



Developing, Positioning, and Promoting Tahlequah as a Global Tourist Destination: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Few places in the world have the potential to offer various types of tourism within a small radius, as does Tahlequah, a small city nestled in the Western foothills of the Ozark mountains in Northeastern Oklahoma. Despite so much to offer, the city and its surroundings have shown little growth in the number of visitors to the area over the past several decades. This exploratory research looks at the current tourism scenario in Tahlequah, and the challenges the city and its neighborhood face in attracting tourists. It also suggests efforts needed to develop the tourism infrastructure in the region to make it a prime tourist destination from the perspective of the theory of planned behavior (TPB). The study is expected to create awareness among potential visitors, provoke thought among stakeholders, and inform the decision makers; in addition to making contribution to the extant tourism literature about the area and its tourist potential.

Keywords: Tahlequah, Cherokee-Nation, Oklahoma, Native-America, Tourism, Challenges.

JEL Classification Code: M31

"I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in."
—John Muir

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has not only brought expanded interdependencies in the economic sphere, but also widespread cultural consciousness, and national embeddedness in world society, Drori (2008). It has also led to exponential growth in the travel and tourism industries, to an extent that some nations and communities are now weighing the costs and benefits of tourism on one hand, while others are trying to restrict tourism, Verissimo, *et al.* (2020). Still others are trying to develop their hidden tourist treasures as major tourist destinations for possible new

employment, business, revenue, and economic development opportunities, while providing people seeking inexpensive and non-traditional tourism alternatives that are in line with their personal values, Kotsi and Pike (2021).

The rapidly changing customer demands, business environment, information technology, and most importantly how these needs are fulfilled today by bringing the vendors and consumers together on a common web-based platform, is just amazing. For example, Uber, Air BNB, Grub Hub, Amazon, Google, and Apple, to name a few companies that have revolutionized how people seek information, purchase, and use products and services. The tourism sector is not left behind in this business and IT revolution either; integrated online bookings, YouTube videos about places of tourist interest, mobile apps, and social media, are all impacting how people choose where to go for their next vacation and how they make their bookings. Many places that were not frequented earlier are being explored and visited because the information about these destinations is available online for people to check them out, prior to their visits to match with their interests, budget, and social norms.

This exploratory research spotlights, Tahlequah, one such dormant travel location in the United States, which has a capacity to develop into a major global tourist destination and discusses the opportunities and challenges the city faces to achieve its full tourism potential. Anchored in the “Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)” this study is an effort to invoke thought amongst stakeholders about how the consumer attitudes and norms, which influence people’s motives for travel and choice of a tourist destination, can be modified in a favorable way in context of Tahlequah and its surroundings. The study also looks at some other popular global tourist destinations, such as, Singapore, Dubai, Orlando, Las Vegas, Cairo, as well as some comparable locations within the state of Oklahoma, on how they evolved and continue to attract visitors, to draw some comparisons and insights. This study is expected to add to the extant tourism literature on destination development and inform readers about the potential of Tahlequah as a global tourist destination, as well as inspire the stakeholders in the region to make efforts to put Tahlequah on the popular tourism circuit.

RESEARCH QUESTION, KEY ISSUE, AND GAP

Background

Over the years, almost all the major tourist destinations in the world have developed because of one or more of the following factors - unique characteristic

of interest that a location had to offer (directly or indirectly associated with tourism); sourcing of private and public investment; or the support of the local/national leadership and government, Lohmann and Koch (2009). Examples of these abound around the world: from a religious center, such as Mecca or Jerusalem to logistics, trade, and aviation hub, such as Dubai or Singapore; a place of historical interest such as Cairo or Rome to being an inexpensive and advanced medical treatment center such as Bangkok or Delhi; a place offering some natural wonders such as Niagara or Zurich to a place having manmade wonders such as Agra or Paris; a location that offers adventure sports such as Daytona Beach or Denver to the one that offers ageless entertainment such as Orlando or Los Angeles; and perhaps a location that offers a mix of these attractions such as London, New York, Sydney, Frankfurt, Rio, Miami, or Moscow to name a few. The attributes of these locations bring people in large numbers to these destinations as tourists, as they continue to grow and evolve. Some of the prime ingredients for any major tourist destination include infrastructure for travelers to be able to reach, stay, eat, travel, enjoy, gather memories, and be safe, while visiting the same for tourism purpose. However, there are places in the world that have the potential to become an attractive tourist destination with their unique attractions and offerings but have failed to entice visitors because of the lack of proper tourism infrastructure in place and promotion. Tahlequah is one such place; despite being the headquarters of the Cherokee Nation, the largest “Native American community in the United States and having so much to offer in addition to the cultural and heritage tourism opportunities, it has failed to develop an attractive place in the tourism market.

The Place

Tahlequah unique is a small city located in Cherokee County, Oklahoma, United States, nestled in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains (see the map in Figure-1). It is a part of the “Green Country” region of state that was established as a capital of the 19th-century Cherokee Nation in 1839, as the new settlement in Indian Territory after the Cherokee Native Americans were forced west from the American southeast on the “Trail of Tears”. The town’s current estimated population in 2021 is 17,049 (<https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/tahlequah-ok-population>) and it is the capital of the two federally recognized Cherokee tribes based in Oklahoma, the modern Cherokee Nation, and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians. Tahlequah is also the county seat of Cherokee County. The main campus of Northeastern State University

is located here as well. The city and the neighboring areas have a moderate climate with an average year-round temperature ranging between a low of 48.8F and a high of 71.1F, making most of the days comfortable for outdoor activities. The area gets about 50.23 inches of rain every year, spread roughly over 82 days, making it one of the greenest regions of the state (<https://www.cityoftahlequah.com/>). The city of Tahlequah and its neighborhood has a range of tourist attractions that only few places in the world have to offer in a single location.

