

## **Sustainable Promotional Strategies: Relevance of International Study Tours for Destination Marketing**

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### **Abstract**

Promotional policies adopted for destination marketing can be two-fold- short term and long term promotional aspect. A variety of tools can be used for promotion like advertising, organizing FAM trips, commission writing, internet, media etc. These tools have their own relevance in promoting and branding destinations yet they have their limitations too. Moreover, not much analysis has been done on the sustainable aspects of these tools. Methods need to be backed up by long drawn out strategies to generate sustainable promotions that have a continuous multiplier effect. It is in this context that the study tours have to be situated, as our study reveals their attributes, benefits and merits. Twelve attributes in total with their rationale were identified across four principal dimensions of sustainability- economical, socio-cultural, environmental and ethical. The paper also identifies and analyses eighteen relevant aspects of International Study Tours to India through the responses of tour members along with their justification to establish the sustainable angle

*Keywords: Sustainable promotion, Sustainable promotional strategies, Students tours*

### **Introduction**

Tourism has become highly competitive. This puts pressure on the tourism service providers and Destination Marketers to step up their promotional efforts. Promotional policies adopted can be two fold-short term and long term aspect. Short term policies addresses immediate concerns like mitigating the impact of an adverse effect while long term policies usually concentrate on building or Positioning/repositioning a unique destination brand. Either way, Promotion is an expensive and elaborate exercise with a major portion of the destination's tourism budget earmarked for it. As such, zeroing on the most appropriate promotional strategy is crucial. What defines 'appropriateness' however depends upon various parameters, each exclusive to individual destination. This research paper explores the sustainable aspect of promotional strategies, highlighting the relevance of Study tours in destination marketing. Probing tourism promotional strategies which would translate into continuous positive multiplier effects is thus the primary concern in this paper.

Youth travel is one of the most exciting growing markets within the global tourism sector. According to an UNWTO forecasts, by 2020 there will be almost 300 million international youth trips per year. Within this ambit, an interesting trend is the increased mobility of students across national boundaries for education purpose. International student mobility crossed 5 million in 2015 which as per projection of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is likely to reach 8 million students per year by 2025. A major chunk of students' international educational travel scheme is through enrolment in Schools/colleges/Universities/ Institutes in a foreign country (as an International student) which involves a long stay leading to certification or award of degree. Other forms of travel include study or visit through exchange programmes; taking a language course; being part of a Faculty led Study tours; internship programmes etc. Study tours undertaken by students, which is the focus of this paper is characterized by a rather short travel period, usually of only one to three weeks duration or a little over a month. Essentially organized by academic institutions with the main intention of taking the teaching-learning process beyond the confines of the classroom into an international setting, these tours are often a component of the academic curriculum in developed countries. In recent years there have been a number of such short duration study tours from schools, colleges and universities abroad coming to India.

This paper is an outcome of interaction with students and teachers who had come to India on a study

tour and also with the tour operation companies facilitating such travels. It is part of a wider doctoral research work on a critical analysis of inbound study tours to India within the framework of educational and academic exchanges as a promotional tool for tourism. The paper is descriptive in nature and identifies:

- specific attributes of Sustainable Promotional Strategies across four dimensions of sustainability
- eighteen relevant aspects of International Study Tours to India through the responses of study tour members along with their justification to establish the sustainable angle

To situate Students tour within the context of sustainable promotional strategies and in effect their relevance in the overall destination marketing plan, it is imperative to understand the notion of Sustainable Promotional strategies.

### **Sustainable Promotional Strategies**

Promotion is one of the basic 4P's of Marketing Mix (the other three being, Product, Price and Place). In a destination marketing plan, Promotion is about presenting competitive information of the destination to potential tourists with the aim of increasing actual demand and tourist inflow. A variety of tools are used, each with their own merits and limitations.

