

Utilising Thematic Analysis to Investigate the Perception of Egypt's Image from a Touristic Perspective

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Abstract:

This paper aims to investigate tourists' perceptions and emotions towards Egypt as a destination and to determine the optimal marketing communication mix in the digital age to enhance Egypt's image. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with potential tourists to explore their perspective about Egypt image. A non-probability convenience sampling method was employed. The resulting interviews were coded and analysed through thematic analysis using NVivo software. The empirical results indicated that Egypt has a mixed-image destination characterised by positive associations related to its historical significance and affordability. However, there are some concerns regarding local transportation, infrastructure quality, and hygiene standards. Moreover, the study identified essential

marketing tools such as online advertising, social media, websites, festivals, and celebrities that can be crucial for improving Egypt's image.

Keywords: Egypt image, Tourism sector, Thematic analysis.

الملخص البحث:

يهدف البحث إلى دراسة أدراك السياح ومشاعرهم تجاه مصر كوجهة سياحية، وتحديد مزيج الاتصالات التسويقية الأمثل في العصر الرقمي لخلق صورة إيجابية لمصر. تم إجراء مقابلات مع سياح محتملين لمعرفة آرائهم حول صورة مصر الحالية. وتم الاعتماد على عينة غير احتمالية ميسرة، وتم ترميز المقابلات الناتجة وتحليلها من خلال منهج التحليل الموضوعي Thematic analysis باستخدام برنامج NVivo .

أظهرت النتائج أن مصر تتمتع بصورة وجهة مختلطة تتميز بأبعاد إيجابية تتعلق بأهميتها التاريخية والقدرة على تحمل نفقات السفر لها. ومع ذلك، أثّرت بعض المخاوف بشأن وسائل النقل المحلية وجودة البنية التحتية، ومعايير النظافة. علاوة على ذلك، حددت الدراسة أدوات تسويقية أساسية مثل الإعلان عبر الإنترنت ووسائل التواصل الاجتماعي والمواقع الإلكترونية والمهرجانات والمشاهير التي يمكن أن تكون حاسمة في تحسين صورة مصر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: صورة مصر، التحليل الموضوعي، قطاع السياحة.

1. Introduction

Egypt is well known as a crucial touristic destination not only in the Middle East but also in Africa (Baalbaki & Zizka, 2023). It is not surprising that Egypt's dependency on travel and tourism for its GDP is manifested in its 51st position on the Travel & Tourism Development Index 2021 (WEF, 2022). This implies that Egypt's tourism industry is a substantial contributor to its economy. Therefore, Egypt is considered the top scorer in North Africa in terms of advancing the travel and tourism sector's development (WEF, 2022).

Because of the 2011 Egyptian revolution and its consequences, Egypt's image as a nation and a tourism destination has changed at the same time. Due to the subsequent events experienced by Egypt, there was a negative impact on the tourism sector (Ragab, Mahrous, & Ghoneim 2020). Some political challenges in the last few years have led to a reduction in the volume of international tourist arrivals. A series of terrorists' attacks have targeted several places in Egypt, resulting in continuous political instability (Baalbaki & Zizka, 2023). In order to rekindle the country's tourism sector and face the fierce competition among countries for tourists, country branding has rapidly evolved as a new approach that can enhance sustainable tourism development. Therefore, countries have to build a strong, favourable country brand image that can be communicated to diverse stakeholders. One of the major steps is to explore the

current Egypt image in the minds of international tourists to explore the current perception of Egypt as a country and a destination from an outsider perspective, as well as examine how to improve this image using marketing communication tools.

The study of image has garnered sufficient attention from various research domains in recent years (Issac and Eid, 2019). Several scholars were interested in "country image" as the most fundamental construct in the field of country branding (Kotler et al., 1993; Anholt, 2007; Chung and Chen, 2018). Although research efforts in the area of country image have increased over the last few years, little research has been concerned with exploring Egypt image from western travellers' eyes. Moreover, there is a lack of qualitative studies into country image (Greaves, & Skinner, 2010). Therefore, this study will explore how UK tourists perceive Egypt's destination image and how to improve it from their perspective.

2. Literature Review

This section presents a brief review of the literature regarding country image and its antecedents.

