Research Paper

# What destination marketers can learn from their visitors' blogs: An image analysis of Bethlehem, Palestine

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## ABSTRACT

The understanding of visitor images is an important subject for tourism destination marketers. Although an increasing number of empirical studies explore images of several tourism destinations worldwide, limited research has been focussed on the tourism destination image of conflict areas. This study examines the image of Bethlehem by analysing Bethlehem's visitors' online publishing. Data was collected from popular travel blog sites, which include online posts about Bethlehem and its visitors' beliefs and evaluations. The results revealed that destination specific attributes in addition to primary image attributes are essential to understand the visitors' image of a conflict area. This study suggests that destination marketers of conflict areas should first accept their unique destination attributes, which do not change rapidly. The visitors' perceptions of Bethlehem and its people are based on more functional and psychological attributes than on holistic impressions. Destination marketers of conflict areas should craft a unique branding strategy that fits their destination best.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, the study of image has become a major area of research across a broad range of scholarly domains. Image studies have generated considerable attention from tourism (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003), marketing (Nagashima, 1977), business organisation (Burt, Hogarth, & Michaud, 2000), business strategy (Wang, 2006), sociology (Li, 2000), psychology (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999) and political science (Cain, Law, & Peel, 2000). It is widely accepted that destination image is an integral and influential element of the travellers' decision processes and therefore tourist behaviours (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002; Hunt, 1975; Pearce, 1982; Pike & Ryan, 2004; Rezende-Parker, Morrison, & Ismail, 2003; Stabler, 1987) and tourists' destination choice (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989).

In the early stages of destination evaluation, when the tourists' involvement with the destination is still low, visuals are vital (Mackay & Fesenmaier, 2000) and need to be considered. Because of the multiple dimensions of destination image (Gallarza et al., 2002) and the greater complexity the Internet has provided to destination marketing, investigating the destination image on the web is currently receiving greater attention from researchers as well as from destination marketing practitioners (Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007). Despite the increasing amount of empirical research, which examines the images of several tourism destinations worldwide, there is, however, one intriguing gap in terms of tourism destination images

of conflict areas. Thus, the focus of this study is on travellers' posts regarding their evaluations of a conflict area. Specifically, it investigates the image of Bethlehem by employing qualitative methods to analyse Bethlehem's visitors' online publishing on their blogs.

Bethlehem comprises, together with Jerusalem and Nazareth, one of the three most sacred cities for Christianity. Bethlehem, being the birthplace of Jesus Christ, is part of Palestine and is only 9 km away from Jerusalem. The Basilica and Grotto of the Nativity is sacred for Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Armenians, and all have ownership rights in the church. Although Bethlehem has been an important pilgrimage destination for centuries and probably possesses one of the oldest brands in the world, it suffers from an unknown tourism destination image.

Relatively little attention has been paid in the academic literature on the tourism development, difficulties, growth or destination image in Palestine. The tourism topics in the Middle East have been addressed in a general sense (Daher, 2006; Mansfeld, 1996; Wahab, 1995) with some exceptions about Palestine such as Al-Rimmawi (2003) and Isaac (2008, 2009, 2010). However, there have been no previous studies investigating the online destination image of conflict areas such as Bethlehem.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Destination image

Destination images are simplifications of the complex beliefs, attitudes, impressions and ideas a person has about a place. The

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sum of these impressions may be correct or false, real or imagined, but they guide and shape a person's behaviour (Barich & Kotler, 1991). Previous research provides evidence that the image of a destination influences tourists' decisions and behaviour (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). As destination choices for tourists are increasing rapidly, destination images can be used as mental short-cuts for evaluating information in the decision making process (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Early studies proposed that destination images are formed by four components which are distinctly different from each other but hierarchically interrelated: cognitive, affective, evaluative and behavioural (Boulding, 1956). In a more recent study, Echtner and Ritchie (2003) argue that a destination image is processed in a three dimensional space: namely functional, psychological and holistic. Accordingly, to measure these multi-components researchers need to use a combination of structured and unstructured methods. In the past scholars had a strong tendency to use only structured methods to measure destination images (Jenkins, 1999). By using structured methods a researcher asks tourists to rate a set of attributes and applies sophisticated statistical methods to explain a certain group of tourists' destination image. Using only structured methods in image measurement studies has received criticism, as destination image structure is highly dependent upon the researcher's conceptualization and reflects the researcher's own perceptions of the dimensions.