#### **Box 1: Common Promotional Tools**

- Advertising
- Familiarization trip (FAM trip) and Workshops
- Other PR activities- Press conference, press letters, presentations
- Commission writing,
- Participation in travel and tourism fairs
- Publishing Promotional material- brochure (general and product specific), tourist maps
- Interactive websites
- Branding, creating Destination Logo, Slogan

Which, when and how these promotional tools are to be used are determined as per strategy formulated for each specific case. In the words of Engel, Warshaw and Kinnear (1991), "Promotional strategy is a controlled integrated programme of communication methods and material designed to present an organization and its products to prospective customers; to communicate need satisfying attributes of product to facilitate sales and thus contribute to long-run profit performance". Promotional strategy therefore spells out not only what to say about the destination but also how to say and to what effect. Development of effective promotional strategies serves as connect between the customers and the experience they are seeking (Esu & Ebitu, 2010) and involves immense planning, coordination and consideration of various factors including product type and life cycle stage, competitors' strategy, infrastructure condition, market preference, buyer readiness stage, community's attitude etc. Since successful Promotion are instrumental in enticing and attracting potential tourists (Mulec, 2010), much is at stake at the strategy formulation stage. The fact that a major portion of the budget is usually allocated for promotional activities further substantiate the point. Identifying and adopting promotional strategies which are sustainable thus become crucial here. In this paper, the

meaning of the term ‘Sustainable’ is used in its boarder implication of being related to something long-lasting, durable or consistent.

Overall, the concept of sustainable development has now become more holistic with economic, social and cultural aspects being considered mainstream as opposed to the initial environment-centric connotation. Sustainability is a widely researched theme in many streams of studies including tourism. However, research and literature on the Promotional aspect of tourism marketing is rather limited with those concentrating on the sustainable angle getting even lesser attention. Mohammadi et al (2015) identified “economic capacity, social capital, cultural enrichment, attractions and environmental resources” as main elements of tourism and considers their interaction and balance as conditions for sustainability. As such they emphasized the consideration of all these elements while “selecting, designing and implementing promotional strategies for attracting tourists”. In her Masters dissertation on the sustainable approach of promoting Ecuador to the Chinese market, Centavo (2014) had compiled ten relevant themes with respective general guidelines for Sustainable Tourism Promotion. Her source of reference was ‘a guide for policy makers on making Tourism more sustainable’, jointly published by UNWTO and UNEP (2005). The themes considered were related to Product, Visitor, target market, Seasonality, Alternative destinations, Value maximization, Transportation, Authenticity, Tourism stakeholders and Education.

A natural extension of the above discussion would be the identification of attributes or characteristics, whose reflection in the implementation and outcome would determine the sustainable aspect of Promotional Strategies. This identification will also act as a checklist at strategy formulation stage and the base upon which the relevance of student study tours can be established.

**Attributes of Sustainable Promotional Strategies**

Any analysis of sustainability would require conformity to the three dimensions of sustainable development – Economic, Social and Environmental (Munasinghe cited in Rodríguez et al, 2013). Moreover, since destination promotion is about conveying what the destination has and influencing potential tourists to visit, it also becomes important to ensure that the right information is conveyed. This necessitates the consideration of a fourth dimension- Ethical dimension. In the Table below, corresponding sustainable promotional strategies’ attributes for each of the four dimensions are identified with their Rationale.

**Box 2: Dimensions and Attributes of Sustainable Promotional Strategies**

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Attributes</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
<i><b>Economic</b></i>	Cost Effectiveness	Will enable promotional activities within the earmarked budget
	Market research oriented	Will enable identification of target markets (size, characteristics and behaviour) so that promotional efforts are focused exclusively on identified market segments
	Seasonality issues prioritization	possible extension of peak tourist season duration and tourists inflow throughout the year, which translates into more income and lesser income gap between peak and lean seasons
	Local attraction maximization	When more easily accessible products are identified, developed and offered, it may lead to increased length of stay and spending per head
	Pro-community	When tourism is seen as benefiting the host community, it leads to harmonious development
		Two fold benefits- the host community’s deep connection with