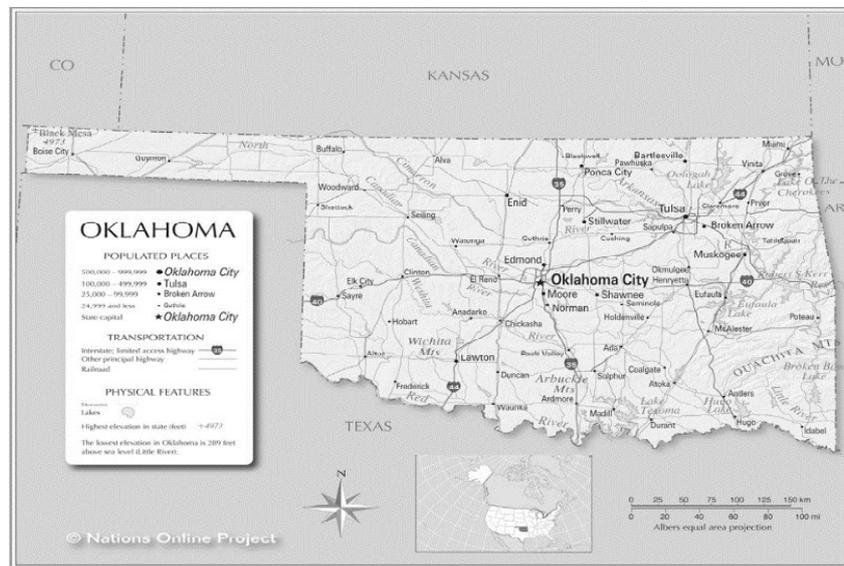


Figure 1: Tahlequah Location Map, Oklahoma, USA

Source: google.com

The Key Issue

With its strategic geographic location, Tahlequah is surrounded by beautiful hills and valleys, natural creeks and rivers, man-made lakes, several ranches and farms, rich museums and heritage homes showcasing the area's history and culture, modern casinos, and a world class institution of higher education. The place has a potential to offer numerous kinds of tourism, such as cultural, heritage, nature, adventure, sport, gaming, farm, rural, etc., all in one place. Despite so much to offer, within a radius of 25 miles from the city center, the place has shown little growth in the number of visitors over the years. Perhaps there is a need to create awareness about this distinctive wonderland, draw attention of local, state, and federal leaders to come together and put a strategic

plan in place to bring in public and private investment to build world-class tourism infrastructure, in and around Tahlequah. At the same time, the local community needs to be educated about the opportunities and benefits that tourism may bring along, while alleviating their fears and concerns about the negative impact of tourism.

Research Gap

Though there are government reports and data available on the tourism within the state of Oklahoma in its different regions and counties, but there are few scholarly studies done in the past that focus on the development and promotion of tourism in and around Tahlequah. Some of these studies include - Cultural Tourism: Exploration or Exploitation of American Indians, Markovitz (2001); A Case Study of the Cherokee Nation Cultural Tourism Initiative, Smith (2008); The Relationship Among Destination Image, Place Attachment, and Tourist Motivation for Oklahoma State Parks, Soltani, (2015). Hence there is a need to fill this research gap by highlighting the potential and prospects of tourism in Tahlequah.

Why it is Important?

This exploratory study is important because it will provide a lens to the public - community, stakeholders, government representatives, to look at the possibilities of developing tourism in and around Tahlequah. If the development plan is well executed, it will bring economic prosperity to the region over the years by creating thousands of jobs, flourishing hundreds of businesses, improving local infrastructure, and raising the standard of living of the local community.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The information and data for this exploratory study were collected through the published secondary sources of data and information, online. A few focus group interviews were conducted with people in leadership roles in the region for their opinion about the potential of the city as a tourist destination. There was no survey or primary data collected for this research.

Global, National, State, and Local Tourism Horizon

In order to get a perspective about the city of Tahlequah's share in the tourism pie and where it stands today, this section reviews the global, national, state, and local tourism scenario in terms of spending and volume of tourist traffic.

Global Tourism Trends

Tourism is the largest industry in the world according to United Nations figures on employment and expenditures (<https://www.unwto.org/>). As per the recent World Tourism Economics Report (2017), the value of global tourism has reached \$5.29 trillion in 2017 — and the size of the market only continues to expand. Travel provides individuals with the opportunity to escape temporarily from the humdrum of every-day life, to experience the novel or unknown and, possibly, to make a long-time dream come true, Kuenzi and McNeely (2008). According to pre-Covid-19 data, about a billion people, the equivalent of roughly 15% of the world's population, travelled within or outside their countries of residence (see Figure-2). Airlines, the hotels, restaurants, and outdoor equipment vendors are among the supplier industries that are dependent on a successful tourism sector. The recent pandemic has impacted the global tourism industry, but once the dust settles down it is expected to come back to pre-Covid-19 levels or perhaps even higher due to the pent-up demand for people to be able to travel for pleasure or business.

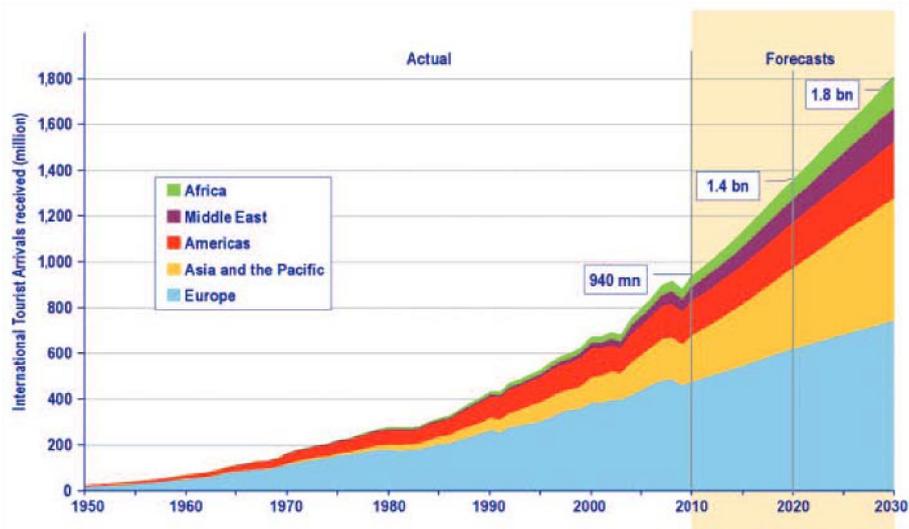


Figure 2: International Tourist Arrivals, 1950-2030

Source: Platzer, 2014

The US Tourism Scenario

Travel and tourism collectively, account for about 3% of gross the domestic product (GDP) of the US economy. According to the US Travel and Tourism

Overview-2018 (<https://www.ustravel.org>), U.S. domestic travel increased about 1.7% in 2018 to a total of 2.3 billion person-trips, with domestic leisure travel accounting for 1.8 billion person-trips, and domestic business travel for 464 million person-trips. International visitations to the U.S. (including overnight visits from Canada and Mexico) increased 3.5 percent and totaled 79.6 million in 2018. The domestic and international travelers together spent nearly \$1.1 trillion (\$1,089 billion) in the US in 2018. This spending generated \$268 billion in payroll income and \$171 billion in tax revenues for federal, state, and local governments. California accounts for about 10% of the total spent by domestic and international travelers, followed by Florida, Texas, New York, and Nevada (<https://www.businessinsider.com>).

State of Oklahoma's Tourism Share in the US Tourism Industry

Though travel and tourism in Oklahoma is the third-largest industry, the total direct travel spending by an estimated 22 million visitors was \$8.9 billion in 2018 and \$9.6 billion in 2019. It is trivial compared to other states, according to new research released by the Oklahoma Tourism & Recreation Department (2018). Tourism in the state directly supports 100,900 jobs that reflect earnings of \$2.29 billion — both record highs for Oklahoma's tourism industry. Tourism generated \$656 million in state and local tax revenue for 2016 — the equivalent of \$430 for each Oklahoma household. That number represents taxes paid by visitors that fund the core functions of government, displacing taxes that state residents would otherwise have to pay (https://www.travelok.com/industry_reports/2018). Still, Oklahoma ranks among the bottom ten (41st) on the list of most popular states to visit according to the research summary infographic (<https://www.businessinsider.com>).

