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Beyond
Dr. Roland Silva
Charting New Frontiers
in Sri Lanka's Cultural Heritage

CONFERENCE READER

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Beyond Dr. Roland Silva:

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Reflection of Tourism Destination Image through Online Reviews: A Netnographic Approach to UNESCO World Heritage Site of Rangiri Dambulla Cave Temple, Sri Lanka

Indrachapa Weerasinghe* and A.A.H. Pamalka

University of Kelaniya

chapaw@kln.ac.lk

Tourism Destination Image (TDI) is conceptualised through three components: cognitive, affective, and conative. Tourists' impressions play a vital role in shaping destination image within the tourism sector. In today's digital era, user-generated content (UGC) provides deeper insights into visitor perceptions, as travellers widely share experiences through online platforms and social media. TripAdvisor, one of the most popular and globally recognised travel websites, offers authentic reviews reflecting visitor experiences. This study aims to examine how the image of the UNESCO World Heritage Site, Rangiri Dambulla Cave Temple in Sri Lanka, is reflected through online reviews. The study was guided by two objectives: (i) to determine tourists' perspectives of visit experiences at Dambulla Cave Temple under the three TDI components, and (ii) to identify negatively addressed elements in each component. A qualitative Netnography approach was used, with individual online reviews as the unit of analysis. Out of 6,902 reviews recorded under the filtering terms, 'Dambulla Cave Temple' and 'Golden Temple of Dambulla' by August 2025, 150 detailed English-language reviews (January 2024-August 2025) were selected through convenience sampling until thematic saturation. Data was coded and analysed using the open-source software "Taguette", based on the deductive approach in thematic analysis. The results of the study reveal that the Rangiri Dambulla Cave Temple has received both positive and negative online reviews on three TDI components. The visitors have been immensely impressed by the cognitive components of the site, including its cultural and historical attributes (heritage aspects, carvings, paintings, and statues) and natural attributes (scenic beauty and caves). TDI has been negatively affected by the cognitive elements of physical attributes (heritage and visitor management approaches, visitor facilities). The reflection of positive thoughts and emotions, reinforced by the religious atmosphere and the historical prestige of the site, reveals that visitors' affective level is at a considerably satisfactory level. Due to the complications in site management, the visitors' overall conative image of revisit intention was very poor, while recommendations were at a neutral level. The study provides novel insights for authorities in heritage site management to prioritise enhancing the quality of the visit experience, thereby ensuring the prestigious reputation of this UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Keywords: Destination image, Netnographic approach, Online reviews, Rangiri Dambulla Cave Temple, Tourists