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## Destination images of non-visitors

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### ABSTRACT

This article provides much needed understanding of destination images held by non-visitors. Recognizing the characteristics of non-visitor images and their formation is important in order to understand images more widely. This qualitative study assesses images of London. The views of three hundred people in the Czech Republic who have never visited London were obtained via an innovative open-ended research instrument. The study showed that non-visitors imagine destinations through comparisons with their own experiences of places. Findings indicate that images can be very persistent and that the first images formed of a destination endure over time. Although the research is based on people with no direct experience of London, the research highlights that a range of secondary 'experiences' influence image formation.

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### Introduction

Many existing studies recognize the importance of destination image. How we imagine a place influences where we travel (Bigné, Sánchez, & Sánchez, 2001; Gallarza, Saura, & García, 2002; Goodrich, 1978; Jenkins, 1999), satisfaction levels (O'Leary & Deegan, 2005; Pikkemaat, 2004), as well as perceived loyalty to a destination (San Martín & Del Bosque, 2008). Destination image has become a well-researched aspect of tourism (Pike, 2002), but this study departs from existing work, as it analyses the reflections of participants on the characteristics of their destination image and the image formation process rather than assessing the content of images. It is also different because it focuses only

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on images held by non-visitors—those who have not visited the destination. This study is rooted in geography, but has obvious links to, and implications for, marketing. Destination images of non-visitors are linked to other fields including politics (D'Hautessere, 2011; Marzano & Scott, 2009)—particularly public diplomacy (Anholt, 2006)—architecture and urbanism (Castello, 2010), and literary analysis (Ziolkowski in Stambovsky, 1988). If people have not been to a place, any images they have of it are inherently imagined. Imagination has been researched through the disciplinary lenses of history, geography, cultural studies, heritage studies, visual studies, cinematic studies, the arts, literary studies, philosophy, as well as psychology (Lean, Staiff, & Waterton, 2014). The lack of literature on the images individuals possess of destinations they have never visited is highlighted by many authors (for instance, Beerli & Martín, 2004; Govers, Go, & Kumar, 2007). Focusing on these 'non-visitors' allows the study to isolate the relative influence of different image sources and representations, as the influence of direct experience is not applicable.

Critics of current marketing research practice believe a much deeper understanding of how consumers really think is needed (Pike, 2008). As Tasci and Gartner (2007) point out, "Despite the overwhelming amount of research of destination image, there are still many facets of this complex construct yet to be investigated empirically" (p. 424). Image formation is one of the least researched areas of destination image and needs more investigation (Baloglu & McLeary, 1999) whilst discussion of travel and imagination is neglected in the tourism literature (Lean & Staiff, 2014). These noted gaps help justify the focus of our paper.

Images of London held by Czech non-visitors were explored to help understand how people imagine a place they have never visited. London was selected as it is one of the world's most visited cities, and one of the world's most widely known places. The city has a 'rich image' and it generates coverage for a wide range of different reasons, including events that take place there (Avraham, 2000). London is a complex as well as multi-faceted city (Raban, 1974; Stevenson & Inskip, 2008), a global capital that plays a special super-national role, for example in politics (Maitland and Ritchie, 2007). As Holcomb (1993) and Gilbert and Henderson (2012) remind us, London has been established as a tourist destination for a very long time.

The Czech Republic was chosen because the post-communist era provides a fascinating context for the study. As Williams and Baláž suggest (2001), there is a relative lack of tourism studies on the latter parts of the transformation period of the post-communist states. The extensive changes that followed the 'Velvet Revolution' (the change from a communist to a democratic regime) in 1989 impacted Czech society greatly. This political change radically influenced the way London was represented to individuals and provided an additional dimension to the study. Tourism was restricted in the Czech Republic in the past as, until 1989, outbound tourism beyond Eastern Europe and other countries of the economic alliance was very limited (Williams & Baláž, 2001). The Czech Republic has been a member of the European Union since 2004 and in 2007 it became part of the European Union's Schengen area, enabling free movement of persons and long-term stays of Czechs in the UK without visa restrictions (Europa, 2014). At the present time, the Czech Republic is an important market for London tourism, something that helps to further justify analysing Czech images in this study. In 2012 325,000 Czech tourists visited the UK, with approximately 45% coming to London (Visit Britain, 2013).

### **Destination images of non-visitors**

Authors use a variety of terms to describe the images held by people who have not visited a destination (Hughes & Allen, 2008). The term 'secondary image' is sometimes used but this is usually considered to be one constructed before a planned visit to the destination (Phelps, 1986 in Lopes, 2011). Some existing studies make comparisons of pre-and post-visit images (Jani & Hwang, 2011). Others explore images of potential visitors, defined as those likely to visit the destination (Kolb, 2006). However, Pike's (2008, p. 206) definition of 'non-visitors' is important, as he includes "those who would like to visit, but have not yet been able to for various reasons, as well as those who have chosen not to visit".

The term 'naïve' images used by Selby (2004) also deserves consideration. Naïve images are created without a direct experience of a locality and are held by the vast majority of people. These are seen as simplistic compared to the more complex, nuanced and realistic images held after a visit (Chon, 1990

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