<b>Socio-cultural</b>	Culture sensitive	their culture is not disturbed; side by side, the tourists are also sensitized thereby reducing chances of host-guest hostility
	Pro-Stakeholders' interest	When involvement and interest of all stakeholders are guaranteed, misunderstandings and conflicts are kept to the minimum
<b>Environmental</b>	Alternative destinations prioritization	Would help divert tourists traffic flow from popular (and often overcrowded) destinations thereby addressing issues in carrying capacity and uneven concentration of tourists at specific tourist sites
	Ecology friendly	Would encourage use of more sustainable tourism products and facilities (transportation means, accommodation Units, tour companies etc)
	Visitors' involvement centric	Creating a Visitor's code would help inform visitors' about sustainability issues thereby encouraging them to participate in activities that would help to achieve sustainable tourism.
<b>Ethical</b>	Authentic product information	When visitors actually find in the destination what they had been promised/shown, there is less chance of sending home an unsatisfied visitor
	Clean Marketing emphasis	Ensures healthy competition when competitors campaign are not demeaned or maligned

Source: Adapted and Extended from UNEP and UNWTO, "Making Tourism More Sustainable - A Guide for Policy Makers" (2005).

Destination Promotion Strategists should aim for inclusion of as many identified attributes as possible while strategizing destination's promotions. A study of these attributes across all dimensions points towards their role in influencing visitors' choice and behavior. For instance:

- Emphasis on promotion of off seasons attractions and facilities *can influence timing of trips*
- Emphasis on promotion of Alternative destinations *can influence Places to visit*
- Emphasis on promotion of means of Public Transport *can influence type of transportation used*
- Emphasis on promotion of lesser known local attractions *can influence Length of Stay*
- Emphasis on promoting travel companies and establishment which adopts sustainability principles *can influence selection of Supplier and Operators*

Inclusion of these attributes therefore has the potential of generating sustainable effects. Another crucial sustainable issue in the overall process of strategizing tourism destination marketing plan is the recognition and targeting of visitor segment with more propensity of conducting themselves responsibly. What makes student study tour group such a segment is discussed in the following section.

### Why it make sense to target student Study tour groups?

An outcome of an increasingly globalised world is the internationalization of academic curriculum, aimed at exposing students to diverse cultures and working environment that exist beyond their own familiar settings. Short term cultural Exchange programmes hosted by partner institutions and short tours organized by educational institutions to foreign destinations commonly referred to as International Study tours programmes are one among many reflections of this development. These

types of travel range from even less than a week to a little over a month duration. Essentially organized by academic institutions with the main intention of taking the teaching-learning process outside the confines of the classroom into an international setting, these tours are often a component of the academic curriculum in developed countries and usually involve visits to one or multiple foreign destination countries.

Till date, there is no published research work which explores the sustainability of study tours. In fact, studies focusing on the sustainable impact of any form of student travel are very few although the social and educational impact of broadening viewpoints through exposure to different cultures and thereby contributing to better understanding of people has been extolled by various researchers and authors. One significant study by Rodríguez, Martínez-Roget, & Pawlowska (2013) had argued how international Academic Tourism (which they define as less than one year stay in a higher education institute) is a more sustainable type of tourism than conventional tourism through the analysis of experiences of European students in Spanish universities (coming through European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, ERASMUS programme). Points put forth in favour include economic impact like more expenditure per visitor, longer overnight stays, additional spending generated through more local visits and by visits of friends/relatives; lesser negative environment impact since the consumption pattern of such students were found to be similar with those of domestic students and activities are usually concentrated in college campus; social impact in terms of displaying enlarged capabilities due to exposure to different culture. The focus of their study was however limited to increasing the enrolment numbers international and exchange programme students.

