Exploring Tourist Perceptions of Kerala's Destination Marketing

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Abstract

Kerala has been recognised as one of the top ten paradises in the world. Kerala offers a wide range of tourism items that meet the requirements and expectations of practically every type of traveller, and it stands out for offering a full travel experience. The state of Kerala offers tremendous potential for tourism expansion thanks to its ideal temperature, lush vegetation, natural tourist attractions, vibrant festivals, martial arts, wildlife sanctuaries, and ancient Ayurveda legacy. But Kerala has not been able to fully realise its potential, despite having a variety of resources and opportunities. Kerala's tourism industry has a lot of untapped potential as less than five percent of visitors to India come to the State. Kerala is ranked eighth in terms of foreign visitor arrivals and fifteenth in terms of domestic visitor arrivals. Kerala travel marketing tactics must be updated over time to reflect changes in customers' requirements and tastes if the state is to realise its full potential and pull in an increasing number of tourists, especially from abroad. To assure service quality, it is crucial to understand exactly what the client expects, and marketing research on consumer preferences is required to examine how the customer's needs are evolving. This study aims to comprehend how tourists see the advertising tactics used by the public and commercial sectors at different Kerala tourist attractions. The study also seeks to gauge travellers' expectations and satisfaction levels in regard to Kerala as a tourist destination because the success of marketing depends on consumer happiness.

Keywords: *Destination marketing, Tourist perception, Travel behaviour, Marketing strategies, Tourist satisfaction, Kerala tourism, Brand identity.*

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Introduction

The development of a distinct brand identity that reflects the key characteristics and personality of its products is necessary in the modern, highly competitive and dynamic global tourism sector. Destination marketing is a significant tactic used by countries to encourage tourism. It seeks to distinguish a destination from its rivals by creating a distinctive character. When travellers are planning their vacations, they will continue to prioritise destinations with a distinct market position and alluring features. Since customers choose how, when, and how they access and acquire their travel and tourism plans, positioning a place in the minds of consumers through evoking their perspective is necessary for a destination to be successful.

Kerala, a small state in the south western tip of India has been successful in gaining widespread reputation on a national and international level as a tourist destination. Kerala has been chosen by National Geographic Traveller as one of the ten world's paradises and one of the fifty places to visit once in a lifetime. In order to meet the demands of visitors arriving in the state, a variety of tourism items are now offered in this God's Own Country. Kerala tourism provides a range of vacation packages including activities like Ayurveda travel, pilgrimage travel, heritage travel, adventure travel, and medical travel. Additionally, the state provides unique assistance for the development of ecotourism.

Objectives of the study

The study aims at the following objectives.
1. To evaluate and compare both domestic and international visitors' travel behaviours.
2. To comprehend how visitors, perceive the advertising and marketing techniques used by public and private parties at various Kerala tourist locations to draw visitors.
3. To comprehend how the characteristics of the place and the services provided there affect the satisfaction of the tourists.

Review of literature

Destination's image has a role in both the creation of a destination brand and its success. Understanding how travellers perceive the place and its image is the first step in creating and maintaining a strong brand image (Tasci, Gartner, 2007). Consumers must create an image of the products and services offered by tourism destinations before making a decision to acquire them. Therefore, it doesn't really matter whether the image really depicts how the particular place actually is; what matters is that the image exists in the minds of potential customers (Govers et al., 2007). Destinations have a variety of attributes that influence tourists' opinions (Mahdzar et al., 2015; Singh, 2020). Quality of destination is the backbone of tourism competitiveness and the biggest loading factor in influencing tourist satisfaction (Mukherjee Adhikari, Datta, 2018; Sumaryadi et al., 2021). Market segmentation, targeting and positioning tactics are very crucial and has a big impact on the state's economy and healthcare system (Kariyil, Mathew, 2022). Destination marketing should be efficient enough to meet the needs of all stakeholders and market groups (Cai, 2002). For the destinations, it is crucial to establish the ideal image and then uphold it through effective use of marketing techniques like promotion strategies. While some elements influencing destination perception are beyond one's control, marketing, promoting attractions, creating

