



Assessing destination image: An online marketing approach and the case of TripAdvisor



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ABSTRACT

Destination image is a popular research domain in the tourism literature, yet few studies focus on destination image as reflected by actual tourists' evaluations and reviews on social media. Given the significance of social media and the relationship between country and destination image, the study sets out to assess the cognitive, affective and conative components of image. This study considers the concept of destination image from the tourists' point of view, through their reviews of Istanbul on TripAdvisor during the summer in 2013. This study, although limited in scope, will be of interest to academic researchers and industry practitioners who are seeking to better understand the behavior of travelers using the Internet.

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1. Introduction

Destinations today have to deal with a variety of new challenges in their effort to gain and maintain a competitive advantage. Smart destinations, which have emerged out of the concept of smart cities, particularly highlight the significance of synergies between stakeholders and of addressing travelers' needs before, during and after their trip (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2013). Within this context, the potential for assessing destination image using an online marketing approach arises.

Destination image is one of the most studied areas in the tourism literature (Gallarza, Saura, & Calderón García, 2002). The concept of destination image traditionally contains a cognitive and an affective component. Other researchers argue, however, that there is a third conative dimension which reflects the behavioral aspect (e.g. Gartner, 1993). Gunn (1988), focusing on the factors influencing image formation, identified a distinction between organic and induced images, and argued that actual experience effectively modifies the destination's image. The importance of modified-induced image, which results from visitors' actual experience of a specific destination, becomes of particular significance given that, as a result of visiting the destination, images

tend to be more realistic, complex, and differentiated (e.g. Chon, 1987). Even so, "image development must be based on reality, otherwise the destination will not succeed in satisfying the tourists, which will in turn have a negative effect on the image that they will transmit by word of mouth" (Beerli & Martin, 2004, p. 677). This becomes of special importance given the development of new information sources, such as social media, and the influence of user-generated content on the customers' decision-making process (Jalilvand, Samiei, Dini, & Manzari, 2012).

Social media are used before, during and after holidays for experience sharing and are a significant information source (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In fact, social media content is very often perceived to be more trustworthy than official tourism websites or mass-media advertising (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012). Furthermore, the link between destination image and search keywords is of critical importance to link between destination image studies and online marketing (Pan & Li, 2011). Despite its significance, however, there is a paucity of research analyzing image as reflected in social media (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014), particularly research that assesses the importance of each component to the online user.

In an attempt to address this research gap, this study seeks to assess the three image components (i.e. cognitive, affective and conative) and to consider the concept of destination image from the actual visitors' point of view. In order to achieve this objective, a phenomenological study was carried out to determine visitors' interpretation of the destination's image. To be specific, San Martín and Rodríguez del Bosque's (2008) image framework is used to facilitate the interpretation of the visitors' image. Given the importance of induced images, interest focuses on visitors' reviews

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on the largest online network of travel consumers, TripAdvisor (O'Connor, 2010). The study builds specifically on the case of Istanbul, seeking to shed light on the importance of the destination's image dimensions from the actual visitors' perspective. The study also takes into consideration the challenges of segmenting international travelers in the digital era, when online users' profiles (e.g. Ip, Lee, & Law, 2012) are not entirely aligned with traditional segmentation criteria (e.g. Baloglu, 1997; Cleveland, Papadopoulos, & Laroche, 2011).

The research outcomes offer marketing scholars greater insight into the dimensions of destination image and their distinct significance when an online decision tool is employed. Implications for tourism practitioners stem from the dilemma of focusing on several key themes in their mass-media marketing efforts, as is suggested for more mainstream markets (e.g. Chen & Uysal, 2002), or capturing the 'niche' image held by only a few tourists, as suggested by Pan and Li (2011) in the context of online marketing. Finally, the research provides guidelines to practitioners so that they can develop a greater understanding of what tourists consider to be significant when evaluating a cultural destination.

2. Background

2.1. The case of Turkey and Istanbul

Building the city brand is an objective explicitly stressed in the Turkish Strategic Plan for 2023 (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2007a). Istanbul is recognized as a 'strong card' for tourism development in Turkey. This is also underscored by the city's international arrivals, which in 2012 exceeded even those of Rome, one of the world's most popular city destinations, (Euromonitor International, 2014; Istanbul Culture and Tourism Directorate, 2014). Turkish stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, explicitly focus upon projects and programs which will create a positive destination image of Turkey (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2007b). The emphasis on image is not surprising, considering the importance of re-positioning the image of the country as a whole, which suffers from negative news in the mass media (Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007). The research of Tasci et al. (2007) further reveals that Turkey lacks a clear image. Therefore, the study focuses on Istanbul as a case for assessing the importance of different components of destination image for actual visitors.

