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The impact of Public Relations on the Tourism Industry; a study based on Tourism in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Tourism is a very historic industry in the world. At present tourism has booming demand among people who love to travel around the world. Public Relations (PR) is a distinct function that creates an organizational image, reputation, goodwill, and interactive understating among its key public. PR plays a big role in tourist destination marketing and attracts several tourists. It provides huge support for retaining tourists for a long period competing with competitive tourism countries and companies smoothly. This study mainly focuses on identifying what is public relations and tourism, the relationship between PR and Tourism, the Role of Public Relations in the Tourism industry, and identifying how Public Relations build a Sri Lankan country's image in the global tourism industry. A qualitative approach is used for this research. The research study concludes that Public Relations and Tourism have a very close relationship; it plays a big role in promoting tourist destinations and builds a positive image among world tourists consumers. Also, the study reveals that at present numerous Public Relations strategic plans and campaigns are implemented to uplift the Sri Lankan tourist image, to decrease the negative impact of the Easter Sunday terrorist attacks and the Covid-19 impact on the tourist customers.

Keywords: *Tourism, Public Relations, Role of Public Relations, Image Building, PR Tools*

Introduction

Tourism locally and globally plays a massive environmental, political, and social influence on the industry concerning social responsibility and community relations. (Yavuz.M,\Oter.Z,2016). The field of public relations assists many organizations for instance; trade unions, business communities, government agencies, educational foundations, hospitals, religious and social voluntary associations, and tourism sectors (Harlow, 1976). Today public relations have become very crucial in the communications and promotional activities of tourism. World tourism changes by the impact of economic, technological, and sociocultural changes. (Huertas. A, 2008). In 2013 Petrovici stated that tourism is an intercultural process and PR is a part of communication activities that help more than one understanding. He argued that participation in tourism is not a static experience, but a “life experience”, that creates instances for imagination mind and life-changing understandings. It can affect the personality of a tourist intellectually, emotionally, and physically. Tourism is an economic and cultural behavior that leads to the growth of the country and public relations provide strength for tourism. Building the tourism sector’s image, credibility, and trust among tourist consumers, maintaining goodwill and positive understating between tourist companies and the public, crisis communication and strategic crisis management is the key role of PR. The research problem of this study was assessing the impact of public relations on the tourism industry in Sri Lanka. The objective of the study was to determine the impact of public relations on the tourism industry in Sri Lanka and to identify the relationship between public relations and tourism.

Materials & Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used as the research choice. Qualitative data were gained from previous research journal articles, books, magazines, and computer resources. Mainly the conceptual analysis was conducted within this research to define and analyze the collected data. According to the conceptual framework, the independent variable was public relations and the dependent variable was tourism.

Result and Discussion

In 1987 Institute of Public Relations defined Public Relations as, “Public Relations are the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and understanding between an organization and its public” (Theaker A, 2004). Father of public relations, Edward L Bernays defined PR in 1923 as “information given to the public, persuasion directed at the public to modify attitudes and actions, and efforts to integrate attitudes and actions of an institution with its publics and of publics with those of that institution”. Persuasion of public attitudes and integration of institution efforts with publics is a major aspect of PR according to Bernays’ definition. “Public relations are supposed to be considered as a task which takes part in creating company goodwill, engage itself in promoting the company brand or name maintaining continuity and snowballing profitability. (Eyrich. N, Padman. M.L, Sweetser. K,2008).” Tourism has become an attractive job field in recent decades among the global population due to globalization and the power of communication devices. Since ancient times people love to visit place to place and destinations. Tourism is the temporary movement of individuals from where their normal life or work environment to destinations outside the places (The Institute of Tourism, 1976). The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) stated that “Tourism comprises the activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside of their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business or other purposes” 1991. In 1994 Sharpley discuss that there are a variety of factors for tourism that affect peculiar to each tourist such as social, economic, demographic, and psychological. In 2017 Deeri and Schmuecker argues that the tourism sector provides a large influence to develop and strengthen the financial pillar of a country and gives direct effects on social and environmental growth. (Ceylan. M., 2007).

PR campaigns build an image of tourism organizations and countries. In 1998 Krapfl stated that “Images are built and created by public relations through print media, word of mouth, and the attitude of the targeted audience. If done properly, potential tourists will know how they will benefit, learn and grow from visiting a

particular site or event” (Ceylan. M, 2007). There are many public relations tools use for tourism. Brochures, television advertisements, display advertisements, social media, pop-up ads, newspapers, magazines, public relations events, sponsorships, leaflets, cutouts, billboards, and web articles are some of them. “The most important of these tools is public relations which play a role in constructing images of locations, activities, and identities” (Morgan and Pritchard, 2001) Public relations means not only attracting visitors but keeping them happy after they arrive in the tourism industry. “Due to the explosive growth in technology in the last decade, people are buying their vacations on the net. As there are many opportunities, a tourism company must advertise the destination attractive with the photographs and also positive feedback on the Web site”. (Ceylan.M,2007;Ward,2000). So, tourism and public relations have a strong relationship. But public relations can build a negative image of tourism in a country. So, the positive or negative impact of PR is very powerful to persuade tourists in good or bad ways.