Tourism in Cherokee County

Cherokee county of Oklahoma, with the county seat located in Tahlequah, accounts for only \$67.6 million on travel related visitor spending, annually. This amounts to only 0.76% of the total direct spending of \$8.940 billion on travel, attributed to the state of Oklahoma. There are about 439.2 thousand overnight visitors who stay for about two nights, with a total of about 1110.1-thousand-night stays. Even though Tahlequah and its surroundings offer several different kinds of tourist attractions and interests, it has an insignificant share in the travel and tourism generated income of the state. In fact, earnings of only \$18.58 million (2.2%) of the total employment incomes of \$832 million

generated in the Cherokee county, are attributed to travel (<https://datausa.io/profile/geo/chokeee-county-ok/>). On the other hand, other counties in the state with the greater share of direct travel-generated employment are all non-metropolitan. They include counties with second homes, tribal casinos, and destination resorts. Figure-3 below lists the top ten counties of Oklahoma with the largest proportion of travel employment earnings to their total earnings. It is a reflection that these counties are taking advantage of their tourist attractions much better than Cherokee county.

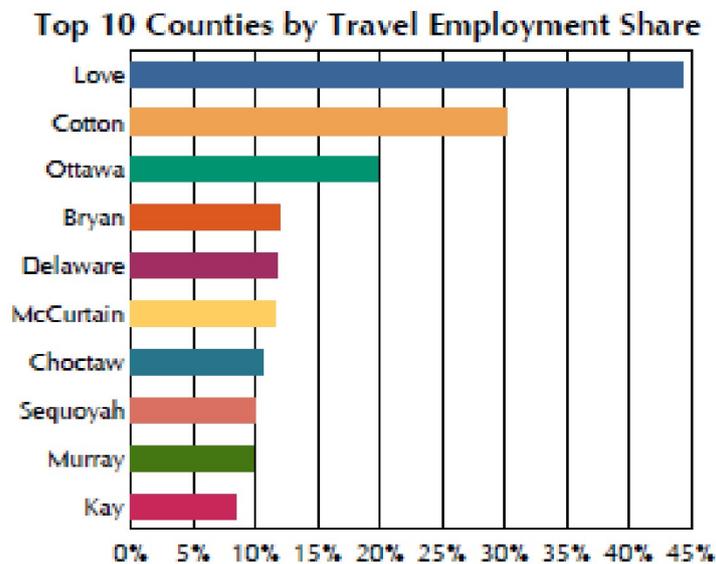


Figure 3: Top 10 Counties by Travel Employment Share

Source: Runyan, 2018

Theoretical Perspective: The Theory of Planned Behavior

The theory of reasoned action (TRA) developed by Fishbein in 1969 and extended to the theory of planned behavior (TPB) by Ajzen in the 1980's, provides good understanding of how an individual's attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control influence behavioral intentions leading to certain outcome behaviors, Montano, D. E., & Kasprzyk, D. (2015); Glanz *et al.* (2015). Other factors, including demographic and environmental characteristics, are assumed to operate through model constructs and do not independently contribute to explaining the likelihood of performing a behavior. The conceptual model of TPB is presented in Figure-4 below. Taking a cue from this theoretical perspective as a conceptual anchor, this study looks at what needs to be done for changing

people’s attitudes and behavioral intentions to consider Tahlequah as a potential tourist destination.

According to the TPB, the main drivers to influence behavioral intentions are attitudes, norms, and self-control. Based on the demographic profiles of domestic and international tourists, their target attitudes towards tourist locations, personality traits, and other individual differences variables such as culture, ethnicity, age, and income; marketing and promotional campaigns can be tailored to influence and change their perceptions, and eventually their attitudes towards considering Tahlequah as a tourist destination. It will need all the stake holders, including the federal and state government representatives, the city administration, local business owners, community leaders, and potential investors to come together and develop a plan of action for building proper tourist infrastructure, promote the place effectively, and provide excellent visitation experiences. Eventually, this will lead to the tourists spreading positive word and change their beliefs about the place, to inspire and motivate others to come to Tahlequah and have a wonderful excursion. Quantitative research and primary data collection to find peoples’ current knowledge and attitudes towards the

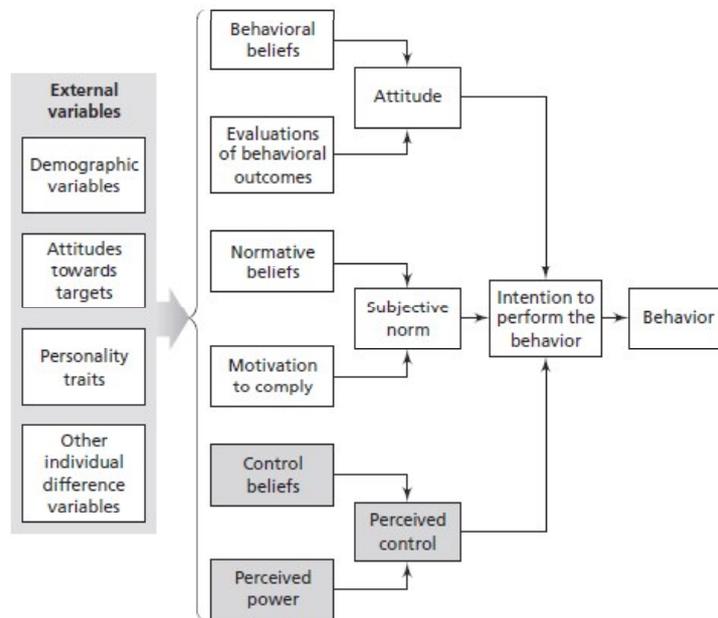


Figure 4: Conceptual Model - Theory of Planned Behavior

Source: Glanz et al, 2015

city of Tahlequah, identify their expectations and accordingly tailor the promotional messages through various media, would be needed to achieve this objective.

Potential of Tahlequah as a Tourist Destination

Despite the potential of Tahlequah and its surrounding areas to present several kinds of tourism opportunities, ranging from cultural, heritage, nature, adventure, sport, entertainment, gaming, food, to farm tourism, its share in tourism related spending within the state of Oklahoma, is just a fraction of the total. In this section each type of tourism that Tahlequah has the capacity for, is discussed briefly and mapped on to what the city and its neighborhood have to offer.

