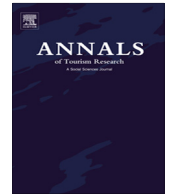




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Annals of Tourism Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/atoures

Antecedents and consequences of destination image gap



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 April 2016

Revised 12 November 2016

Accepted 14 November 2016

Keywords:

Tourism marketing
 Destination image
 Destination image gap
 Image gap formation
 Tourist satisfaction
 Tourist loyalty

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the antecedents that explain changes to the image that first-time tourists have (pre- and post-visit image gap) of a destination and its impact on satisfaction and loyalty through the design and validation of a model. The research has been carried out using a sample of 411 tourists in Tenerife (Spain). The involvement with the trip, the time dedicated to the search for information, and the number of attractions visited influence the change in cognitive image. The factors that explain the time spent searching for information are uncertainty, involvement, and duration and intensity of the visit. The positive gap in the image generates greater satisfaction, which has a positive impact in the loyalty.

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Introduction

The importance of image in the tourism development of a place is reflected by the interest shown in academia under different approaches. In this regard, Pike (2002), and Stepanenkova and Mills (2010), who have conducted reviews of the literature regarding the image of the tourism destination, identify different research areas in order to provide useful guidance to researchers in respect to topics for analysis, and useful methodologies and research techniques, attempting, in turn, to identify emerging trends within studies. Most of the research works have focused on the 'choosing a holiday' stage (Hyde, 2008; Pike & Ryan, 2004). Despite the interest shown in image in academic research, some authors agree that there is a scarcity of studies regarding the evolution of the image at different phases of the journey: before, during and after the visit (Kim, Mckercher, & Lee, 2009; Yilmaz, Yilmaz, İçigen, Ekin, & Utku, 2009). These studies have shown that the image can change, more or less significantly, not only while travelling, but also after the travel experience is concluded, with effects on the level of tourist satisfaction and the likelihood of recommending the destination, or making repeat visits (Kim et al., 2009; Yilmaz et al., 2009).

A more comprehensive investigation into this line of research related to the evolution over time of the image of a destination in the development of the holiday-making process has important implications for the sector. Market operators and those responsible for marketing may be able to create an image which more closely resembles reality in order to increase customer satisfaction and take advantage of those elements of the image that have been shown, during and after the trip, to be more prone to modifications that positively impact the level of satisfaction (Bigné, Sánchez, & Sanz, 2009).

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We also note that there are very few studies that have developed models that explain the relationship between the image and the multiple of factors that shape it (Beerli & Martín, 2004a, 2004b; Ryan & Cave, 2005; Tasci, 2007; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). These studies have examined the impact of primary and secondary sources of information and the personal characteristics of tourists on the process of forming an image. However, there are no studies that have evaluated how these factors influence the image gap, understood as the change in perception that occurs regarding the image during the different phases of a holiday: pre- and post-visit. That is, what factors can explain the gap that occurs in the image after visiting. However, Smith, Li, Pan, Witte, and Doherty (2015) carried out an exploratory study which indicates that the image tourists have of a destination is dynamic and continuously evolving throughout their trip during several key moments (pre-trip, upon arrival, halfway through, on departure, and post-trip), and that various incidents during the trip could have an impact on it.

Based on the above, this research aims to contribute to the improvement of knowledge about the antecedents and consequences of the gap that occurs in the image after the visit. More specifically, the overall objective of this research is focused on developing and empirically validating an explanatory model in order to determine what the antecedents and consequences of the pre- and post-visit gap in the image are.

Literature review

The decision-making process involved in arranging a holiday consists of several stages during which prospective tourists, faced with a number of alternative inputs, act in a certain way that leads them to make certain decisions. According to Van Raaij and Francken (1984), this process takes place during three fundamental moments – that is, before, during and after the visit to the destination – and is divided into five stages: the general decision to travel, searching information, choosing a holiday, the travel experience and, finally, the feeling of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the holiday taken.

The pre-visit stages are particularly important and critical to the success of a destination and, therefore, have been given special attention in the literature and among market operators (Decrop & Snelders, 2004; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004; Hyde, 2008; Kerstetter & Cho, 2004). In the literature, works can be found in which the need to understand the behavior of prospective tourists before they make a trip to a destination is highlighted such as, for example, the strategy employed during the search for information, since it allows market operators to successfully develop offers which are more consistent with the client segment being targeted (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004; Hyde, 2008). In this sense, Gursoy and McCleary (2004) declare that the process of searching for information is a key factor in the whole decision-making process of organizing a trip, as it represents the initial phase of activation of the behavior of prospective tourists trying to reduce the perceived risk of buying an intangible product. This process of looking for information is more intense among tourists visiting a destination for the first time (Li, Cheng, Kim, & Petrick, 2008).

With regard to the concept of image, there is widespread agreement in the tourism marketing literature (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Baloglu & Mangalolu, 2001; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999a, 1999b; Beerli & Martín, 2004a, 2004b; Chen & Uysal, 2002; Gartner, 1993; Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006; Pike, 2009; Pike & Ryan, 2004) in considering the image as the result of three closely interrelated components: (1) perceptual/cognitive, which is related to the beliefs of individuals on the attributes that characterize a destination; (2) emotional/affective, which refers to emotional response or the feelings that individuals express about the place; and (3) global, which corresponds to the overall positive or negative impression of the place. In addition, the cognitive component is an antecedent of the affective, as emotions are also influenced by rational elements. The cognitive component directly affects the global perception of the image and indirectly affects it through the contribution of the affective component (Anand, Holbrook, & Stephens, 1988; Beerli & Martín, 2004a, 2004b; Stern & Krakover, 1993).

The antecedents of the pre- and post-visit gap in the image can be classified according to their relationship with the process of searching for information before visiting the destination and with the characteristics of the holiday during the stay at the destination.

In relation to the antecedents of the gap in the image prior to visiting, the time spent on the search for information from secondary sources is a key variable in the creation or modification of the image by a prospective tourist (Fodness & Murray, 1997, 1999; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996), which influences the formation of the perceived image before a visit (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999a, 1999b). It is therefore essential to know what factors determine it and, hence, the specific efforts made by the prospective tourist to search for information before they choose to visit a particular destination.

First, the time spent on the search for secondary information derives from availability of time and the pressure that a lack of time has on the browser. Thus, the value perceived by expectant tourists who are under pressure due to their imminent departure to a destination is greater than the value attributed by those who do not find themselves in this situation. Meanwhile, the search for sources of secondary information will be greater, the more time there is available (Beatty & Smith, 1987; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996). Therefore, the longer the time spent by prospective tourists on gathering information, the greater the amount of information collected, thus providing them with a more complete and detailed image before their visit (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999a, 1999b).

Second, the need to seek information before making a purchase is typical behavior for consumers, who through this activity reduce the uncertainty and risk inherent in making purchases. Because of its intangible nature, the purchase of a holiday has a high level of uncertainty. Thus, the prospective tourist is motivated to seek external sources of information. As evi-

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