An examination of aspects of study tours programmes which generates or has the potential of generating positive multiplier effects will bring to perspective its sustainability and relevance of being included in destinations' promotional strategies as a target market segment. In this paper, the examination is carried out through selection of relevant questions from two set of questionnaires prepared and administered to study tour group members, who had visited India and tour operation companies respectively as part of the broader ongoing doctoral research work. Eighteen aspects from these questions were identified and considered, responses of which were justified for relevance of study tour group as a sustainable target market segment. The responses were elicited from the following sources:

- 67 filled-in questionnaires received so far from study tour members as a part of the Doctoral research work
- In-depth interaction with three study tour groups - two groups from the University of West Indies which visited India in 2012 and 2013 as part of its 'Understanding Global Culture' course and a group from the Eszterhazykaroly University of Hungary. All these tours were led and coordinated by the first author and hosted by the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), India (both the authors are Faculty members here)
- Other applicable information from blogs, research findings and reports available on Study tours to India

**Aspect 1:** Average Group size range

**Finding:** 15-20 (approximately)

**Corresponding Relevance:** Significant group size

**Justification:** For a smooth conduct of movement as a group, it may be considered to be in the optimum size range, being neither too small nor too large. It can be well coordinated and managed by a tour leader/coordinator, the most obvious benefit being the advantage of communicating as a single Unit. This may lessen chances of miscommunication and misunderstanding thereby leading to a satisfying group experience. The range is also sizeable enough to initiate a positive economic multiplier effect cycle.

**Aspect 2:** Average tour Duration range

**Finding:** 8-14 days

**Corresponding Relevance:** Respectable duration of stay

**Justification:** This is a respectable duration. There are many popular international destinations, whose respective average is only 4-5 days. Longer the visitors' stay, more economically beneficial it is for the host destination through extended spending per additional day on products and services including accommodation, transport, essential commodities etc. A longer stay also means longer contact with local environment and condition, which may translate to enhanced understanding leading to increased satisfaction level.

**Aspect 3:** Expenditure (students)

**Finding:** Less than \$500.

**Corresponding Relevance:** Significant spending

**Justification:** This may seem less but we need to acknowledge two important facts to put it in the right context. First, students had already paid an inclusive fee at the time of registration, which covers all major expenses like return airfare, accommodation, most meals, insurance etc. Therefore this extra expenditure is significant, more so considering that secondly, students usually being non-earning members and their trip being financed by other sources, high spending are not expected from them.

**Aspect 4:** Average Age Group range (Students)

**Finding:** 15-25 years

**Corresponding Relevance:** Long travelling years ahead

**Justification:** This is a young group with many travelling years ahead between them. Since intention for repeat visit is also expressed (Aspect no. 15), appropriate marketing and promotional strategy can be used to target them for many multiple visits in later years. India is a huge country with diverse resources capable of catering to different needs and desire of tourists' and this definitely is an advantage which can be use to full advantage during promotions.

**Aspect 5:** Month/(s) of Visit

**Finding:** Maximum arrivals are in the month of June, July and December but arrivals also observed in other remaining months.

**Corresponding Relevance:** potential of addressing seasonality disparity issues

**Justification:** Study tours are usually scheduled during semester break or vacation period of academic institution. In recent years there has been an increase in the number of such tours to India from institutes spread across the globe, with varying academic and vacation schedule. This explains the year round arrival pattern. If their number increases especially during the lean tourist arrivals months in India, it will be a win-win situation for both. The underutilized infrastructure during lean season can be utilized while the study tour group can avail the discounted rates and reduce their overall tour costs.

**Aspect 6:** Pre-departure Orientation

**Finding:** Yes

**Corresponding Relevance:** Informed and therefore behave responsibly

**Justification:** It is a compulsory feature of every Study tour, organized to address various issues including programme schedule, academic requirements, participants expectation from the tour, travel documents, living arrangements, code of conduct, cross-cultural adjustments etc. These sessions helps sensitize the members about the destination's culture and custom and also the Do's and Don'ts to be followed during the trip. Since the group members are well informed beforehand, they tend to behave responsibly.

**Aspect 7:** Expert's Presentation/Lectures on Indian themes

**Response:** Yes

**Corresponding Relevance:** Deeper insights

**Finding:** All Study tours to India are planned with the objective of understanding the country of visit. The nature and type of understanding sought is determined by the subject/discipline specific learning objectives. A tour of Business Studies students aims to learn the business environment and their

management while a Legal Studies students' tour aims to understand the Judiciary system and its functioning. Lectures and presentation given by Experts is one method of getting this understanding. Here the advantage over a general tourist is the deeper insights of the country. This may translate into a feeling of knowing the country better.