2.1. Country image

The marketing literature presents several definitions of a country's image. According to Mafro (2015), a nation's brand image refers to the consumer's perception of a nation's tangible or

intangible products. The consumers can be domestic or international, like tourists, investors, and buyers of export brands. Moreover, Same and Solarte-Vasquez (2013) have clarified that the public's perception of a country is reflected in its image, which may or may not align with its reality or identity and may vary from person to person. Furthermore, according to Fetscherin (2010), country brand image is also defined as belonging to the public domain, which is complex and incorporates multiple disciplines, levels, and elements. There are several dimensions to a country's brand image, such as political, economic, social, environmental, historical, and cultural. Recent literature operationalises country brand image through two components: cognitive image and affective image (Wang et al., 2012; Alvarez and Campo, 2014; Lindblom et al., 2018; Kang, Kim, & Lee, 2018; Yu & Zhang, 2020). The cognitive image component refers to consumers' beliefs and opinions regarding a country's economic development, education level, technological advancement, and so on (Lindblom et al., 2018). On the other hand, the affective image component refers to consumers' emotions and feelings towards the country, including its culture and people (Wang, 2021).

2.2. Factors influencing country image

Since its emergence in the 1990s, country brand image has become a fundamental construct in the field of nation branding (Anholt, 2007; Chung and Chen, 2018). According to Kotler and

Gertner (2002), country image can be described as the sum of people's ideas, beliefs, opinions, and impressions about a place. In the marketing literature, some scholars have emphasised some factors influencing country image, such as information agents, mass media, cultural differences (Yousaf and Samreen, 2016), social media utilisation (Li et al., 2016), individual experience and awareness of the country (Yang et al., 2008), and country and people attributes (Jenes, 2013). Nevertheless, those variables were discussed separately by some researchers from different cultures and perceptions.

3. Research Methods

This study aims to investigate how outsiders perceive Egypt's image and explore strategies for managing it. Therefore, a qualitative method employing an exploratory study is used, aiming to provide a detailed description of tourists' perceptions and feelings towards Egypt as a touristic destination and determine whether some marketing communications tools can improve Egypt's image.

3.1. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews are conducted to get an insight into the contemporary perception of Egypt among external audiences and configure the role of marketing communication channels in augmenting Egypt's image as a desirable tourist destination. A semi-structured interview approach was used to

gather detailed insights from some prospective visitors regarding their perceptions and experiences of Egypt. This approach offered a flexible questioning style, enabling interviewees to freely express their thoughts and engage in a thorough discussion. The selection of interviewees followed a convenience sampling technique, which is a form of non-probability sampling wherein participants are chosen based on their availability or accessibility. The interviews were conducted with UK-based participants of various nationalities. The participants are postgraduate students or postgraduate teaching associates (staff) at the University of Exeter between the ages of 22 and 35.

During the interviews, a list of questions is developed and serves as a general guide. The interviews are terminated upon reaching data saturation, indicating that no new information or insights are being generated from additional interviews. A total of fifteen interviews were conducted with participants residing in the United Kingdom and representing different nationalities. The average duration of interviews lasted between 10 and 20 minutes and took place between May and June 2022.

3.2. Data Analysis

The interview recordings were decoded and analyzed using thematic analysis with NVivo software, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage framework: familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, revision, theme definition, and report writing. The analysis began with repeated listening to the recordings, followed by

transcription and organization in NVivo. Initial coding involved generating a list of ideas and assigning codes to specific data segments. Patterns were identified among the coded data, leading to the grouping of similar codes into overarching themes .

Key themes identified included the current image of Egypt, suggestions for branding, integrated marketing communication, and channels for positioning Egypt as a destination. Each theme, supported by sub-themes, was defined and accompanied by relevant quotations. This structured approach facilitated a comprehensive analysis of the qualitative data gathered from the interviews.