Despite the aforementioned lack of clear image, Istanbul remains a major destination attracting visitors of many different nationalities. According to official figures, in 2013, regardless of their travel motive or duration of stay, more than 1.1 million arrivals were from Germany, while around 573,500, 503,000, 478,200, 456,100 and 437,500 visitors were from Russia, the US, France, the UK and Italy respectively (Istanbul Culture and Tourism Directorate, 2014). During 2013, around 386,300, 261,400, 241,200, 228,600 and 223,100 arrivals are realized by Iranian, Libyan, Iraqi, Azerbaijani, and Saudi Arabian nationals respectively. In 2013, the greatest number of international arrivals to Istanbul occurred between late spring and the beginning of autumn (Istanbul Culture and Tourism Directorate, 2014).

2.2. Destination image and the role of social media

In order to effectively market tourism destinations, it is important to be able to recognize the image that tourists have of a destination, to identify its strengths and weaknesses (Chen & Uysal, 2002), and to position it efficiently in the marketplace (Pike & Ryan, 2004). Destination image is therefore one of the most explored fields in tourism research (Gallarza et al., 2002). Nevertheless, more effort is required in order to explore the multi-dimensional nature

of destination image and the importance of each image dimension as recognized by tourists in the digital era.

The various definitions of destination image and the frameworks developed for its assessment reveal the importance of the concept for both scholars and practitioners (Gallarza et al., 2002). Different definitions have followed Hunt's (1971) first identification of image as a factor in tourism. Developments in the literature eventually led to the identification of three main components of image, namely cognitive, affective and conative (Gartner, 1993). The cognitive component is connected to awareness and refers to what people know or may think they know about a destination (Baloglu, 1999; Pike & Ryan, 2004). The affective component, meanwhile, goes further than beliefs and knowledge of the characteristics or attributes of a tourist destination, and evolves around people's feelings toward the destination (Chen & Uysal, 2002; Kim & Richardson, 2003). Finally, the conative component is the action step and refers to how people act on the information. Konecnik and Gartner (2007, p. 403) argued that, destinations are evaluated not solely from real or imagined attributes rather than according to the 'brand'. The conative component and the significance of the 'brand' are further emphasized given the nature of tourism and the importance of experience for services such as tourism, which are produced and consumed simultaneously.

According to San Martin and Rodriguez del Bosque (2008), factors such as 'natural environment', 'cultural heritage', 'tourist infrastructures' or 'atmosphere' underlie the cognitive structure of destination image. They argue that, the cognitive component of destination image derives from tourists' beliefs about the place and, as such, is related to the destination's attributes. The attributes of place can be classified into three sub-categories including not only functional/tangible attributes (e.g. landscape, cultural attractions, infrastructure) and psychological/abstract attributes (e.g. hospitality, atmosphere) but also affective attributes, such as the feelings and emotions that the destination may evoke (e.g. pleasure, excitement). Tourists evaluate destinations based on these dimensions and then decide on their behavior towards the destination (e.g. whether they would visit the destination again or recommend it to others): the conative component of destination image.

Literature traditionally links consumer behavior to demographics and develops corresponding segmentation criteria (e.g. Cleveland et al., 2011). Tourism research has also investigated the relationship between destination images and sociodemographic characteristics (e.g. Baloglu, 1997). The conative component of destination image is particularly connected to the action step and, thus, with behavior. Sociodemographic variables clearly affect perceptions of destination image, although studies disagree on the importance of different variables. For instance, when Baloglu (1997) attempted to determine whether destination image variations occurred as a result of the influence of sociodemographic variables, no significant differences were found between groups in terms of gender, income or education. The study's segmentation criteria thus focused on tourists' marital status, age and occupation. Other studies have, however, found some differences in perceived image depending on gender, age, level of education, occupation, income, marital status, and country of origin (e.g. Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Calantone, Di Benetton, Hakam, & Bojanic, 1989). Given the radical changes in consumer behaviors in the digital era, however, research on social media users from a market segmentation point of view needs to be further developed (Foster, West, & Francescucci, 2011). Specific segmentation criteria based on demographics may not be completely in line with the profile of internet and social media users (e.g. Ip et al., 2012).

The internet has reshaped the way tourism-related information is distributed and the way people plan for and consume travel (Buhalis & Law, 2008). In line with technological advances, tourism scholars have gradually started to focus on online destination

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