**Aspect 8: Interactive Sessions**

**Finding:** Interacted with student and faculty members, Business leaders, NGO's etc

**Corresponding Relevance:** Deeper Insights

**Justification:** Cultural immersion is a major objective of any Study tour programme. During study tours, there is high level of interaction with sections of the local host population. This provides an opportunity for understanding things from various stakeholders' perspective and gives further deeper insights. As one student participant puts it aptly, 'Now that I have experienced India for myself, I try to break the stereotypes people have about India'.

**Aspect 9: Visits to Popular tourist places**

**Finding:** Yes

**Corresponding Relevance:** Touristic activity

**Justification:** Study tour programmes are usually designed to strike a balance between educational and cultural excursions. Visits to popular tourist places are thus a prominent feature in tour itineraries. This is a direct touristic activity and gives the members a feel of being a tourist in India. This may also be one decisive factor when considering revisiting the country in later years as a holiday tourist.

**Aspect 10: Shopping**

**Finding:** Yes

**Corresponding Relevance:** Touristic activity

**Justification:** Another touristic activity, a separate budget is always kept for shopping. Buying local products as souvenirs is what almost every tourist does. Tour members surveyed in our study bought a variety of products, mainly handicraft items, leather goods, jewellery, dresses, traditional costumes and shoes.

**Aspect 11: Whether they made any local friends during the Tour**

**Finding:** Yes

**Corresponding Relevance:** Relationship formed

**Justification:** Study tour programmes being quite interactive creates an environment conducive for nurturing friendship between the visiting students and their counterparts in the host institutes. This is especially true in exchange programmes, where home-stays are the usual practice for housing the visiting group. This friendship, if sustained, will have favorable implications. When a foreigner is guaranteed of the service of the local friend as a guide and the accommodation part taken care of, it may then act as a huge incentive to travel back to India again.

**Aspect 12: Sharing Experiences, photos on social networking sites**

**Finding:** Yes

**Corresponding Relevance:** Publicity Advantage

**Justification:** In today's internet savvy world, this seems to be a standard practice with almost all student tour members. This is especially true when they are in a foreign destination and are being exposed to conditions and culture quite different from their own. Since their exposure is more intensive than a general tourist, what they upload on this platform is not just restricted to photo shots at popular tourist sites. This is therefore a great medium through which the country is publicized. Though, there is also an equal chance of negative publicity, a general examination of updates on generating Institute's websites, blogs etc on study tours to India paints a favorable image. "A positive image derived from positive travel experiences results in a positive evaluation of a destination" (Kim Soon-Ho et al, 2012).

**Aspect 13: Write-up/ Presentation given post-tour**

**Finding:** Yes

**Corresponding Relevance:** Publicity Opportunity

**Justification:** Submitting a Tour report (individual/group) or giving a presentation is often a mandatory requirement in almost all Study tour programmes. The immediate academic circle of fellow students and faculty members are usually the audience of such a presentation. Also, inevitably there are one or two students in each group who write about the tour in the college/University magazines and also in the local newspaper columns. The more people the image of India reaches the more additional publicity it is.

**Aspect 14:** Average number of people talked to about the India Tour experience

**Finding:** 20 -30 people

**Corresponding Relevance:** Publicity Advantage

**Justification:** A Study tour group of 20 members, each talking about their Indian experience to 20 other people, that's a total of 400 people. When the experience is a positive one, the spill-over narration on the 400 people is also likely to be positive. A positive image formed is always advantageous considering all people are potential tourists.

**Aspect 15:** Repeat visitation desire

**Finding:** Yes

**Corresponding Relevance:** Repeat Visitors

**Justification:** Almost all members of study tour groups intend to visit India again. They feel the 15-20 days tour was too short and too hectic. India is a big country and during the tour they could cover only a few places. Moreover the tour members are now aware of the diverse offerings of India as a tourism destination. This is an opportunity for tourism marketers and promoters in India to tap and target this market in future marketing efforts.