Cultural, Heritage, and Legacy Tourism

Silberberg (1995) defines cultural tourism as “visits by persons from outside the host community motivated wholly or in part by interest in the historical, artistic, scientific, or lifestyle/heritage offerings of a community, region, group, or institution”. Heritage on the other hand involves legacies of the past that are deemed important and conserved in the present for the benefit of future generations. A sub-segment of the heritage market consists of tourists who have a personal connection with their heritage, beyond a general relationship of collective ancestry, and those that travel to engage in genealogical endeavors, to search for information on or to simply feel connected to ancestors and ancestral roots are categorized as “legacy tourists”, McCain and Ray (2003). Cultural and heritage travelers participate in diverse activities such as visiting art galleries or museums, attending a concert, play, or musical, and recreating at national parks or monuments.

With the Cherokee nation heritage center, arts center, capital square, gift shops, several museums (<https://www.cherokee.org/>), Murrell Home, Northeastern State University’s Seminary Hall (<https://nsuok.edu/>), Fort Gibson’s historic site and national cemetery, Muskogee’s War Memorial Park: home of the USS Batfish submarine, and historic Tahlequah downtown (<http://www.tourtahlequah.com/>), there are a plenty of available historical, cultural, and heritage attractions for the prospective visitors to see and enjoy in the area all the year round. In addition, there are cultural events such as the annual Cherokee Nation parade, art exhibitions, NSU Sequoyah Institutes’ performing arts series (<https://academics.nsuok.edu/si>) that happen during specific times in the city of Tahlequah, which can surely provide a rich and unique experience

into the history and culture of one of the nation's largest Native American tribes and their struggle for survival. Usually, the interest in the life and culture of native Americans is aroused from a very early age amongst several people around the world when they read stories about the Native Americans. Many of them would be willing to travel long distances to experience that culture, firsthand, by meeting people who come from that heritage, and bring to life their imaginations as a child, be it a re-created experience, through the Cherokee heritage center, parades, museums, or visiting their historic sites. This one attribute alone makes Tahlequah a unique tourist destination.

Nature, Adventure, and Sport Tourism:

One of the fastest growing elements of tourism is 'nature-based' tourism, involving excursions to national parks and wilderness areas, or to developing countries where a large portion of the world's biodiversity is concentrated, Kuenzi and McNeely (2008). Nature tourism is associated with locations that are typically considered exotic, Whelan (1988), or places that are abundant with natural beauty of lakes, hills, rivers, forests, beaches, etc. It may also include an 'adventure tourism' element that may carry physical risks, such as skiing, water sports, fishing, hang-gliding, hunting, nature photography, rafting, horse riding, safaris, bungee jumping, rock climbing, etc. "Sport tourism includes travel to participate in a sport activity for recreation or competition, travel to observe sport at the grassroots level, or travel to visit a sport attraction such as a sports hall of fame or water park", Gibson, Attle, and Yiannakis (1997). Each year, more international tourists are steering away from the traditional tourist destinations to exotic places abundant with natural flora and fauna for a nature-based adventure, such as Kenya, Ecuador, or Costa Rica. The present estimates put the global spending on nature tourism to several billion dollars per year, figures that are beginning to attract the interest of government planners.

Tahlequah, which is a part of the "Green Country" of Oklahoma state, has several places in its vicinity that offer nature, adventure, and sport-oriented tourism. For example, Illinois river that flows in the south-east region of the town is a main attraction for rafting, kayaking, fishing, or picnicking during the summer, with rentals available for kayaks, canoes, rafts, and tubes, along the upstream stretch of the river. In addition, there are recreational areas, campsites, picnic tables, and cabins for patrons to stay. Lake Tenkiller, in the south of the town offers, beaches, opportunities for boating, jet skiing, fishing, and various other watersports. Sparrow Hawk is another popular natural area with trails,

camping, hunting, cabins, and fishing sites north-east of the city (<https://sparrowhawkcamp.net/>). Cherokee Landing and Sequoyah state parks offer breath taking views of the surrounding lakes with a nature center, horse riding, camping, cabins, RV parking, and a dining facility for tourists seeking a close encounter with nature in a serene environment (<http://www.tourtahlequah.com/>). In addition, there are professional fishing and water sport competitions organized in nearby areas at specific times of the year. Tahlequah also has at least three large golf courses that can be an attraction for interested visitors during the summers (<http://www.tourtahlequah.com/>).

Gaming and Entertainment Tourism:

Entertainment attractions encourage tourists to travel around the world to have fun and are an important part of many gaming destinations. Hughes (2000) defined entertainment as a subset of art performance, while Xu (2010) believed that entertainment was a subset of tourism products with the objective of providing an unforgettable experience. Luo and Lam (2017) posit that entertainment tourism lies on the intersection of entertainment and tourism industries. Gaming with gambling is one of the entertainment products that provides joy and enhances the attractiveness of a place, Loi and Pearce (2012). Casinos provide a source for both gambling and entertainment, in many tourist destinations including the United States. According to McCarthy (2002), gambling is one of the driving forces for economic growth in many countries. Places like Macau in China; Las Vegas, Orlando, Detroit, and Oklahoma City in the United States; Monte Carlo in Monaco; London in England; Amsterdam, Netherland; and Singapore are famous for their gaming and entertainment attractions. According to the Oklahoma Indian Gaming Association, there are currently 102 casinos in Oklahoma. These casinos range from small plain buildings with nothing but a few banks of slots to all the way to luxurious, spacious Las Vegas-style resorts.

The Cherokee nation owns and operates about twelve casinos in the Green Country (N-E) region of Oklahoma, including their newest one that recently opened in Tahlequah. Some other Cherokee Nation casinos are in Fort Gibson, Muskogee, Tulsa (Hard Rock), Siloam Springs etc. The new casino in Tahlequah, also has nice in-house restaurants and offers live music. There are a few hotels in the neighborhood and nice golf courses, which give the place a resort like ambience and options that many tourists would be eager to enjoy. The Northeastern State University (NSU) playhouse puts on student-led drama

productions throughout the year, as well as hosts NSU's River City Players who perform live music (<https://academics.nsuok.edu/si>). The Cherokee nation has its own festivals, fairs, and parades on certain times during the year that draw a lot of attention and interest. The Cherokee Arts Center offers artists an opportunity to explore several creative avenues and spreading awareness about Cherokee culture (<https://artscenter.cherokee.org/>). There is a sports complex and a water park in the northwest part of the city that remains underutilized and can be an important attraction during summers, particularly for families with children (<https://www.cityoftahlequah.com/>).

