategies of places. Other possible research fields include the social, political, or linguistic, within which there is little to no consequence to the terminology and methodology used. As such, Alexander Buhmann has proposed an interdisciplinary approach in investigating country image, and has developed an original image model aiming at promotional strategies for the country and its tourism with respect to objectivity and recalibrating the ideologies of the tourists intending to visit any of these countries with the above intentions, that is, for tourism, for education, for employment, and so forth.

Some of the recent papers published and their scholarship have focused on using data from social media in developing the image of a country for marketing purposes. For example, Leung et al. (2013) provide a detailed overview of such papers and scholarship and classify them in the following way: consumer, supplier, or product centered. This classification clearly demonstrates the marketing focus of such papers, and in the same way, the methodologies that they employ in the process. The differences between the country image, provided in social media, and the brand image consciously constructed by official organizations, have not been yet considered in a significant way, or to a significant extent, to my knowledge. I suggest that it is further interesting to learn and to discuss if the country image remains the same, at times when it is aimed at tourists from different cultures. Each image component of a destination country can be presented and conceived in a variety of different ways, a variety which is predicated on the traditions and values of both interacting cultures, and on other factors: What is estimated as positive in one culture may not closely correspond to the values of another culture, and thus may be conceived as negative in some ways.

One of the aims of this paper is consequently to provide a linguistic analysis of a certain country's image and other traits, represented in the formal and informal tourism and its related

Internet sources in both the Russian and German contexts and languages. The investigation is based largely on the analyses of the interaction of three cultures. These three cultures are Cambodia, Russia and Germany.

Here, Germany represents a Western culture type as a country which has long represented and positioned itself in such a context. Germany, located in the heart of Europe, is a country of rich history and vibrant culture. It is a popular tourist destination, with millions of visitors flocking to the country each year to explore its historic landmarks, museums, and festivals. Germany's tourism industry is promoted extensively on websites around the world, showcasing the country's unique blend of modernity and tradition. Let's take a closer look at how Germany's tourism is represented on websites globally. Multiculturalism is a key aspect of Germany's tourism industry, and websites often promote the country's diversity and inclusivity. Visitors are encouraged to experience the country's many cultural festivals and events, such as Oktoberfest, the Berlin International Film Festival, and the Cologne Carnival. These events showcase Germany's diverse cultural heritage and provide visitors with a unique insight into the country's history and traditions.

Cambodia is an Eastern country, where its culture represents a node of many other eastern cultures, contexts and languages all interacting to further intensify its position as such, that is, as a southeast Asian country adjacent to Myanmar, Vietnam, India, Malaysia, and so forth. Here, Cambodia is a Southeast Asian country that boasts a rich cultural heritage, diverse natural landscapes, and a fascinating history. It is a popular destination for tourists from around the world, and the country's tourism industry has grown significantly in recent years. Multiculturalism is at the heart of Cambodia's appeal, and it is represented in various tourism advertisements and websites across the globe. One of the most significant draws of Cambodia is its multiculturalism. The country is home to over 20 distinct ethnic groups, each with their own traditions, customs, and languages. Cambodia's diverse population is reflected in its rich cultural heritage, which is a blend of various influences from neighboring countries, including Thailand, Vietnam, and China. Tourism is a critical industry in Cambodia, accounting for a significant portion of the country's GDP. The government has made significant investments in infrastructure and marketing to attract tourists to the country. Tourism advertisements are a crucial part of these efforts, and they often highlight Cambodia's multiculturalism.

One of the most prominent ways that multiculturalism is represented in Cambodia's tourism advertisements is through the promotion of its traditional festivals and ceremonies. Cambodia has several national holidays, including Khmer New Year, the Water Festival, and Pchum Ben. These events are celebrated with great fanfare and are a way for tourists to experience Cambodia's unique culture and traditions. Cambodia's temples are another major attraction for tourists. The country is home to several ancient temples and ruins, including the iconic Angkor

Wat, which is the largest religious monument in the world. These temples offer visitors a glimpse into Cambodia's rich history and the unique blend of Hindu and Buddhist influences that have shaped the country's culture.

Multiculturalism is also represented in Cambodia's tourism advertisements through the promotion of its culinary offerings. Cambodian cuisine is a fusion of various influences from neighboring countries, including Thailand, Vietnam, and China. Some of the most popular Cambodian dishes include fish amok, a steamed fish curry, and lok lak, a stir-fried beef dish. These dishes are often featured in tourism advertisements and are an excellent way for tourists to experience Cambodia's unique culinary traditions. Another fact that has influenced the selection of Cambodia as a point of analysis is the fact that it is seen as exotic and also offers a context for interesting tourism. This context is consequent to the fact that tourists to this location can access neighboring countries, and also the fact that it is quite far from western contexts such as the UK or the USA.