Table 1: Themes and Subthemes emerged from Interview analysis. Source: Nvivo

Main Themes	Current Egypt image	Integrated Marketing communication	Channels to position Egypt as a destination	Suggestions for branding Egypt
Sub themes	<i>Cognitive image</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Centre of Islamic studies Economic development political situation and Safety Heritage (Pyramids) <i>Affective image</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Food People <i>Overall mixed image</i>	<i>Advertising</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multimedia advs Traditional advs Online advs Lack of advs <i>Official tourism website</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of Website Knowledge Positive elements Negative elements <i>Travel Influencers</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Followers Not followers <i>Type of Events</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultural /festivals Sporting <i>Type of social media</i> <i>Message consistency</i>	<i>Online channels</i> <i>Both Online and Offline</i>	<i>Use Celebrities</i> <i>Tv shows.</i>

4. Findings

This section provides a summary of the results of the qualitative analysis and the themes resulting from the coding. Seven themes emerged from the interview analysis, as follows:

4.1 Current Egypt image

This section reflects overall perceptions and feelings towards Egypt and encompasses two subthemes: cognitive and affective images.

4.1.1 Cognitive Image of Egypt

Political situation and Safety

The majority of respondents agreed on the impact of the political situation in Egypt and the safety factor when they described their image of Egypt. They mentioned some words such as stability, revolution, president, politics, and stealing to reflect their negative perceptions about Egypt. For example, interviewee no. 10 commented as follows:

"I heard that some students have been stolen during their visits to Egypt."

Moreover, Interviewee No. 5 stated that it can be slightly dangerous to travel alone to Egypt, especially for ladies, and she preferred going to Egypt with somebody to feel safer. The interviewee no. 4 mentioned that the negative is the safety, saying "If it were safer, then I think a lot more people would go

to Egypt". The interviewees no. 8 and 9 added that the political instability in Egypt influenced their image of Egypt. Specifically, Interviewee No. 8 said

"The negative side is about the political situation. Especially when the transition of the former president to the new president and then the next protests again. The political revolution led to a bad image, especially for international tourism".

Economic development

In terms of economic factors, some interviewees mentioned that economic development is poor compared to developed countries, and this can have negative effects on educational and human development. Interviewee no. 3 said, "The economic situation appears to be very low. If the country does not have a high income and a lot of festivals or promotional campaigns, how will other people from other countries want to come there?" Further, interviewee no. 1 commented that there is poor infrastructure in general and a lack of cleanliness in the streets. The medical situation in Egypt is another negative element in their perceptions, as mentioned by interviewee no. 6.

Heritage / Pyramids

When the respondents asked about Egypt's image, the heritage and culture of the country were consistently mentioned as distinctive features. All interviewees highlighted the pyramids as

the most prominent attribute that comes to mind when talking about Egypt. For example, participant no. 10 commented as follows:

"The first thing that comes to mind is the Pyramids. They include mystery and a lot of history".

Other participants agreed that heritage and culture are the crucial features that characterise Egypt's image. All interviewees admired Egypt's fascinating culture, including elements such as mummies, museums, the intriguing stories of kings, and historical buildings. These remarkable features greatly appealed to and amazed the interviewees. In interviewee no. 6's response, they linked Egypt's image with the golden colour. Another one highlighted the Nile River as a vital attribute of Egypt. For example, interviewee no. expressed that

Centre of Islamic studies

As highlighted by another participant, Egypt is widely recognised as a centre of Islamic studies. This distinction stems from its abundance of mosques and numerous significant religious sites. For instance, interviewee no. 8 expressed a keen interest in learning more about Al-Azhar, the world's oldest Islamic university. By virtue of its rich academic history and profound impact on Islamic education, Al-Azhar holds a revered standing within the scholarly community.

4.1.2. Affective image

Food

Egypt's emotional perception, particularly regarding its cuisine, is consistently viewed positively by both visitors and non-visitors. Interviewee No. 9 emphasized that when thinking of Egypt, food comes to mind due to its rich flavors and diverse dishes, noting its popularity in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Interviewee No. 1 highlighted her familiarity with Egyptian culture and cuisine from her time in Dubai and interactions with Egyptians, suggesting that Egyptian cuisine has gained recognition beyond its borders within the broader Middle Eastern context. This widespread appreciation for Egyptian food contributes to a favorable emotional image of Egypt as a country renowned for its culinary offerings.