Agri, Farm, Food, and Rural Tourism:

Agritourism involves supplementing income from farming and natural resource activities with tourism-related activities, from harvest festivals to farm vacations. Jolly and Reynolds (2005) suggest that agricultural and on-farm nature tourism can be characterized as businesses conducted by farmers or ranchers on their working agricultural operations for the enjoyment and education of visitors. Agricultural and nature tourism present the potential to generate increased on-farm revenues, and, given strategic management, might increase farm profitability. According to the 2017 U.S. Census of Agriculture (<https://www.nass.usda.gov/>), 28,575 farms provided agritourism and recreation services valued at \$950 million. Since many farms are in country areas, "rural tourism" has become an important and a dominant factor in the rural development of western economies. The country vacation is defined by the Alberta Tourism and Small Business Administration as, "a vacation or a holiday in which a vacationer occupies a large portion of his time engaged in recreational activities on a farm, ranch or country home and its environs" (<https://www.alberta.ca/tourism-levy.aspx>). On the other hand, Hall and Sharples (2003), define food tourism as, "visitation to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants as well as other tastings and experiences as motives to travel." Interest in food extends opportunities into the farms and ranches where people would want to pick produce, such as fruits, vegetables, sample fresh dairy, juices, donuts, honey etc., and have a close encounter with farm animals. Usually there is a petting zoo and children's play areas located on a farm; also, there is a gift shop, and a marketplace for produce and other fresh farm supplies such as honey, doughnuts, popcorn, apple cider, cooking oil, etc. Many of the farms also offer pony or hayrides, tractor-trolley rides, corn maze, pumpkin patches, BBQ grills, and picnic tables.

Tahlequah is surrounded by huge ranches and farms many of which also have farm animals such as goats, lambs, hens, roosters, ducks, pigs, donkeys, ponies, and farm produce such as eggs, beef, pork, honey, fruits and vegetables, etc., for sale to residents on site or through local farmer's market. Perhaps, some of these farms can be developed for tourism purposes for visitors from the urban areas to get a feel and joy of living on a farm. Providing fully furnished cabins (for overnight stays), a restaurant, and a gift shop would add a lot of value and interest among the tourists. Imagine having a hot cup of fresh coffee watching the sun rise across the horizon sitting in the porch of a cabin, enjoying the beauty of a farm covered by morning dew and surrounded by Ozark foothills, hearing the chirping of birds, the moos of the cows, and the crowing of a roosters. One can also enjoy the nature walk after a lavish breakfast, pick some produce, and return to the gift shop for a piece of barbecued steak with freshly grilled corn. Many people long for such a vacation and would travel any distance and spend any amount of money and time to get such an experience.

During the summers there are several food and farm festivals in the region such as the 'Porter Peach Festival (<https://www.porterpeachfestivals.com/>)" and "Stillwell Strawberry Festival (<https://strawberrycapital.com/>)". The town of Tahlequah also hosts the "Red Fern Festival (<http://www.tahlequahmainstreet.com/red-fern-festival.html>)", towards the end of April each year, that showcases a lot of food vendors in addition to live concerts, game stalls, and art displays in the town's historic downtown area. Also, Tahlequah has authentic Cherokee food available for patrons year-round in Cherokee restaurant near the nation's headquarters. There are several Mexican, Italian, Chinese, American food joints available, other than fast food chains like Sonic, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Domino's, Chilis, Subway etc. Everett and Aitchison (2008) denote that food tourism can be a very important factor in establishing a cohesive and recognizable regional identity that could draw in patrons from outside of the region. Should Tahlequah capitalize on the local cuisine, the regional identity of its food would become a contributing factor to potential tourists.

The fact that several types of tourist interests and attractions are available in Tahlequah and its surroundings, within a small radius, could be the most important and unique selling proposition (USP) for the city, as opposed to any other place of tourist charm. Perhaps, what is needed is to join all these tour offerings and providers together to offer visitors a valuable tour package to have a vacation experience that the tourists will long remember,

SITUATION ANALYSIS

This section explores the current tourism scenario in the city of Tahlequah and the business environment related to tourism in the region.

Current Tourism Scenario in Tahlequah

While Tahlequah and the surrounding areas have a variety of tourist attractions, none of them are being explored and promoted close to their potential. One of the biggest reasons for few visitors to the town is the absence of proper public transit, poor local transport, and inadequate tourism infrastructure within the city. The two commercial airports nearby are Tulsa International (TUL) and Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport (XNA), both about an hour's drive from the town, on either side, and the only way to the town from them is either by getting a ride or rental a car. Cabs and Uber are either not available or drivers are reluctant to come this far. The Ki Bois Area Transit System (KATS) only serves limited zones around Tahlequah and during certain time frame, catering to the transportation needs of residents.

Most of the places with potential tourist interest in Tahlequah are either dormant, such as farms and ranches, under-developed such as the Cherokee Heritage Center, lake shores and beaches, or working in isolation, such as, the museums, river attractions, state parks, cabins, hotels, and restaurants. They have no tie-up, coordination, or collaboration with each other for synergy and to offer package deals to the visitors for enhanced value and experience. Thus, many people who come to visit the town hesitate to stay overnight and are in a rush to return to their camping station, offering limited daytime business and lost nighttime business to the town. The town of Tahlequah itself needs a facelift with broadened sidewalks, bicycle paths, benches, picnic tables, green patches on the main street, flower beds, better paved roads, signage, parking, and a lot of cleaning. With a budget of about \$10 million, as per Mayor Sue Catron, there is a limitation on how much the city can contribute for the development of tourism. It appears that there is a need to generate funding from the community, private, state, and federal sources to develop the town with tourism infrastructure. Similarly, when it comes to promoting Tahlequah, as a place of tourist interest, there are several entities such as the City of Tahlequah, Cherokee Nation, NSU, and Travel Oklahoma doing it separately without much engagement with each other, through their websites, billboards, and traditional advertising channels.

Business Environment

Cherokee county, with its capital Tahlequah, has the following demographics (as per the <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/cherokee-county-ok/#demographics>): Population – 48,404, median age – 35 years, median household income – \$39,187, poverty rate – 21%, number of employees – 19,399, median property value – \$111,300. Thus, it is clear from the data that there is a lot of room for the social and economic development of the region. With 50% of the population White, 30% American Indian, 9% two or more races, and 11% others, there is a lot of ethnic diversity, compared to many other counties of the state. The region is represented both in the state and federal government by the respective members of the congress through an electoral process, but the native American tribes have their own governing structure as well as their own land reservations, approved by the government. The native population is skeptical of outside investment for fear of losing their land, dilution of their culture, and forfeiting regional control, based on the history of their forced eviction from southeastern United States under President Andrew Jackson. The signage within the city of Tahlequah reads both in English and Cherokee. Northeastern State University that grew from an initial female seminary established by Cherokee Indians in 1851, is the only institution that teaches the Cherokee language, and is the second oldest in the country, west of Mississippi river.

Despite so many potential places of tourist interest in and around Tahlequah, there are very few public and private enterprises that are directly involved in travel, tourism, and recreational business. The region's share in tourism related income is less than 1% of that for the state of Oklahoma, as per earlier discussion. There is a general indifference among the residents towards the development of tourism. Some residents are even concerned about the potential influence on the culture and law and order within the city. A lot of key lands and properties are owned by the Cherokee Nation, which may require special permission or permit to be developed by private investors and might not be available for sale. Neighboring cities (within 30-70 miles) such as Muskogee, Broken Arrow, and Tulsa offer choice of attractions, accommodations, and dining that forces many visitors for a day trip to the city of Tahlequah.