tourist-centric events, and controlling tourism infrastructure services (e.g., hotels, restaurants, visitor centres) are all manageable (Marzieh et al., 2017; Beerli, Martín, 2004). The marketing and promotion initiatives helped the Indian tourism sector perform better (Amitabh, Ojha, 2014). The campaign "Incredible India" can definitely help to attract more foreign visitors to India and would also close the communication gap between centralised and state-wise tourism campaigns (Singh et al., 2012). In the context of an emerging country, the state of Kerala stands out for its unique beauty as a developing tourist destination. Kerala's attractiveness is greatly enhanced by the area's natural beauty, pleasant climate, captivating backwaters, tempting native food, and rich cultural experiences (Edward, George, 2008). Kerala is portrayed as the ideal location for individuals seeking captivating natural beauties, including mesmerizing backwaters, mighty mountains, and exquisite beaches. The tagline "God's own country" lends a profound emotional touch to this portrayal (Ganesh, Jagadeesh, 2014). Tourism development in Kerala is socially, culturally, and environmentally sustainable, assuring the entire sustainability of its tourist sites (Venugopalan, 2021). Ecotourism plays a crucial role in improving sustainable tourism practices in Kerala, India. Various media platforms, including traditional and digital ones, is critical in successfully targeting a range of domestic and foreign customers (Kumavat, Prakashraj Pradipbhai, 2021). Tourism, travel, and hospitality industries greatly benefit from the use of information and communication technologies (ICT). The successful operation of a tourism business depends on ICT integration in the sector (Anand Bethapudi, 2013; Tham et al., 2013; Khan, Abir, 2022). Social media has great impact on marketing tactics, particularly in the travel and tourism industry, and it profoundly influences travelers' information-seeking and trust-building processes (Alizadeh, Isa, 2015; Asha, 2023; Choudhury, Mohanty 2018; Kumar et al., 2015; Buluk, 2015; Mukherjee, Nagabhushanam, 2017; Yang, Wang, 2015). Social media is one of the best instruments for destination marketing and advertising. Social media is incredibly effective at increasing sales, brand loyalty and it can be utilised to introduce a brand to millions of people throughout the world (Neeraj, 2015). Travel behaviour differs across different types of travellers, with preferences impacted by characteristics such as age, money, and travel experience (Subathra et al., 2019). The selection of tourist locations is greatly influenced by the preferences, prior travel experiences, and opinions of other travellers (Gurdogan 2022). Destination competitiveness is influenced by a variety of elements, including infrastructure, management techniques, human resources, environmental considerations, and contextual variables (Chernega, 2021).

Methods and Data

The present study was conducted in selected tourist destinations in Trivandrum District, which is located in Kerala, India. The specific locations analyzed were Kovalam, Sankhmugham, Ponmudi, and Trivandrum City. Kerala is referred to as a tourist destination due to its widespread reputation on a national and international level, with recognition from National Geographic Traveler as one of the world's paradises and one of the fifty places to visit once in a lifetime. A quantitative research approach with a survey technique was primarily used in this study. The survey was conducted in-person through face-to-face interviews. The survey was conducted within a specific time frame, from September 2022 to January 2023.The sample size consisted of 150 domestic and foreign tourists from the four selected locations. The respondents were selected using a convenience sampling approach with a non-proportionate sample technique. The study incorporated both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire survey administered during the face-to-face interviews. The ques-

tionnaire utilized a 5-point Likert scale for rating. Data analysis was conducted using MS Excel and SPSS software to meet the objectives of the study. In addition to the survey data, necessary information was collected from various sources, including the Department of Tourism, hotels, non-governmental organizations and travel agencies.

Result and discussions

The table provides a detailed analysis of the characteristics and preferences of domestic and foreign tourists. Male domestic visitors account for 62% of the total, while male foreign tourists account for 68% of the total. Similarly, 57% of domestic visitors are single and 43% are married, compared to 62% and 38% among foreign tourists. Domestic and foreign tourists are more evenly distributed across age groups. Nuclear family arrangements are prevalent among both domestic (61%) and foreign tourists (70%). Professionals make up the largest occupational group among both categories of tourists, accounting for 33% and 40% of domestic and foreign tourists, respectively. The income distribution among visitors reveals a significant gap between domestic and international travelers as 86% of international tourists had an average monthly income of more than 60,000 rupees, indicating a greater economic profile within this group. Family members make up the biggest percentage,40% and 24% respectively, of both domestic and international travelers' preferred travel companions. The choice to travel with spouse is made by a sizable portion of foreign tourists (34%) compared to local travelers (10%). A significant proportion of visitors, domestic (18%) and foreign (14%) prefer to travel alone.

