



Images, affective evaluation and personality traits in tourist behaviour: An exploratory study with Italian postcards

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore which kinds of emotions were evoked by the postcards of an Italian tourism destination and whether their affective components influenced the perception of the tourism destination's identity. The study also explored the relationship between personality traits and emotions. The empirical data was obtained by a convenient sample of 110 tourists who were asked to evaluate two of ten selected postcards of Polistena (located in the South of Italy). After a preliminary evaluation, two postcards were analysed in terms of affective feeling and personality traits. The findings reveal that the postcards evoked emotions that encouraged tourists to travel. The personality traits conscientiousness and emotional stability highlighted the fact that tourists are accurate in selecting and sending exclusive postcards for communicating ideas about the holiday destination that they visited to others. Finally, some considerations regarding the role of postcards in improving tourism are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The concept of tourism destination image has been introduced thanks to the seminal work of [Dann \(1988\)](#) to underline how images can control and determine tourist behaviour. Furthermore, recent studies have examined the cognitive and behavioural value of images in developing, presenting and promoting tourism destinations ([Frías, Rodríguez, Castañeda, Sabiote, & Buhalis, 2011](#); [Matteucci, 2013](#); [Pan, Lee, & Tsai, 2014](#); [Pantano & Servidio, 2011a](#); [Pantano & Servidio, 2011b](#); [Nicoletta & Servidio, 2012](#)). As tourism services are intangible, a distinctive destination image can help to create a set of unique and authentic association in tourists' long-term memory, and thus attract visitors' attention and support their decision-making processes ([Ekinici, Sirakaya-Turk, & Baloglu, 2007](#)). An image is a mental construct. It is formed in the mind based on a few selected pieces of environmental information from among the varieties of beliefs, and personal impressions that a tourist holds of a destination, through cognitive processes in which those selected pieces of knowledge are then organized into stable mental resources ([Crompton, 1979](#); [Echtner & Ritchie, 2003](#); [Rakic & Chambers, 2010](#)). In this sense, images represent an important component for destination marketers, especially in the highly competitive world of international tourism.

Indeed, one of the scientific objectives of social sciences, especially in the field of social psychology theories, is to increase the current level of knowledge about tourists' consumption experience by attempting new challenges in the accomplishment of positive hospitality tourism (for a

review, see [Tang, 2014](#)). The study findings in the field of social psychology point to the importance of identifying some specific behavioural phenomena, for instance, those associated with motivation, decision-making, and destination image, and thus provide suggestions for improving the tourism industry ([Pearce, 2013](#)).

Given the interest in the notion of tourism destination image, in recent years, this conceptual construct has received noteworthy consideration in the recommendation of new approaches for the design of visual contents to better communicate and promote tourism products and services ([Pantano & Servidio, 2011b](#); [Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011](#)). For example, it is said that the important role of a tourism destination image is universally accepted, since it has been demonstrated that tourism destination image affects several aspects of tourism behaviour ([Agapito, Oom do Valle, & da Costa Mendes, 2013](#); [MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997](#); [Yang, He, & Gu, 2012](#)). Moreover, images are widely used in tourism because they are closely related to human emotional experiences, which influence the final decision in the choice of a holiday destination ([Bigné, Andreu, & Gnoth, 2001](#)). For this reason, a substantial body of studies has examined the relationships existing between emotions and tourist consumer behaviour ([Hosany & Gilbert, 2010](#); [Hosany, 2012](#); [Mackenzie Houge & Kerry, 2013](#); [Nawijn, Mitas, Lin, & Kerstetter, 2013](#)).

Going on to the subject of emotion insofar as it relates to tourism studies, it has been said that although every person has an idea of what an emotion is, there seems no full agreement on its definition because describing its concept is not a simple task. In this view, according to [Feldman \(2011\)](#), the most accepted general definition of emotion is "Emotions are feelings that generally have both physiological and cognitive elements and that influence behaviour" (p. 328). On the other hand, while images have a key function in the field of tourism, there is

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relatively little attention paid to postcards insofar as these postcards “explore how the nature of their photographic images symbolize desired experiences and how they sustain particular motivations” (Markwick, 2001, p. 419; Milman, 2011a). Nevertheless, an initial analysis underlines the importance of postcards, which have the capacity to make the invisible visible, the unnoticed noticed, the complex simple and the simple complex (Edwards, 1996).

Thanks to the communicative nature of postcards, they enable a direct and straightforward dialogue between tourists and travel destinations. Postcards realize this dialogue by combining text and images. In several cases, postcards communicate their pictorial representations with a short written message. Milman (2011b) found that often the postcard's text language is not necessarily that of the travel destination, but rather of the region's major tourist origin. Furthermore, visual images and texts are powerful elements of tourism destination marketing. Both are not neutral, but rather convey to tourists information whose meanings are “beyond any initial messages” (Small, Harris, & Wilson, 2008, p. 19).