Lessons from Singapore, Dubai, Orlando, Las Vegas, Cairo, Pahuska, and TPB

Lohmann *et al.* (2009), assert that the growth of air transport networks and government deregulation have allowed small, low-populated places like

Singapore and Dubai to become major international tourism destinations. Both these places effectively and efficiently combined airline, airport, and tourism strategies to help achieve this. The extent to which these locations were able to establish themselves as something more than a airlines hub or a gateway, to become tourist destinations, was their ability to provide facilities and attractions that appealed to the connecting traffic to stop for a few hours or to spend nights there. This changed the connectivity to interconnectivity and today they remain among the top visited places. Thus, there is a need to create and market a compelling reason for people to consider visiting Tahlequah, as a tourist destination. Perhaps among all other tourist attractions that can be developed, showcasing the Native American history, culture, traditions, food, and artifacts could be one such factor to bring people in. For instance, considering the tourism in Cairo, Egypt, the most compelling reason why people from around the world flock to that city is because of the ancient pyramids. Similarly, while Orlando, FL, attracts people of all age groups, particularly young children, and their families from around the world primarily for the Disney World and Universal Studios owned theme parks. Other attractions such as Sea Life, and Madame Tussauds Museum are more recent additions to the city. Las Vegas, NV, on the other hand is the gaming capital of the world and is a popular destination among young and middle-aged people. It is particularly known for its casinos, live shows, and adult entertainment. Among some other growing cities for tourist potential, Phoenix, AZ, has already become an airlines hub and is now ranked fifth largest city in the United States in terms of population at 1.66 million.

However, it is not fair to compare the city of Tahlequah, with its population of about 17,000, to Singapore, Dubai, Orlando, Las Vegas, or Cairo. Even a half-century ago, before the growth of tourism, the smallest of these cities had populations over 100,000 and two were nearly 6 million. Instead, places like Eureka Springs, AK or Estes Park, CO should be examined as models of small cities with tourism success. Although now much larger than Tahlequah, the city of Santa Fe, NM, would also be an excellent a role model; much of its tourism draw is based on its people sharing their Native American cultures and arts. Within the state of Oklahoma, one such city where a plan like this has been effective is Pawhuska. This city was virtually off the map until recently with the increased fame of the brand of Pioneer Woman. This brand allowed Pawhuska to emerge from its dormant state, capitalizing on the increasing popularity that Pioneer Woman brought to their city. People came from local towns, cities, and all over the southern United States to visit the Pioneer Woman headquarters, namely her ranch and her general store. Other businesses hopped on board;

antique shops, local business owners, and even the entertainment industry benefitted from Pawhuska's emergence, as the film "Killers of the Flower Moon" recently wrapped up filming in this city. Pawhuska was successful in bringing tourism to Oklahoma, and if Tahlequah wants to capitalize on tourism, perhaps a strategy such as Pawhuska's would benefit them as well. The endorsement of a celebrity, in Pawhuska's case the Pioneer Woman herself, Ree Drummond, helped place Pawhuska back on the tourism radar. This new breath of life into one of Oklahoma's small towns proves that Oklahoma can attract tourists.

Liu *et al.* (2021), cautions that prior to implementing a successful tourism model of one place the planners should consider how it can be adapted and/or adjusted based upon the unique characteristics of the new community. The theory of planned behavior (TPB), as discussed earlier, provides a good guideline and a starting point in developing any tourist destination by changing the peoples' attitudes with promotional campaigns, which will eventually lead to certain positive social norms in considering a place a tourist destination, within the domain of one's self-control of ways and means, impacting the intentions and behavior.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

This section looks at the challenges Tahlequah faces, from the standpoint of the 7 Ps of marketing (product, price, placement, promotion, people, process, and physical evidence), and how these can be addressed to develop the area into a top tourist destination as a brand.

Product (What can be offered?)

From the earlier discussion, despite Tahlequah's potential as a place with various tourist attractions, the area needs to be developed to attract visitors to the city. Right from the ease of getting a conveyance from the nearby commercial airports, to their ability to stay in a range of hotel/resorts, visit places of interest, engage in adventure and entertainment, have a firsthand feel of a farm, or perhaps watch the beautiful sunset over one of the lakes in the region, watch an evening performing arts show, and have a variety of dining options, while able to get local rides with ease to move around with a pass that works everywhere, and a several places to take back some memorabilia. For all this to happen, there is need for huge private and public investment to develop the infrastructure that goes along with an important tourist destination. All the stake holders need to come together and work out a plan and synergize their efforts to make it happen.

Price (At What Cost?)

The cost of a vacation that includes travel, hotel stay, food, local conveyance, attraction tickets, and shopping, is a major factor that influences the choice of a tourist destination. Getting all the stake holders together and offering a variety of tour packages as bundled deals would add a lot of value to potential visitors and assured business return to the providers. For example, “City-Pass (<https://www.citypass.com>)” works with many attractions in large cities by offering bundled deals (up to 40-50% less than regular pricing) and advanced bookings, which saves time, money, and hassle of getting the tickets to the prospective tourists. At the end of the day, value for the money is one of the most important factors in choosing any product, service, or vacation.

Placement (How Can it be Delivered?)

Service dominant logic, Lusch, Vargo, and O’Brien (2007), embedded in market-driven firms, demand that a firm achieves higher level of customer satisfaction by delivering excellent service. With this view, potential tourists should be able to get all their bookings done online through one website/window/travel agency, have themselves picked up by a tourist bus at one of the nearby airports, enjoy a vacation of their lifetime, and then be dropped back to the airport to return home, with fond memories. The integrated online booking system would get all the vendors and service providers on a common platform, and to know ahead of time about the number of guests to expect on a certain day and plan their resources accordingly. The visitors would just need to carry either a printed barcode of their reservations or have it displayed on their cell phones to be checked in to any facility or a place of interest that they opted for in the package. At present, there is no coordinated single window solution for the visitors, making it cumbersome and difficult for visitors to get their reservations ahead of time.

Promotion and Positioning (How can it be Communicated?)

A coordinated marketing strategy to position and promote Tahlequah as a major tourist destination is needed with support and cooperation from all the stake holders. In addition to using traditional advertising channels, digital and internet marketing channels should be leveraged to reach world-wide audience. There is a need to position Tahlequah, as a tourist destination that offers numerous tourist attractions in one place, but the only place in the world that offers a peek into the Cherokee Nation’s heritage. Above all, the best promotion happens

through word-of-mouth (WOM), when people tell others their stories of any great experience.

People (Needed Personnel and Training?)