Table 1. *Sample Description*

Characteristics		Domestic Tourists		Foreign Tourists	
		Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	62	62	34	68
	Female	38	38	16	32
	Total	100	100	50	100
Marital Status	Single	57	57	31	62
	Married	43	43	19	38
	Total	100	100	50	100
Age (in years)	Below 20	18	18	5	10
	20-29	25	25	12	24
	30-39	22	22	10	20
	40-49	20	20	16	32
	50-59	10	10	5	10
	More than 60	5	5	2	4
	Total	100	100	50	100
Family Structure	Nuclear	61	60	35	70
	Joint Family	39	39	15	30
	Total	100	100	50	100

Characteristics		Domestic Tourists		Foreign Tourists	
		Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Educational Level	Post-Graduation	27	27	15	30
	Graduation	43	43	22	44
	Higher Secondary	22	22	10	20
	Matriculation	8	8	3	6
	Total	100	100	50	100
Occupation	Students	25	25	2	4
	Professionals	33	33	20	40
	Business	16	16	10	20
	Agriculture	14	14	4	8
	Self-employed	12	12	14	28
	Total	100	100	50	100
Average Monthly Income in rupees	No Personal Income	10	10	0	0
	Below 10,000	11	11	0	0
	10,000– 20000	18	18	0	0
	20000 – 40000	22	22	2	4
	40000 – 60000	23	23	5	10
	Above 60000	16	16	43	86
	Total	100	100	50	100
Companion for travelling	Alone	18	18	7	14
	Spouse	10	10	17	34
	Friends	32	32	14	28
	Family	40	40	`12	24
	Total	100	100	50	100
Most Preferred type of destinations	General recreations	40	40	4	8
	Religious sites	30	30	5	10
	Beaches	15	15	16	32
	Backwaters	10	10	13	26
	Wildlife and nature reserves	5	5	12	24
	Total	100	100	50	100
Geographic Preference	Southern Kerala	38	38	24	48
	Central Kerala	34	34	20	40
	Northern Kerala	28	28	6	12
	Total	100	100	50	100

Characteristics		Domestic Tourists		Foreign Tourists	
		Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Travelling time	October –March	25	25	33	66
	April – September	20	20	10	20
	No specific season	55	55	7	14
	Total	100	100	50	100
Travel mode	Road	57	57	20	40
	Rail	40	40	18	36
	Air	3	3	12	24
	Total	100	100	50	100

Source: primary data

Comparing the travel habits of domestic and foreign tourists, it was observed that foreign visitors arrive more frequently during specific seasons (their arrivals account for 66% of the total annual arrivals during the period from October to March), compared to domestic visitors, whose arrivals are more evenly distributed throughout the year. The southern and central parts of Kerala receive a disproportionately bigger share of the country's international visitors, who arrive by road and rail after entering India through other states. Foreign visitors make up a small portion of visitors to Northern Kerala. While domestic visitors choose general recreation and religious sites, foreign visitors are more drawn to beaches, backwaters, and wildlife.

Descriptive statistics

Tourists generally rated destination branding favorably, with (Mean: 3.88, SD: 1.723): This demonstrates that the "God's Own Country" branding has successfully built a strong favorable image of Kerala as a desired tourism destination. The continuous use of this brand across marketing materials has resonated effectively with tourists, helping them link Kerala with natural beauty, cultural richness, and friendly hospitality. The internet presence and digital marketing activities were favorably accepted, with (Mean: 3.83, SD: 1.885). This demonstrates that both the government and corporate groups have effectively used online channels to communicate with potential tourists.

Table 2. *Perception of Tourists about Marketing Strategies*

№	Marketing Strategy	5 – Excellent	4 - Good	3 - Fair	2 -Poor	1 - Very Poor	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Destination Branding	45	55	40	7	3	3.88	1.723
2	Online Presence and Digital Marketing	40	65	30	10	5	3.833	1.885
3	Eco-Tourism and Sustainability	47	50	41	9	3	3.86	1.85075
4	Cultural and Heritage Promotion	48	52	42	5	3	3.913	1.698
5	Wellness and Ayurveda Tourism	45	50	41	10	4	3.813	1.959

