



## PROMISING THE DREAM: Changing destination image of London through the effect of website place

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### ABSTRACT

Drawing on theories of place identity and social identity, this study aims to fill a gap in place identity studies regarding the effect of a place website on the destination image of customers/visitors/tourists. The research addresses three questions: (1) what are the main impacts of tourists' attitude on place identity and the place website, (2) what are the factors that influence destination image, and (3) what are the main impacts of a favorable destination image? The favorability of a destination image is reflected by the extent to which visitors positively regard that place website. Results reveal the importance of the destination image in enhancing the intention to revisit and recommend. Also, visitors' satisfaction impacts on their intention to revisit and recommend the place. Significant implications for place managers and researchers are highlighted.

### 1. Introduction

The destination image is widely acknowledged as being a powerful tool for the tourism industry to use to advantage in achieving competitive strength in the market. Destination image influences tourist behavior, implying that destinations with strong, positive images are much more likely to be taken into consideration and probably chosen in the decision process of a travel destination. Faced with an extensive choice of competing destinations, the traveler must eliminate some options owing to time and money constraints. Among the narrowed set, however, the traveler is likely to choose the destination with the most favorable image. Not only does the tourist become involved in the actions but they also shape the actions at the vacation destination. Perceptions of a place can be improved by designing new websites or optimizing the existing ones (Foroudi, Gupta, Kitchen, & Nguyen, 2016). Similarly, a website can influence the formation of corporate image (Abdullah, Shahrina, Nordin, & Abdul Aziz, 2013; Foroudi et al., 2016; Foroudi, Dinnie, Kitchen, Melewar, & Foroudi, 2017; Melewar, Foroudi, Gupta, Kitchen, & Foroudi, 2017; Tran, Nguyen, Melewar, & Bodoh, 2015).

What are the main impacts of tourists' attitudes on place identity and place websites, what are the factors that influence destination image and what are the main impacts of a favorable destination image? A large body of studies, in domains including tourist behavior (Hunt,

1975; Pearce, 2005), place identity (Tuan, 1980), place websites, destination choice (Bastida & Huan, 2014) and image (Gartner, 1989; Padgett & Allen, 1997) has tried to understand when and why such associations are likely to occur. By contributing to the growing research on destination image, this study explores how these relationships can build deeper, more satisfied customers, visitors, and tourists, which can improve their intention to revisit and to recommend the place. Moreover, it draws on the theories of place identity (Rooney et al., 2010) and social identity (Brewer, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) to provide a comprehensive, coherent articulation of both the circumstances in which consumers are likely to form their potpourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas, and related feelings, and their sense of belonging (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) about a place and the consequences of such satisfaction.

In the following sections, we first provide a brief, general discussion about the influence of place identity and consumers' attitude toward place websites and the effects on destination image, which then influence satisfaction, intention to revisit and the intention to recommend the destination. Next, the methodology used to evaluate the proposed model is outlined. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical significance of destination image, implications, limitations of the study, and suggested avenues for future research.

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## 2. Background of the research

The concept of image holds various notions, incorporating ideas, form or conception (Alhemoud & Armstrong, 1996). Kosslyn (1983) refers to an image as a representation of the mind that gives rise to the experience of 'seeing' in the absence of the appropriate stimulation from the eye. Enis (1967) defines an image as "the whole of all sensory perceptions and thought interrelationships associated with an entity by one individual" (p.51). The formation of an image was portrayed by Reynolds (1965) as the development of a mental construct built from a few impressions based on a flood of information. There is, however, no universally accepted meaning of the term 'image' (Lyman, 1984; Poiesz, 1989).

In the marketing literature, the significance of the image concept has been widely discussed (Brown, 1998; Foroudi, Melewar, & Gupta, 2014; Stern, Zinkhan, & Jaju, 2001) and signifies the associations, beliefs and attitudes about a company that are kept in the minds of consumers (Barich & Kotler, 1991). Corporate image is "the immediate mental picture an individual holds of the organisation" (Foroudi et al., 2014, p. 2271) and relates to the overall impression left in the minds of the consumers (Zimmer & Golden, 1988). The positive image of a company is constructed by means of effective communication (Bravo, Montaner, & Pina, 2009; Leuthesser & Kohli, 1997; Van Riel & Balmer, 1997) and management of its identity (Balmer & Wilson, 1998; Foroudi et al., 2014, 2016; Van Riel & Balmer, 1997). This understanding of corporate image implies that consumers can create and change their impression (corporate image) based on their perceptions about the website of the company (Bravo et al., 2009; De Chernatony & Christodoulides, 2004) and its identity (Balmer & Wilson, 1998; Foroudi et al., 2014, 2016; Van Riel & Balmer, 1997). In addition, a positive corporate image is known to provide a competitive advantage (Brown, 1998; Stern et al., 2001). A positive corporate image also influences attitude toward a company's products (Brown, 1998), and affects and shapes consumer behavior (Lai, Griffin, & Babin, 2009). Based on the argument above, the image can be shaped by the website and identity, and can impact on satisfaction, intention to re-visit and intention to recommend. By extension, this concept can also be applied in relation to the destination image.