Efficient product and service delivery are among sustainable competitive advantages in today's customer-centric enterprise, which are hard to replicate. For this reason, the training of employees who directly engage with the customers, becomes very important to be able to provide a superior service. The focus should be on long-term gains and customer's life-time value, loyalty value, and referral value rather than short-term profiteering or fly by night operational attitude. This is only possible if there are well trained, professional, and empathetic personnel to interact with visitors who come onboard. Vendors across the entire tourist circuit, should set some training standards and need to provide the best possible interpersonal engagement and experience to the visitors, no matter at what stage or location of their visit to the city or tour they might be.

Process (How can Onboarding, Service Delivery, and Deboarding Accomplished?)

Effective, efficient, accurate and user-friendly business processes for ordering, delivery, and communication are the keys for any successful enterprise. Smart IT systems should be put in place that allow integrating processes and information flow. Perhaps there is a need to put in place an advanced ERP software that would integrate all the customers, vendors, support services, hotels, restaurants, local transportation, and law enforcement. Blockchain is an emerging technology that can revolutionize the tourism industry, Kwok and Koh (2019). As an example, like any other service business, the customer engagement for tourists headed to experience Tahlequah would start when they report to one of the booths at nearby airports or a booth within the city (if they decide to drive) to begin their sojourn. Once a tourist checks-into a tourist booth, his or her presence to begin the tour is confirmed with all the vendors and attractions, for whom the choice was made in the package, for them to plan accordingly. With access to multiple local rides, the tourists should be free to hop-on/hop-off the local transit where and when they want to go within their tour circuit and get access to attractions they have booked to visit, using some kind of "smartcard" as their pass. Finally, on the day of their return, guests would check-out from the hotel and either leave on their own or get picked up by one of the tourist busses for nearby airport to board their flights to return home.

Physical Evidence (How Can the Town be Painted Red?)

Because business assets are effectively used for marketing, brand personality should be a pervasive consideration when choosing things such as brand name, logo, employee uniform colors, furniture, fittings, publications, and brochures. Visible signage is important and so is the website which should be modern, classy, easy to use and effective. To brand and market Tahlequah a global tourist destination, the choice of each and everything ranging from the people to paper towels should be of top quality. This should also be reflected in the behavior and services offered by all the vendors and stake holders in tourism, but also in the available tourist infrastructure in the city such as wide roads and sidewalks, proper signage, colorful brochures, clean neighborhoods, adequate parking, disable friendly ramps, walking and biking tracks, 24/7 local transport, safety and security, Wi-Fi internet and telecom connectivity throughout the tour circuits, emergency alert and response systems etc. The city should provide the infrastructure, ambience, and evidence for the vibrant tourist activity round the clock.

WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO A POTENTIAL TOURIST?

The above discourse offered some perspectives on how to develop Tahlequah as a tourist destination. Continuing the discussion, this section will address some of the concerns the tourists usually have, prior to a visiting to any place of their travel interest, from their perspective. These concerns include the following: how to get there, where to stay, how to move around, what to see and things to do, where to eat, what memories to take back, and will they be safe, mapped on in context of Tahlequah.

How to get there?

Tahlequah is well connected by a network of highways and freeways from all directions to the city, except for the availability of reliable local and long-distance public transport. There are three routes from Tulsa (Route-359, 51, and 412), route 82 that runs in north/south direction connects to interstate I-40 to the south and I-44 to the north of the city, and the Route-412 and 51 extend into NW Arkansas. There are two commercial airports, within a drivable distance of about an hour from the city on the east side (XNA in Bentonville, AR) and west side (TUL in Tulsa, OK). With no proper public or private transportation at present, the best way to get to Tahlequah is by renting a car or getting a ride. A good tourist transportation service through busses, shuttles, or cabs can make

it easier, less expensive, and convenient for potential visitors to the town, with prior bookings. There is certainly a need to investment in high-speed public transit to the city from nearby metropolitan areas, round the clock.

Where to Stay?

At present there are a few hotels ranging from mid-range pricing (Holiday Inn Express, Day's Inn) to budget (Roadway Inn, Super-8). There are also a few inexpensive motels near the main intersection of the city, primarily being used by the truckers or sales representatives. Some state parks/lakefronts such as Sequoyah/Tenkiller do have some cabins, and RV parking available. There is a dearth of upscale, upper range hotels, or resort type places in the city, and for this reason many current visitors prefer to either stay in nearby cities (Muskogee, Broken Arrow, Tulsa, or Fayetteville) or just spend a day in Tahlequah, limiting the evening and nighttime tourism related business. In addition, there are hardly any listings on websites like Air BNB for alternate accommodations. Perhaps there will be a need for more variety and number of hotel rooms available in and around the city if tourism must grow. There is a word that Hilton Garden Inn is set to break ground in the city soon.

What to do?

Though the city of Tahlequah offers a range of activities and tourist interests such as the museums, heritage center, vibrant NSU campus, casinos, lakes, and fishing that are pretty much available year-round, some others are seasonal such as kayaking, river floats, parades, and festivals. There are few other places of interest such as Farms, Boat Rides, and Agritourism, which the place has a potential to offer but are not yet developed. Additionally, the lack of reliable local transit to connect these places makes difficult for people to move around without their own transport. What is needed is a hop-on and hop-off shuttle service which runs and connects the tourist circuits in both the directions. Also, there is a need to add more parades, festivals, shows, and performing arts to keep the tourist interest throughout the year.

Where to eat?

Surprisingly, the city of Tahlequah offers a good selection of fast-food restaurants, diners, buffets, and a range of ethnic food cuisine from Mexican, American, Chinese, Japanese, Cajun, and Italian. There is a Cherokee restaurant located within their headquarters compound offering Cherokee cuisine. A couple

of big grocery stores in the city have their own deli that can be an inexpensive source of value meals. If the farm tourism sector opens, then lunches and dinners can also be offered at the farm locations with fresh BBQ meats and veggies, with nice aroma and smoke of sizzling skewers and food on the grill. New York City, style street food carts would be a great idea to sell quick snacks and inexpensive meals and drinks, at all important places of interest in the area.

What memories to bring back?

Everyone wants to take back some good memories and souvenirs from a nice vacation trip. Other than pictures that everyone gets on their own cameras and mobile devices these days, there are some gift shops in downtown Tahlequah, Heritage Center, and the Cherokee Nation headquarters campus that offer artifacts, plaques, handmade baskets, woven scarfs, decorative magnets, key rings, post cards, wall hangings, calendars, antiques, and several other gift items. With the increased tourist traffic and demand, there could be more such gifts and novelties shops opened in the area for the visitors. Fresh produce from farms such as meat, corn, fruits, honey, eggs, etc., could also be a popular item to take back. Above all, taking back the nostalgic memories and stories of a wonderful experience shared by word of mouth or electronic/social media is helpful in spreading the word and attracting more people to visit the town.