People

The majority of respondents praised the hospitality and warmth of Egyptians. However, some expressed concerns about safety, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination. Interviewees 4 and 5 discussed cultural differences in Egypt compared to the UK, emphasizing the importance of respect and companionship. They cautioned solo female travellers about the potential dangers of traveling alone in Egypt. In spite of these concerns, it is worth mentioning that Egypt is still regarded as an intriguing destination with its own unique charm; however, we

need to focus on solving these issues that reflect the negative image of those interviewees, which may be the result of their personal experiences or negative word of mouth.

4.1.3. Overall mixed image

In general, all interviewees agreed on a positive perception of Egypt as a desirable destination, emphasising its rich culture, heritage, hospitality, and the friendliness of its people. For instance, interviewee no. 4, who had previously visited Egypt, had a very positive experience, highlighting the presence of a local tour guide who ensured their safety and enjoyment throughout the trip, as well as the pleasant weather and beautiful beaches, which were also mentioned as positive aspects when comparing Egypt to their home country, England.

However, alongside these positive attributes, the interviewees also expressed some negative concerns. They mentioned worries about the country's political and economic situations as well as safety issues. This indicates a mixed perception of Egypt, as both positive and negative factors were highlighted during the interviews. Overall, there is a diverse range of perspectives with regard to Egypt, highlighting positive perceptions like cultural and historical richness with some negative perceptions related to safety and Egypt's socio-political climate.

4.2. Marketing communications Tools

Advertising

A literature review highlights the importance of advertising in integrated marketing communication. Interviewees reported encountering advertisements from various sources, including traditional channels like television and radio, brochures, and multiple forms of advertising across different media like television, social media, and Instagram. Online advertising was also mentioned, with underwater imagery ads found on websites or travel platforms. However, four interviewees mentioned not seeing any advertising for Egypt, with one mentioning seeing ads on television during their younger days but not recently. Overall, the review highlights the importance of effective advertising in shaping marketing communication.

Official Tourism Website

The official tourism website for Egypt, <https://egypt.travel>, was reviewed by interviewees who had not encountered it during their search for information about Egypt. All respondents agreed that the website is attractive, colourful, and provides useful information. Positive aspects include the ease of navigation, stunning images of the sea, snorkelling, and beautiful bays of Egypt, and the attractive design and colours. However, negative feedback was highlighted, including the absence of certain information. Suggestions included a page on what to pack or buy

when visiting Egypt, the top 10 things to know about each city, recommendations on hotels and restaurants, and further details on prices and food. Interviewee No. 10 stressed the need for further information on facilities and restaurants and more extensive reviews from other visitors.

Suggestions included better focussing on different groups of travellers, such as families with children, the elderly, and the young, and providing more information on child-friendly amenities. Interviewee No. 3 believed that the website provided different options for tourists, but more focus should be given to providing information without making users search extensively. Additionally, interviewee No. 7 suggested incorporating aspects beyond natural beauty, such as economic or cultural aspects, and allowing open reviews for previous visitors. Overall, the official tourism website for Egypt showed positive comments about its attractive design, colourful layout, and useful information.

Travel influencers

The study found that the majority of interviewees do not actively follow influencers or travel bloggers, despite their positive views on showcasing both positive and negative aspects of their destinations. Others prefer to search for themselves and consult friends who have been to a particular destination. For example, Interviewee No. 7 mentioned the reason for not following them as follows:

" I don't follow influencers. I believe that they can affect the perceptions of people who cannot form their own perceptions."

On the contrary, only four interviewees mentioned following influencers for travel inspiration, as they provide a full picture of different countries and places they would like to visit. For example, interviewee 4 follows a reality TV star's travel experiences to gather travel information. Overall, following influencers and viewing their pictures can provide inspiration and ideas for travel.

Types of Events

The majority of respondents, according to a word frequency analysis using NVivo, highlight cultural events, particularly festivals, as the primary reasons to visit Egypt. These events provide insight into local celebrations, contributing to a better understanding of Egypt's culture, history, and traditions. Interviewees also emphasize the appeal of cultural events in creating immersive experiences in another culture. Festivals showcase Egypt's rich cultural heritage, attracting visitors to explore its cultural side. However, only two participants agreed that sporting events were a compelling reason to visit Egypt. Interviewee no. 2 stated that sporting events would be particularly attractive, while interviewee no. 4 suggested that the Olympics could potentially pique their interest. Lastly, only one interviewee mentioned conferences as a reason to visit Egypt.