In the tourism literature, in line with the understanding of image from the marketing literature, destination image can be defined as the sum of the beliefs, feelings, conceptions, knowledge, imaginations, emotional thoughts, ideas, and impressions held by people about a place or destination (Alhemoud & Armstrong, 1996; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Lawson & Baud-Bovy, 1977; Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997). According to Metelka (1981), the image of a destination relates to the expectations about a place, prior to the actual experience. Alhemoud and Armstrong (1996) highlight that destination image has an important influence on the consumers' choice of place to visit. In particular, prior research demonstrates that destinations with strong, positive images can promote and impact upon consumers' choices of destination (Alhemoud & Armstrong, 1996; Goodrich, 1978; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989) and have cognitive and evaluative components (Alhemoud & Armstrong, 1996; Embacher & Buttle, 1989).

Notwithstanding the many studies that use the concept of place and identity, there are but a handful of studies that encapsulate the relationship between identity and place. This relationship is a complex phenomenon. The place identity concept refers to a sub-structure of the self-identity of an individual's "potpourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas, and related feelings about specific physical settings as well as types of settings" (Rooney et al., 2010, p. 47). Given that definition, place identity can be explained through interaction with places, where people describe themselves as belonging to a specific place. It is not determined only by physical place but also describes the individual's socialization with the physical place (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983).

The second concept related to place and identity is place

identification, which refers to the membership of a group of people defining themselves by the place itself, for example, "a person from London may refer to themselves as a Londoner" (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996, p. 205). Additionally, Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) point out that the physical, social and cultural context has an impact on place identity. Place identification is also linked to the characteristics of individuals and the framework of experiences that individuals have with the place. Place identity is a condition rather than a process (Lalli, 1992); individuals often identify themselves with particular places that reflect their own identity (Brocato, 2006; Kyle, Mowen, & Tarrant, 2004; Proshansky et al., 1983).

The advance of the Internet has changed the patterns of preferences of consumers, which creates significant challenges in tourism marketing (Govers, Go, & Kumar, 2007; Lepp, Gibson, & Lane, 2011) and a need for a more holistic view of the image of a destination. For a destination or place to be successful, it needs to be positively positioned and differentiated from its competitors (Calantone, Di Benedetto, Hakam, & Bojanic, 1989; Govers et al., 2007), making place website and place identity key elements of the destination image. Therefore, there is a need for more research related to destination image as consumer preferences and patterns change. In particular, there is a lack of empirical research relating to place websites and place identity, and how they can affect destination image.

As Chung, Lee, Lee, and Koo (2015), and Rodriguez-Molina, Frías-Jamilena, and Castañeda-García (2015) state, there is a need for additional research about destination image, in particular, concerning the effect of a website on place and destination image, "especially considering the rate at which the internet is being embraced by destinations around the world" (Rodriguez-Molina et al., 2015, p. 304). A few recent studies have been conducted in relation to the websites of destinations. Examples include 1) Bastida and Huan (2014) investigate performance evaluation of tourism websites via website analysis; 2) Chung et al. (2015) evaluate the influence of tourism websites on tourists' behavior to determine destination selection using the case study of Korea; and 3) Rodriguez-Molina et al. (2015) examine the role of website design in the generation of tourist destination image with the moderating effect of involvement. In these examples, the authors find that websites are the major determinant of consumer attitude and behavior.

This study contributes to marketing theory by drawing on theories of place identity (Rooney et al., 2010) and social identity (Brewer, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), to fill a gap in place identity studies regarding the effect of place websites on the destination image of customers/visitors/tourists. There is limited research on the relationships between websites and image concepts (Abdullah et al., 2013; Argyriou, Kitchen, & Melewar, 2006; Beatty, Shim, & Jones, 2001; Foroudi et al., 2017; Melewar et al., 2017; Pollach, 2011, 2005; Topalian, 2003). Social identity theory has been widely applied in corporate identity research investigating relationships among groups, within groups and the social self (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Karaosmanoglu, Banu Elmadag Bas, & Zhang, 2011). In brief, in-group favoritism improves individuals' self-esteem, which establishes a positively-valued social identity that members of the group seek to obtain (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Similarly, places that aim to gain meaningful relationships with visitors/tourists should fulfill their needs concerning their social identity by communicating images that are relevant to consumers (Foroudi et al., 2017; Melewar et al., 2017) by using the place website. By "engaging in corporate visual identity activities, organisations communicate more favourable to internal and external stakeholders regarding important characteristics of the company's corporate identity" (Foroudi et al., 2014, p. 2276). Furthermore, Dixon and Durrheim (2000) argue in relation to place identity theory that a sense of belonging (place-belongingness) is essential for place identity. Saleh (1998) states that place identity and visual image are connected to social and cultural influences.

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