ALLEVIATING CONCERNS OF THE LOCAL POPULATION

According to Caneday and Zeiger (1991), tourism has been identified as one of the means to save sagging financial base of local and state economies. Yet the blessing of tourism includes the potential for blight, a side which must be addressed early in the development of tourism policy. For example, while tourism may have a positive social influence by creation of employment opportunities, increased family incomes, higher real estate value, etc., it may also lead to higher traffic, drug abuse, gambling, alcoholism, population density, and influence on local values, norms, and customs. These and some other concerns that the residents of Tahlequah and its surrounding region have, can be alleviated, and addressed by enactment of strict laws, policies, and enforcement to protect the residents and visitors from anti-social and opportunistic elements.

Much of tourism development entails community development, and if handled appropriately, tourism can become an important engine for achieving broader social goals, Crouch and Ritchie (1999). In order to alleviate the concerns of the local community, the leadership of the region should educate the people

on the positive manifestations of tourism, such as employment opportunities, improvement of local infrastructure, increased community participation in local events, new ideas from exposure to other cultures, enhanced international recognition of the region and its values, etc., while allocating resources and assuring community in making efforts to control the price gauging, environmental damage, law enforcement, hostile attitudes, commercialization of personal and private activities, exploitation of local population and visitors.

DISCUSSION

At the intersection of heritage and youth sits the city of Tahlequah, a perfect blend of old meets young. While Tahlequah offers rich Cherokee Nation heritage, it is also home to thousands of young college students on the Northeastern State University campus. There's a lot that makes Tahlequah unique from tourism perspective, but it lacks a signature offering to make it stand out in the tourism sector. From the above discourse, to put Tahlequah on the tourist map, we need to make humble beginnings by first identifying a unique selling proposition (USP), in creating a "brand", and start with targeting people within the region to come and spend some time in the city. As the word spreads and infrastructure develops to handle more visitors, national and international marketing campaigns can be launched. Three themes emerged from the review of extant literature, secondary data, focus group meetings, and the theory of planned behavior (TPB) about the prospects, potential, and challenges that Tahlequah faces to grow itself into a major tourist destination. These themes include the need for synergy, competitiveness, and sustainability, as discussed below.

Need for Synergy

Based on the information and feedback from people in the leadership roles in Tahlequah, it appears that there is a need for integration, planning, and investment by bringing all the stake holders (community, city, local businesses, farm owners, native tribes, NSU, local representatives of state and federal government) together to take stock of the current tourism scenario, decide on where the city needs to be, and plan on how to get there. If all the stake holders synergize their efforts and support each other by joining all the isolated dots, a bigger and better picture of the city can emerge as a key tourist destination. It will bring beautiful and vivid experience alive for potential future visitors to the area, while elevating the economy and quality of life for local residents.

Need for Competitiveness

According to Kozak and Rimminton (1999), the competitiveness of any tourist destination is based on the value a tourist destination provides as opposed to other competing destinations. In tourism industry the value component not only considers that ratio of costs to benefits, but translates into overall experience of the visitors, based on factors such as the quality of offerings, attitude of the service staff, safety and security, local transport services, natural environment, speed of check-in and check-out, variety of restaurants, etc., among other factors. Enright and Newton (2004) point out the importance of safety, cuisine, attractions, visual appeal, well-known landmarks, nightlife, different culture, special events, festivals, etc., as attractors in that order of importance. With the right marketing mix, Tahlequah can be positioned as a major tourist destination for tourists from around the world to consider visiting, among other tourism options.

Need for Sustainability

In the longer run, the city of Tahlequah would also need to focus on sustaining tourism, for its impact on longevity, environment, and society as outlined by McCool and Moisey (2001). Sustaining tourism refers to the perception of maintaining tourism industry businesses over a long-time frame. On the other hand, sustainable tourism view comes from an argument that there are finite biophysical and social limits to tourism development. It recognizes that tourism, as any other economic activity, can overwhelm a community with negative social and environmental impacts. Thus, sustainable tourism, closely allied with the notion of ecotourism, is small in scale, designed to benefit local peoples and communities and protect heritage resources upon which the tourism and recreation industry is built. Finally, what should tourism sustain? This viewpoint sees tourism as a tool of social and economic development, as a method to enhance economic opportunity, not as an end, but rather a means to an end. These alternative views of sustainability and tourism carry significantly different implications for social and economic policy, selection of indicators, public participation and the planning processes needed to encourage tourism development in the city of Tahlequah.

CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Buhalis (2000), asserts that destination marketing is increasingly becoming competitive worldwide, and points out the importance of having a balance

between the strategic objectives of all stakeholders as well the sustainability of local resources. The tourist destinations need to differentiate their offerings and develop partnerships between the public and private sector co-ordinate delivery; and take advantage of new technologies and the Internet to enhance their competitiveness by increasing visibility, reducing costs, and enhancing local co-operation. Also, most of the global tourist destinations of the world today have evolved because they had something unique to offer, such as a natural or manmade wonder, or being a logistics, business, service hub. This study explored the potential of Tahlequah to become a major tourist destination and looked at what could be its unique selling proposition for tourism, and the challenges of developing the tourist infrastructure in the city. It also offered some perspectives on addressing the issues the city faces to develop tourism in the area. Based on this exploratory research, it appears that there is a long road ahead for the city to explore its tourism potential, even to attract the domestic tourists, within the state. The city faces financial, economic, political, social, and cultural challenges that need to be tackled to move forward from where it stands today, in terms of tourism, to where its leaders and stake holders might want it to be, if they decide to come together and synergize their efforts. The bottom line is that “where there is a will, there always is a way”. This study is expected to contribute towards developing tourism in and around the city of Tahlequah by invoking thought amongst the people in leadership roles about the tourist potential of the place and add to the extant tourism related literature about the region.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Like any other research, this investigation has some limitations that present opportunities for future research. These include the following: First, since this is an exploratory study based on data and information collected from sources; the accuracy and recency of data and information presented is limited to those sources. Collecting primary data through surveys about the people’s awareness attitudes, travel priorities, likes, dislikes, and expectations with reference to Tahlequah, would be one approach to achieve this objective. Similarly, the local community, including stakeholders and native American population living in the area, could be surveyed for their thoughts and feelings about the tourism potential of Tahlequah and their attitudes towards developing it into a major tourist destination. The data collected can be tested for its mapping on the conceptual model of TPB by looking at the fit statistics. Second, this study offered a broad and general approach to address the challenges faced by the

city to develop itself into an important tourist destination; more specific areas of focus can be explored with the help of area leadership. Future studies in this area can concentrate on development of detailed strategic plan in coordination with the local business and community leaders to present it to the state and federal representatives to press the government for allocation of funding and resources, to transform the region into a major tourist destination.

Third, with the emergence of social media, digital marketing, virtual reality, and block chain technologies, the possibilities of integrated marketing communications can be explored to promote and position the city of Tahlequah on a global scale, while integrating the businesses and processes through a common web-portal for one window solutions to make the whole system of bookings and delivery very effective and efficient. Finally, detailed footprint from successful tourist destinations can be obtained for valuable insights, to determining the best strategies that can be adopted to make Tahlequah a major tourist destination.

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