**Aspect 16:** Recommended India as a holiday destination to friends and family

**Finding:** Yes

**Corresponding Relevance:** Word of mouth referrals

**Justification:** This is an important fact which establishes the relevance of Study tours within the sustainable promotional strategies discussion. First, the recommendations were not binding and done at individual level. It is free publicity and therefore benefits the overall Indian tourism promotional efforts. They become unpaid unofficial brand ambassador of Destination India

**Aspect 17:** Follow Indian theme based events at their home country

**Finding:** Over 80% responded 'Yes

**Corresponding Relevance:** Sense of Affiliation with India

**Justification:** It is a favorable sign that many past tour members follow Indian theme based events. It may in some way help relive the memories of their India tour and help maintain the connections made.

**Aspect 18:** Overall Experience of the tour

**Finding:** Satisfied/Highly Satisfied

**Corresponding Relevance:** Satisfied visitor

**Justification:** "Satisfied consumers have a propensity to repurchase and recommend products to their families and friends" (Siri et al 2012). A satisfied tourist is every destination promoter's dream target; automatically becoming a free walking talking advertisement medium with a higher chance of making repeat visitations and influencing others to try out the destination. This explains Aspect 15 &16 above.

## Discussion

Tourism is a very tricky business, most strategy deemed sustainable inevitably have a counter issue. If we restrict the number of tourists, the economic inflow suffers; if we promote protected pristine areas, more tourists come bringing issues of carrying capacity threshold breach. Every tourism activity will

impact and bring about changes. The challenge is to minimize the negative and maximize the positive impacts. For tourism destinations to develop sustainably, it is crucial to influence visitors/tourists choices and behavior. If they conduct responsibly, half the battle is won. Since Marketing and information activities are important medium through which visitors' choice and behavior can be influenced, appropriate promotional strategy help to ensure the sustainability aspect.

Our study identified attributes which determines the sustainability of destination promotional strategies evaluated in terms of their durability, effectiveness, good will and value of investment. Twelve attributes in total with their rationale were identified across four principal sustainability dimensions- economical, socio-cultural, environmental and ethical. This is a significant theoretical contribution to a rather marginalized research theme of sustainable promotional strategies. These attributes will be instrumental in shaping promotional strategies both in government and private tourism sector.

Pursuing with our other objective of determining the relevance of student tours in destination marketing, eighteen aspects peculiar to such tours were further considered and justified. These justifications contribute to the larger body of knowledge on the impact of study tours by bringing in a new perspective of relating them to tourism destinations marketing plan. Almost all literature on study tours are from Education and Management Studies perspective, with linkages to tourism being very few. This study was an attempt to bridge this research gap. The comprehension exemplified in this study that students who had been to India can be groomed as its brand ambassador is in itself an innovative theory.

### **Limitation of this Study**

There were several limitations in this study, the most obvious being the lack of ready reference of previous research work. This is mainly because of scant academic attention to Sustainable Promotional Strategies and Educational tourism in general and the linkage between student tours and tourism promotion in particular. Identifying and getting access to students who had been to India on study tours was a daunting task. Almost all foreign educational institutions have very strict privacy policy where even their own academic coordinators and faculty members need the consent of the respective student to forward the questionnaires we had sent. This study also being part of an ongoing Doctoral research work, the collection of data is still in process and therefore the findings can only be considered preliminary

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India take the lead in recognizing the potential of this exciting segment of visitor. A much needed action could be expanding the option under which the purpose of visit to India is recorded in the Disembarkation form/card. At present, the form has only 4 broad categories- *Business & Professional; Leisure, Holiday & Recreation; Visiting Friends & Relatives* and *Medical treatment*. All other reasons for visit are clubbed together in a fifth option of 'Others'. It was observed that there was no uniform response of the Study tour visitors on this count with responses divided between 'Business& professional' and 'Others'. Inclusion of a separate option of 'Educational/ Study tours' would help specify this visitor segment. The Ministry can also provide a platform where information from key players facilitating these groups can be documented. A detailed study project on Educational tours to India can also be commissioned to recognize and categories the market segment and plan specific promotional strategies to target them.