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Advancing destination image: The destination content model

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge of the mental representations that individuals hold about tourist destinations are important to understand their intentions. These mental destination representations have often been investigated by applying the concept of destination image. This study argues that the extant literature is often rather atheoretical and lacks operational rigor. These are major shortcomings which undoubtedly hinder the development of academic and managerial insights. In response, this study draws on contemporary psychology to develop the destination content model, comprising three informational components held in individuals' minds about destinations. The present study further outlines preferable methods and measures for each component, thus aiding researchers to investigate mental destination representations.

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Introduction

During the last four decades, tourism managers and researchers have devoted considerable effort to understand how individuals mentally form, store and use representations of destinations (Crompton, 1979; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). According to Dolnicar and Grün (2013), individuals' destination representations, often labelled 'destination image', is the most frequently studied topic across

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all tourism research. However, “the need for more research is critical to deepen the understanding of the destination image in influencing tourist travel behaviour” (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011, p. 542). As such, given the pivotal importance of this literature to both tourism managers and researchers, the focus of this article is to identify the key limitations and in response to present a holistic framework for understanding tourists’ mental representations of destinations.

In the extant literature, individuals’ mental representations of destinations have been defined, operationalized and measured in a variety of ways. While some studies treat destination image as an aggregated and evaluative construct (e.g. Assaf & Josiassen, 2011; Assaker, Vinzi, & O’Connor, 2011), other studies model it as a multi-faceted and rather descriptive construct consisting of qualitative adjectives that individuals use to describe a destination (e.g. Prayag & Ryan, 2012). The conceptual and empirical difference between these two perspectives is significant but has often been confounded under the generic ‘destination image’ label. Furthermore, studies not only differ on whether such mental destination representation is descriptive or evaluative in nature, but also on whether it is a cognitive or affective representation (e.g. Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997).

The intuitive but impalpable nature of destination image is both boon and bane: On the one hand, its visceral nature is highly attractive for both researchers and tourism managers, resulting in countless empirical and practical applications; while on the other hand, most of these applications are based on a rather prototypical understanding of destination image. As early as 25 years ago, Fakeye and Crompton (1991, p. 10) recognized the challenge presented by such studies stating that mental destination representations “have been atheoretical and lacking any conceptual framework.” More recently, Beerli and Martin (2004, p.658) have reiterated this view by stating that studies “tend not to conceptualize this term [i.e. destination image] precisely.” Motivated by this shortcoming, some studies (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002; Josiassen, Assaf, Woo, & Kock, 2015) have acknowledged the myriad of views on destination image in the literature and made initial developments towards a more consistent and appropriate framework.

While these studies contribute to the understanding of the complexity of destination image, two key gaps are yet to close. First, researchers still do not have a sound theoretical framework for the components that could make up mental destination representations and Gartner (1993, p. 209) suggests that “most tourism image research has been piecemeal without a theoretical basis for support.” While “the assessment of attitudes in tourism study is the basis of much research activity” (Pearce & Packer, 2013, p. 392), a comprehensive model that provides sound theoretical bases from attitude research is yet to be developed in the tourism literature.

Second, and caused by the limited theoretical grounding of mental destination representations, most of the studies that conceptually distinguish between different components of destination representations fail to sufficiently implement this conceptualization at the operationalization stage. Using the label ‘destination image’ for several conceptually distinct concepts constitutes an important limitation to the theoretical and operational integrity of studies on mental destination representations, as well as to their applicability to, and comparability across studies.

The aims of this research are therefore twofold. Based on state-of-the-art attitude research, we provide a theoretically sound framework which identifies, conceptualizes and delineates the three components of the mental representations that people hold about a destination. This framework is labelled the destination content model (DCM), composed of a multi-dimensional cognitive component, an affective component and an overall evaluative cognitive component. Second, we provide a blueprint for the measurement of each of the three DCM components. This blueprint is based on a review of existing methodological approaches to the measurement of mental destination representations, and integrates relevant approaches from psychology, marketing and tourism research. We further provide an empirical test of the DCM on selected behavioral intentions.

Literature review

Understanding tourists’ mental representations of destinations

Over the last four decades, within tourism research a myriad of different concepts have been referred to under the common label ‘destination image’, without a consensus on how to define or

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