Types of social media

According to the comments of the respondents, various social media types are used to collect information about countries and travel experiences. Some of them mentioned Snapchat and Instagram, where people share photos of popular travel destinations. YouTube is also considered a popular social media platform to watch videos and explore different places. For Chinese respondents, platforms such as Little Red Book (a Chinese version of Instagram) and Webio are used for travel-related information. Other interviewees mentioned Pinterest and Facebook for gathering information and inspiration for travel destinations.

Message inconsistency

The majority of respondents expressed a lack of awareness about Egypt's messages due to the absence of effective promotional campaigns. They were uncertain about the consistency of online and offline marketing communication tools. Interviewees 6 and 8 expressed uncertainties about the consistency of information about Egypt, while another mentioned encountering advertisements on social media but not a consistent message. Only one interviewee found the messaging moderately consistent, citing their initial exposure to Egypt through movies like "The Mummy" and the impact of these films on people growing up in the 1990s and early 2000s. The lack of effective promotional campaigns and the coordination of promotional messages contribute to the uncertainty surrounding Egypt's message.

4.3. Channels to position Egypt as a destination

Most interviewees believe that online media is crucial for positioning Egypt as a destination. Online advertising is the fastest and most convenient way to reach potential tourists, especially due to digitalization and mobile device usage. Influential social networks can be used to invite influencers to visit and share their experiences, encouraging people to visit the same destinations. Others concurred that social media platforms like Instagram are used by young people to seek advice and inspiration for travel, making online promotion a good way to boost tourism in Egypt. Moreover, interviewee no 10 highlighted that online channels are more flexible than using travel agents, saying, "Online. We tend to use WeChat, which is "a type of social media used in China.". I think that using the internet is more flexible than finding travel agents, which is an inconvenience for me."

However, only a small number of interviewees prefer using both online and offline channels. They argued that online platforms allow individuals to represent their country and showcase its diverse aspects, while offline channels offer greater accessibility and ease of finding information for all travellers' categories. Overall, online advertising is preferred due to its ease of access, speed, and ability to provide comprehensive information.

4.4. Suggestions for Egypt Branding

he interviews revealed several suggestions to improve Egypt's image, including showcasing the country's positive attributes, providing luxury hotels and safe accommodations, understanding tourists' desires, exploiting Egypt's cultural heritage, and promoting affordable flights on websites like Skyscanner. Travel agencies are also emphasized, as older generations may use them more than younger generations, who use Instagram for information. Lastly, the use of celebrities and TV programs is also highlighted by the majority of interviewees. These suggestions are intended to improve Egypt's reputation and encourage more people to travel there. For instance, interviewee no. 4 supported this viewpoint, commenting as follows:

"I think approaching Instagram influencers on Instagram and maybe paying for a full-expense trip for them so that they can promote on their page would be the best way." Other interviewees highlighted the importance of TV as a traditional medium for promoting Egypt as a desirable destination. Interviewee No. 8 suggested using international television networks, including the BBC or CNN, to promote Egypt as a tourism destination worldwide. When people see fascinating places on these channels, they will be more inclined to consider visiting them.

5. Conclusion

The first objective of this study was to investigate tourists' overall perceptions of Egypt, encompassing both cognitive and affective aspects. The findings demonstrated Egypt's positioning as both a country and a destination across various subthemes, including political situation and safety, heritage and pyramids, food, people, and economic development. People generally perceive Egypt as a desirable destination, highlighting its rich culture, heritage, hospitality, and friendliness. More specifically, there are some remarkable features that characterise Egypt, including its culture and history (e.g., pyramids, mummies, museums, the intriguing stories of kings, and historical buildings). These results were in accordance with previous research, which argued that Egypt has a positive image of its historical and cultural richness, natural beauty, hospitality of its people, and unique tourist attractions (e.g., Ayad & Shujun, 2013; El-Said & Aziz, 2019). In addition to that, Egypt is widely considered to have a positive emotional image associated with its cuisine. The abundance of Egyptian cuisine has a major impact on neighboring countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This familiarity with Egyptian cuisine can contribute to the country's positive image as a source of delectable food.