№	Marketing Strategy	5 – Excellent	4 - Good	3 - Fair	2 -Poor	1 - Very Poor	Mean	Standard Deviation
6	Adventure and Wildlife Tourism	45	47	48	8	2	3.833	1.735
7	Community-Based Tourism	27	37	43	32	11	3.2467	2.648
8	International Collaborations and Roadshows	25	30	42	43	10	3.1133	2.638
9	Seasonal and Event-Based Marketing	27	31	40	37	15	3.12	2.923

Source: primary data

Tourists had a positive attitude toward eco-tourism and sustainability activities, with (Mean: 3.86, SD: 1.851). Kerala's emphasis on responsible and eco-friendly tourist practices has clearly resonated with environmentally conscious guests. Cultural and heritage promotion initiatives received favorable responses with (Mean: 3.91, SD:1.698) showing that initiatives to highlight traditional art forms, festivals and heritage places have well attracted tourists looking for authentic cultural experiences. Wellness and Ayurveda tourism tactics received generally good comments, with (Mean: 3.81, SD: 1.960). The adventure and wildlife tourism initiatives were regarded positively with (Mean: 3.83, SD: 1.735) indicating that activities such as trekking, wildlife safaris, and water sports have excited the curiosity of many tourists seeking adventurous experiences. Community-based tourism strategies had mixed reviews, with (Mean: 3.25, SD:2.648). The international collaborations and roadshows plan obtained a mean score of 3.11, SD 2.63, indicating a modest effectiveness as many do not recognize the direct influence of such collaborations on their overall experience. Tourists had mixed feelings about seasonal and event-based marketing strategies, with (Mean: 3.12, SD: 2.923) indicating that a significant portion do not find them consistently appealing.

The aspects that affect effective tourism marketing techniques in Kerala are discussed in this section. Descriptive statistics about the price, cultural, political, psychological, and environmental factors are provided in this section.

Table 3. *Pricing factors*

Variables	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Standard Deviation
	1	2	3	4	5		
	%	%	%	%	%		
Reasonable Product Cost	6	14	16	38	26	3.64	1.738
Reasonable Travelling Cost	2	14	28	30	26	3.64	1.438
Reasonable Accommodation	6	14	24	30	26	3.56	1.758
Available Online Payment Option	10	12	22	32	24	3.48	1.962
Accepted Plastic Money	4	18	22	36	20	3.5	1.5625
Brands are able to fulfil expectation	2	14	34	36	14	3.46	1.1605
Brand Values are Superior	4	8	30	36	22	3.64	1.338

Variables	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Standard Deviation
	1	2	3	4	5		
	%	%	%	%	%		
Ability to satisfy needs	2	4	24	46	24	3.86	1.0005
Preferred Service was available	6	14	18	38	24	3.6	1.7
Customised Product matched with market price	6	12	20	38	24	3.62	1.6445
Market leaders charge higher price	2	6	22	40	30	3.9	1.1625
Overall satisfaction on Pricing Factors	4	6	16	44	30	3.9	1.3125

Source: primary data

Tourists are satisfied with all statements made about pricing tactics, as evidenced by the fact that every variable had a mean score of greater than three. A high mean score of 3.86 and 3.9 respectively, was assigned to the statements "Ability to satisfy needs/wants" and "Market leaders charge greater price." It appears to imply that marketers who can please customers can command a high price and be the market leader. The overall mean values, which range from 3.4 to 3.9 indicate that tourists are content with the factors that can affect the pricing techniques of tourism marketing to demonstrate their efficacy.

Table 4. *Cultural factors*

Variables	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Standard Deviation
	1	2	3	4	5		
	%	%	%	%	%		
Local People are helpful	10	10	16	40	24	3.58	1.9045
Provide Accurate Information	10	10	15	40	25	3.6	1.925
Trust Worthy	10	10	20	34	26	3.56	1.958
Local People are Polite	2	4	16	44	34	4.04	1.048
Responsive to Tourists needs	4	10	16	48	22	3.74	1.3405
Treated as Guests	2	4	20	40	34	4	1.1
Maintaining historical Monuments	6	8	14	40	32	3.84	1.618
Availability of Museums	4	10	22	36	28	3.74	1.4905
Local People Provides Security	4	10	20	36	30	3.78	1.5145
Overall satisfaction on Cultural Factors	4	8	16	42	30	3.86	1.4005

Source: primary data

All factors had mean scores greater than three, with the local people's courtesy and attitude towards tourists coming in at greater than four. This finding suggests that Kerala culture is

particularly distinctive and that residents around or close to tourist destinations are extremely polite. However, a considerable amount of visitors were not that happy about the statement" Provide correct information."