On the other hand, the images portrayed in postcards by marketers to promote a destination can be a conventional means to offer a ‘staged authenticity’ in terms of tourism well-being and hospitality. The information transmitted by postcards can become an effective tool in destination marketing, and is useful in supporting the tourists' buying intentions. More specifically, while postcards may have several functions, usually they also can serve the following functions: first as a personal souvenir of the holiday experience; and then as a means of extending this experience to other tourists who desire to enrich their limited knowledge about a place not previously visited (Markwick, 2001). Thus, travellers can benefit from postcards, and postcards, on the other hand, are relevant to the way in which tourists develop their mental constructions of destinations. For tourists, postcards focus on different attributes of the holiday destination visited, and in turn, these attributes are shaped by their personal ideas, perceptions and impressions of the holiday destination. In general, the research on postcards adopts a more holistic way of analysing their communicative content (Andriotis & Mavrič, 2013).

Now as regards human personality, it has been said that continuous change in the tourism sector, competition among destinations and products, and tourists' motivations for choosing a holiday destination underline the importance of examining how personality traits can influence consumer behaviour in tourism (Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2007; Jani, 2014; Jani, Jang, & Hwang, 2013). However, it should be noted that personality not only defines the behavioural style of subjects but it also represents relatively stable characteristics of the subjects. On the other hand, personality is also representative of the subjects with regard to all aspects of their individuality. Moreover, human activities and types of behaviour are consistent with specific traits of personality.

In this context, one way to study human personality traits is to apply specific conceptual frameworks, such as the Big Five factor model which involves the following traits: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness (McCrae & John, 1992). Moreover, in the field of tourism, it is important to comprehend the presence and/or absence of permanent behaviour related to specific destinations and the connection between these personality traits and the emotions of tourists (Berno & Ward, 2005). The reason for its importance is in the fact that emotions are an important component of tourists' experience, and many of the personality traits and emotions come from the psychological investigations (Lin & Worthley, 2012). However, according to Faullant, Matzler and Mooradian (2011), a limited body of research has investigated the relationships between personality traits and tourist behaviours.

Taking the initial considerations above as starting points, in this study the following ideas are explored: whether postcards are sufficient in generating affective responses, and whether they influence the tourist's desire to visit the destination. This current study therefore attempted to examine which types of emotions are evoked by

postcards, and what relationship exists between the affective image and the desire to visit a destination to undertake a specific holiday experience. In addition, this study examined the impact of different personality traits on tourist behaviour and the influence that these personality traits had on the selection and choice of postcards. These notions being examined in this study are important given that images and holiday expectations are closely linked in the consumer's mind. In this sense, the study recognizes that in fact the ultimate objective of destination marketing, with the support of the tourism psychology is to select images in order to capture the visitor's motivations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Postcards in tourism

The seminal work of Edwards (1996) examined a rich collection of museum postcards in order to comprehend the contribution of photography in building and preserving social identities. According to Edwards (1996), postcards represent a “multi-faceted icon of tourist experience”.

Later, other scholars have studied from different points of view the advantage of considering the role of postcards in the field of tourism, specifically their dynamic nature in creating a faithful and suggestive mental image of the destination (Markwick, 2001; Mayes, 2010; Milman, 2011a, 2011b).

Burns (2004) examined six postcards from Arabia and concluded that they “are documents of culture and through their socially constructed, ritualistic public displays of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ they capture the essence of the culture of colonial travels, power and discourse” (p. 273). Cohen (2007) has also analysed the relationship between representation of famous people in postcards and their associated messages. His study underlined the transformation of Santa Claus' image from a cold patron of children to that of a tourist icon used in the area of the tropical south. Recently, Mayes (2010) suggested in his case study that collective and proactive involvement of residents in the local production of postcards constitutes a remarkable potential for sustaining and increasing the sense of local place-identity for both residents and tourists. From this perspective, postcards are useful tools for keeping local traditions going inasmuch as they strengthen the sense of place-identity. In addition, postcards favour the dissemination of cultural and local practices that increase the cognitive awareness of the tourism destination image. Hence, given the function that postcards have, it should be noted that the images reproduced by postcards should be exclusive rather than generic as they can represent an excellent opportunity for empowerment of the local economy. They can create a “hermeneutic circle” (Ryan, 2002, p. 965) where the tourist can seek what the postcard represents.

Other studies have also investigated the effect of using postcards as promotional tools in supporting the tourism destination image. For example, Milman (2011a) adopted a qualitative approach to assessing the role of postcard pictures to represent Berlin as a famous tourist destination. His study results reveal that most of the postcards which were the subject of his study and which were offered for sale were lacking in realistic and contemporary visual description of Berlin, although prominence has been given to its historical and political images. In another study, Milman (2011b) investigated the emotional and motivational factors of Alanya postcards in representing the tourism destination image. The results of his study underline the idea that only a few postcards represented authentic and real images of Alanya, whereas the majority of postcards provided ambiguous and vague images of the destination. On the other hand, the findings of the study carried out by Yüksel and Akgül (2007) on postcards as affective image-makers underline the positive significant association between postcard-induced emotions and the desire to visit the destination.

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