L’Etang, 2006, explained that only a few researchers were interested in a review of literature about the role of public relations and tourism (Ceylan. M, (2007). In 2008 Huertas discussed that communication is the key to public relations roles. Especially he mentioned that public relations officers (PRO) played a big role in training and consulting, training and advertising on how an organization creates a suitable and favorable image using promotion in various mass media information. Today the developments of PR tools have come to an internet platform such as social networks that provide interaction and communication with tourists easily. (Sweetser,K.D.,E.Metzgar.2007). “All the tourism organizations analyzed have interactive websites that are capable of providing high levels of information and creating virtual experiences” (Ceylan. M, 2007; Klein, 2003). PR play important role in building the image and communication of tourist destinations and it helps to attract a lot of tourists. (Santoso, N.R., Negoro, S.H. (2019). PR is the predominant activity in the promotion and communication of tourist information. (Huertas A. 2008). In 2014 Jain and Chicago explained that PR drives the behavioral intentions of tourists toward destinations because building and strengthening a destination’s

image are significant factors that can support positively and improve tourists' trust, satisfaction, and commitment to the destination. Also, in 2013 Petrovici argued that building goodwill is the most effective way for PR to increase the prominence of tourist destinations and promote tourism products for the sake of attracting a lot of tourist arrivals.

Sri Lanka is a very famous tourist destination in the world. According to the Tourism Industry Report fourth quarter of 2019 Sri Lanka is ranked No.04 in the list of 10 most In-Demand Travel Destination in 2020 followed by the best warm-weather destination title by USA TODAY and CNN Travel has selected Sri Lanka as one of the best places to visit in 2020 and also Sri Lanka was chosen as the best wildlife destination in Asia. The tourism industry plays a significant role in the Sri Lankan economy while being one of the best critical pillars of an asset in its economic growth. According to the 2019 Annual Statistical Report of the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, the tourism industry's direct contribution to the GDP was 4.5%. In 2019, the tourism industry was recognized as the third revenue generator in the country and employs around 135,000 to 150,000 in industry. After gaining independence from the British in 1948, there was continuous progress in the tourism industry in Sri Lanka. But it was stagnant until 2009 and suffered massively because of the adverse influences of the thirty years of the LTTE civil war. However, after the end of the Civil war in 2009, the tourism industry was booming. But this positive scenario was completely changed and tourism was badly affected, and took a tremendous beating due to the Easter Sunday attack in 2019. For the year 2019 April 21st, it was estimated to have more than 3 million tourist arrivals to Sri Lanka while having more than \$5 billion by way of income. But due to the Easter attack, the statistics of the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority stated that tourist arrivals slumped by 70% in May 2019 and by 57% in June when compared to 2018. Furthermore, many small business entrepreneurs in the tourism industry had to close their businesses. "It is a well-known fact that terrorist attacks are beyond the controlling power of even the most advanced security systems. The only thing that can be done is to reduce the negative impacts of Easter attacks through

proper planning and management practices of tourism. It is vital to pay consideration to the tourist destinations in Sri Lanka, as those places are more likely to be terrorist targets since they can get the attention of the whole world.” (Gabriella. E, Sofia.R.2013) Also World Covid-19 pandemic has hugely affected the tourism industry in Sri Lanka. To manage this crisis Sri Lankan tourism needs a proper strategic PR plan. Physical and mental protection is more key need for tourists. Whatever the beautiful island is Sri Lanka, it is necessary to establish credibility and understanding in the protection of tourists who travels to Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has a valued tourist brand around the world but it needs to reposition for care and protection. However, amid many obstacles, the Sri Lankan government is implementing many PR campaigns and global communication campaigns to uplift the tourism industry at present. To mitigate the Easter Sunday attack and Covid-19 impact, the government implemented many promotional PR projects in 2019-2020 with the support of the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB) and Sri Lanka Conventions Bureau. Below projects are some of them. Developed the first Sri Lanka Tourism Mobile Version Travel App, Safe travel Campaign by world travel tourism council – under the So Sri Lanka Campaign, Provided sponsorships for Duruthu Perahera, Nawam Perahera, Kandy Esala Perahera and Ruhunu Kataragama Perahera to showcase the Sri Lankan culture to the world by promoting via digital media strongly, Content Development Project - Collected around five thousand places of tourist attractions to create an image and video gallery as a promotional tool, Wellness and Ayurveda Campaign with the support of European Union, Increase film tourism, Activities Organized By The Sri Lankan Missions Overseas, In Collaboration With Sltpb – In UK, Philippines, Japan, Austria, Russia, Germany, Implement Visiting Blogger Program (VBP) ,Travel influencer campaign - “Keep Sri Lankan Dream Alive”, Print Media Promotions – posted PR articles in Sweden, India, Australia, USA, Germany, Middle East, Russia, Netherland and UK and Implement Earned Media Coverage - CNN one-month Digital and TV Campaign for Sri Lanka Tourism free of charge are some of them.

Conclusion

Public Relations and the Tourism industry have a very close and strong relationship. PR plays a vital role in tourism. But literature review showed that few scholars have been interested to study PR and Tourism related topics. PR can support the positive and negative ways of building image and maintaining reputation. It provides communication, crisis, and issues management consultancies, and implement many PR tools and tactics to attract new tourists and build trust. PR has a lot of strength to support tourism development. In Sri Lanka, the Tourism industry has faced many issues regarding covid-19 and Easter Sunday attacks. Currently, Sri Lankan tourism authorities and other tourist organizations implement many PR activities to mitigate its bad impact. Also, the global tourism industry has been hugely affected by the Covid -19 pandemic. So, PR should implement campaigns to gain a good impact on tourism.

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