Cambodia's natural beauty is also a significant draw for tourists. The country is home to natural landscapes, including beaches, jungles, and mountains. These wonders are often featured in tourism advertisements, and they offer visitors a chance to experience Cambodia's diverse geography and ecosystems. As such, Cambodia is represented in various tourism advertisements and websites, which highlight the country's rich cultural heritage, diverse natural landscapes, and fascinating history. As Cambodia's tourism industry continues to grow, it is likely that the promotion of its multiculturalism will remain a critical part of its marketing efforts.

Russia is situated firmly between these culture types as a major cultural and geographical location and which spans a large section of the globe, across Europe and Asia, and virtually connecting to North America. Here, the Russian context is a debated one and its cultural diversity is varied in this way, which its people diversely identify in a large number of ways across both Europe and Asian contexts. This may expose the differences when estimating image components on these websites or in these advertisements.

As such, a country's image currently offers a popular object of investigation, when seen mostly from a marketing point of view. However, new locations have not yet been studied, owing to the appearance of new ways to describe these countries and to hence conceive their image (e.g. the comparison of formal and informal sources in country's image building) and new text genres (tourist company websites, tourist comments, and so forth), which ground this current research and its data and analysis.

The objective of this research is to explore lexical units that name the most typical features and peculiarities of Cambodia, yet that are emphasized on 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 a country's image are similar in formal and informal text sources, but include such components that 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 or 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

A country's image is traditionally conveyed through a wide set of beliefs, ideas, and the impressions that people have with regards to a certain country. In research, the notions of image and of branding have been distinguished, where the notion of image has been accordingly precise: The image of a country is understood through different opinions by foreign travelers and other populations, who convey these ideas to those people in their own country, estimated by adjectives or qualitative differences, which are positive or negative.

Gert-Jan Hospers defines the correspondence of the term 'image' to other relative terms in the following ways:

Gert-Jan Hospers and 'image'

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 highly useful and convincing, but I do not agree with using the notion of identity in such a way, as I understand identity as people's sense of identifying themselves with a certain nation, region, ethnic, social, or gender group and so forth. 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 seen as the home country image, but may not fully correspond to 'what a country really is.'

I now mention that the term 'image' (pronounced in Russian as ;imidzh') has in 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 is interested in promoting this country, as their 'image' can differ 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 has not yet been described and must be considered in the future, if the country is represented in the same way by the location itself and by outsider institutions. The extent to which we can discuss a brand in both cases is not explicitly certain. 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 the country). 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 in various places. Particularly, Svitlana Larmolenko and Paige Schneider, regarding travel related websites, consider the following components of the image of the Ukraine: Attractions, culture, food, history, hotels, shopping, tourism, travel information. Another image concept list by Natalia Polkanova and Sergey Kazakov is based on several classifications, and includes nine 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, friendliness of locals.

According to Alexander Buhmann, image components can be combined to more global groups.

His image model includes cognitive components (with functional, normative, and aesthetic dimensions) and affective components (emotional appeal for the country). The most items which have been discussed above belong to the aesthetic dimension: Cultural heritage, history, culinary, landscapes and so forth. But as the recent investigations indicate, functional items (infrastructure or prosperity and wealth) and normative beliefs (environmental protection or respect to other nations) are also attracting more and more attention of tourists. To engage in analysis, an analyst must consider these trends of image construction.

Concluding this section, I list the 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:

### Sources

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.

### Data gathered

Texts of each source type representing Cambodia were found (in site menus and through search engines).

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).

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 items were regarded as concerning culture, nature, leisure, the culinary, shopping, and other country image motifs. Tables with statistical data were prepared. 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 the display of 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 promotional text, and so the 'density' of image items in such texts is approximately 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 their own experience and giving advice to others. This results in the fact that country image here is not so full and varied as compared with official tourist companies' sites. Instagram messages also have 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 the mentioning of Angkor Wat, Cambodia's museums, its languages, 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.

Element	German formal sources	Russian formal sources	German informal sources
Items	307	342	171
Words (total)	1804	1800	1804
Image 'density'	17%	19%	9,5%

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

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.'

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

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

The normative dimension of cognitive type is the least among all items, and 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 are believed to be and usually are scientifically described as a rather

emotive nation. This is possibly a 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 after visiting the country. We can thus find such words as "exciting," "tempting," but also "dangerous," "dirty," or "fake" among the affective items. 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 lengths: 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 outsiders think about a location) and country brand, a notion of elaborated image can be distinguished. This method concerns how outsider institutions (tourist companies) represent the country. The country image is the elaborated image, whereas the country brand reflects the reality of the country ('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. A country's real image can be found in informal travel related sources (the users communicate as individuals and not as institution members). The elaborated image is developed in formal communication (the text authors represent an institution, i.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 Cambodia's image in two European countries and show the dependence of the country's image or its elaborated image on 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 aesthetic and affective items, which name different positive and negative emotions concerning Cambodia's image. Future research may show if and to what extent elaborated country images match up with country brand ('how the location wants to be known in the outside world').

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