On the other hand, the increasingly rich and readily available text and visual data on the web has encouraged researchers to use qualitative assessments like content analysis (Choi et al., 2007; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and semantic and word frequency studies (Jani & Yeong-Hwang, 2011; Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007). The use of qualitative analyses allows the use of both holistic and psychological dimensions at the same time and takes the four image components into consideration – something which cannot be captured easily by quantitative methods (Dann, 1996; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Mackay & Fesenmaier, 2000; Reilly, 1990).

### 2.2. Destination image formation

During the past two decades two different literatures focused on destination image formation: namely tourism and marketing literatures. Tourism studies have examined destination image either from the supplier's side as a projected image to promote, develop and communicate a destination's image to attract tourists or from the consumers' (potential tourists') side as a perceived image to use these images in their decision making process of where to travel to (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Castro, Armario, & Ruiz, 2007; Goodrich, 1978; Hunt, 1975; Pike & Ryan, 2004). Marketing studies have examined destination (or place) image by exploring its relationship with product selection decisions and the country-image-effects as a consequential impact of decisions in organisational buying (Heslop, Papadopoulos, Dowdles, Wall, & Compeau, 2004) and decisions regarding places for investment (Wee, Lim & Tan, 1993).

In order to explain how consumers (or potential tourists) use images to simplify their complex decision choices and apply this information in their behaviour, both approaches sought an understanding of attitudes. Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) suggested that attitudes are built via three aspects – cognition (or beliefs held), affect (emotions or evaluations), and conation (intent to behave). Accordingly, when they apply these components in the image formation process, consumers have prior beliefs about a place or a product in the cognitive phase, evaluate this place or product in the affective phase and consequently use these beliefs and evaluations in the conation phase to create behavioural intentions such as visiting a place or purchasing a product. In the early marketing studies one-dimensional image measurement construction (Erickson,

Johansson, & Chao, 1984) was used more commonly and these studies were also product centric (Han, 1988). However subsequent studies took a multidimensional approach and dominated the destination image literature (Heslop, Papadopoulos, Dowdles, Wall, & Compeau, 2004; Laroche, Papadopoulos, Heslop & Mourali, 2005; Nadeau, Heslop, O'Reilly and Luk, 2008). Although these empirical assessments use similar approaches to measure multiple aspects of a destination image, the themes pertaining to these components vary remarkably across different studies. Hence, the belief dimensions of a destination image include built environment; scenery (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003); culture (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999); modernity (Tapachi & Waryszak, 2000); and friendliness of people (Nadeau, Heslop, O'Reilly, & Luk, 2008). The evaluation dimensions include arousal and excitement (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999); quality of service (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003), satisfaction (Chon, 1990). The conative dimensions include the decision to visit a destination (Foster & Jones, 2000) and the willingness to recommend the destination to others (Chon, 1991).

Despite the number of extensively conducted image studies in the tourism literature, the complex reality of geographic locations still provides a broad field to examine image-building practices. From a destination marketing point of view, it is important to understand the image formation components that are held in common with other visitors in a particular group. This understanding facilitates the segmentation of markets and the creation of enduring positioning and marketing strategies for a destination. Intuitively, therefore, observing the destination image continuously is an important aspect for destination marketing organizations (DMOs).

### 2.3. Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) and travel blogs

In recent qualitative studies, scholars (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) have called for research to gain insight into and understanding of the function of electronic word-of-mouth, specifically travel blogs, in the evaluation of a destination image.

Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) involves all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or attributes of particular goods and services (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Bing, 2008). This includes both communication between producers and consumers and also just among the consumers (Goldsmith, 2006). Market research on West-European consumers (Schandwick, 2009) reveals that consumers use online user reviews and recommendations as a principal source of information (26%) in their purchase behaviour. Individuals also use the Internet to learn about tourism destinations and their products and facilities directly from other consumers. Tourists e-mail each other, post comments and reviews on travel related sites, and publish their evaluations and experiences in their personal online spaces. This relatively new type of online communication empowers consumers and increases the importance of e-WOM. According to Buttle, (1998), the WOM phenomenon can be characterised by valence, focus, timing, solicitation, and intervention.

From a destination marketing perspective, first, e-WOM can have either negative or positive valence. In the case of negative valence e-WOM, visitors' reports may focus on poor service quality, unwelcoming residents or high prices. Positive valence e-WOM may include information about the good sides of a destination, its people and attractions (valence). Second, e-WOM activity is not only restricted to visitors. Accordingly, the people at the destination with whom the visitors come into contact (residents, business owners, employees, competitors and other stakeholders) and their communications could become part of the e-WOM activity (focus). Third, e-WOM may be expressed at different stages of the decision-making process; i.e. before or after a visit to a destination. Potential visitors may use comments