However, other concerns were found concerning the political and economic situations. Egypt's political instability and safety

concerns, for instance, were regarded as one of the most observable subthemes in this study. Negative perceptions are also found concerning safety, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination. In terms of economic factors, Egypt is perceived as a country with a low level of economic development and inadequate infrastructure, sanitation, and healthcare, which may impede its educational and human development progress. The results expressed some concerns about Egypt's economic situation, highlighting the importance of a high income and various promotional campaigns to attract potential tourists and investors. This negative image of Egypt portrayed during interviews related to safety and Egypt's socio-political climate may stem from participants' personal experiences or word of mouth. Nevertheless, Egypt is still viewed as an intriguing destination with its own unique culture and history.

Consequently, the results highlighted the mixed image of Egypt as a tourism destination. On the positive side, Egypt is appreciated for its rich culture, heritage, hospitality, and people's friendliness. The natural beauty (e.g., the presence of pleasant weather and beautiful beaches) and historical significance were also highlighted as positive aspects. These positive attributes were counterbalanced by other issues concerned with safety and the political and economic situation in Egypt. The findings highlighted a balanced portrayal of Egypt, with both positive and

negative perceptions of Egypt acknowledged during interviews. These findings are in accordance with other studies that contend that Egypt is a mixed-image destination that has a positive image of historical significance and affordability, but at the same time, some issues are raised concerning its local transportation, quality of infrastructure, hygiene, and personal safety (e.g., Elsayeh, 2020; Ragb, Mahrous, & Ghoneim, 2020; Marzouk, 2022).

The second objective was to explore how to improve Egypt's image. The investigation began with semi-structured interviews with prospective tourists to glean their perspectives on how to promote a positive image of the country. The results of thematic analysis identified some tools, such as influencers, websites, social media, festivals, and online advertising, that can be crucial for improving Egypt's image. The findings emphasise the significance of online advertising as the quickest and most convenient method for reaching and informing potential visitors. A few interviewees mentioned the role of traditional media advertising in generating preliminary ideas before browsing websites. Additionally, the official tourism website for Egypt, <https://egypt.travel>, was reviewed and praised for its attractive design and updated information; however, there is room for improvement through providing comprehensive and targeted information for different traveler preferences.

Additionally, the results suggest that employing influencers and celebrities is a promising strategy for enhancing Egypt's perception as a desirable destination. These results are consistent with previous tourism studies in Egypt, which argued the impact of influencers on domestic travel intentions (e.g., Raafat, Montaser, & Soliman, 2023) and improved tourists perceptions of tourism service destinations, strengthened their image, and boosted tourist service sales (Ragab, 2022). In addition, the significance of social media platforms, TripAdvisor, and Google reviews as reliable and diverse sources of destination information was emphasised. These results are consistent with Huerta-Álvarez et al.'s 2020 study, which explored the interplay between social media communication and destination image. Moreover, they bolster the argument made by Abaalzamat et al. (2021), who confirmed that the high level of satisfaction among TripAdvisor reviewers leads to favourable perceptions of Katara as a cultural village and, in turn, a positive image of Qatar.

On a practical basis, the Egyptian tourism authority should emphasise improving Egypt's image as a safe, culturally rich destination for a diverse range of tourists. Furthermore, the local government and private sector must collaborate to enhance transportation, infrastructure, and health care facilities, thereby enhancing the overall tourist experience. Furthermore, the tourism authority must prioritize initiatives to address some concerns about

the political situation and safety. Adopting more active campaigns is crucial to ensuring that there are improvements in safety measures, collaborations with local authorities to enhance tourist security, and addressing issues related to sexual harassment to ensure a safer environment for all visitors.

6. Limitations of the study

There are some limitations to this study. Firstly, this study has a relatively small number of interviewees and uses nonprobability sampling, which implies caution for generalization. Secondly, because the research was conducted in a limited context (Egypt), the results may not be generalizable to other contexts. Finally, the study's exploratory nature necessitates the conduct of quantitative future studies to validate its findings.

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