Table 5. *Political factors*

Variables	Strongly Disagree	Dis Agree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Standard Deviation
	1	2	3	4	5		
	%	%	%	%	%		
Conscious about present political status	6	8	16	44	26	3.76	1.528
Destination are free from Political Unrest	4	20	30	24	22	3.4	1.65
Available Police Security	6	12	24	40	18	3.52	1.512
Strictly implement tourism policies	14	16	20	36	14	3.2	2
Political Stability encourages you to travel more	10	10	16	42	22	3.56	1.858
Political Stability attracts more Foreign tourists to the state	4	6	16	38	36	3.96	1.398
Support of Government towards Tourism Development	4	6	16	40	34	3.94	1.3705
Overall satisfaction on Political Factors	6	6	20	40	28	3.78	1.5145

Source: primary data

Most of the respondents agreed with the assertions, such as being aware of the current political climate, choosing a destination free from political unrest, rigorously adhering to tourism regulations, etc. Tourists are satisfied with statements relating to political strategies, where all variables received a mean score of greater than three. It's important to note that the statement "Political stability attract more international tourists" has a mean of 3.96 and is a reliable measure of how political stability influences tourism.

Table 6. *Psychological factors*

Variables	Strongly Disagree	Dis Agree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Standard Deviation
	1	2	3	4	5		
	%	%	%	%	%		
Destinations are Safer	4	10	20	40	26	3.74	1.4405
Attractive hospitality of Local People	2	10	12	44	32	3.94	1.2705
Enjoyable Atmosphere	6	6	10	50	28	3.88	1.432
Available discount offers	4	6	20	40	30	3.86	1.3505
Attractive Tour Packages	6	6	20	38	30	3.8	1.55

Variables	Strongly Disagree	Dis Agree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Standard Deviation
	1	2	3	4	5		
	%	%	%	%	%		
Adequate provision for entertainment	4	6	20	40	30	3.86	1.3505
Gorgeous and Tourist Friendly Environment	2	6	20	42	30	3.92	1.142
Overall satisfaction on Psychological Factors	6	6	20	40	28	3.78	1.5145

Source: primary data

Travelers are happy with all the factors that can affect their psychology related to travel behaviour, with mean values ranging between 3.74 and 3.94. With a high mean score of 3.94 and 3.92, attractive hospitality and the gorgeous setting and attractive environment clearly meet the expectations of visitors.

Table 7. *Environmental factors*

VARIABLES	Strongly Disagree	Dis Agree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Standard Deviation
	1	2	3	4	5		
	%	%	%	%	%		
Available Parking facility	2	2	20	48	28	3.98	0.9245
Available Communication Channels	6	8	20	40	26	3.72	1.552
Attractive Landscape	2	2	20	44	32	4.02	0.9745
Good air, water and Sound quality	2	2	20	40	36	4.06	1.0205
Technologically Developed Destinations	4	6	20	42	28	3.84	1.318
Available Information	12	14	16	36	22	3.42	2.1045
Overall satisfaction on Environmental Factors	4	6	16	44	30	3.9	1.3125

Source: primary data

All variables in the table obtained a mean score of greater than three, indicating that tourists are satisfied with all environmental strategy-related aspects. Despite the fact that tourists were satisfied, few criteria, such as available information, available communication channels and technologically advanced destination sites, received a comparatively low mean scores.

Conclusion

The current study with the help of primary data and available literature provides insight into how travellers view Kerala's tourism marketing tactics and the expectations and satisfaction of tourists about Kerala as a tourist destination. According to the survey, the main variables that affect tourists' perceptions are culture, environment, pricing, value, expectations; tech-

nology; environment; and ability to pay. When promoting the businesses to achieve more clients, the service provider must focus on these elements and their sub-factors. The sample profile reveals that the majority of visitors are male, young, and from nuclear families. The tourists were extremely concerned and pleased with the marketing strategies and the ability of the destination's marketers to satiate needs and wants, market leaders' higher pricing demands, distinctive culture, locals, local politics, travel risk technologies, and environment.

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