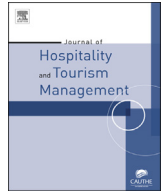




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The influence of travel agents and tour operators' perspectives on a tourism destination. The case of Portuguese intermediaries on Brazil's image

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyse Brazil's tourism destination image taking into account travel agents and tour operators' perspectives. This paper thus seeks to complement previous research carried out based on travellers' viewpoints. This research, more specifically, sought to analyse the antecedents of Brazil's overall image from the perspective of Portuguese travel intermediaries. For that cognitive image, affective image and marketing communications were analysed as antecedents of Brazil's overall image, and visitation influence was modelled as a mediator. Based on a questionnaire completed by 132 Portuguese travel agents and tour operators, the results show that the total (direct and indirect) effect of both cognitive image and marketing communications are more important than the total effect of affective image. Moreover, the visitation influence exerts no mediation at all between affective image and overall destination image, although there is a mild partial mediation effect involving the other two antecedents (cognitive image and marketing communications).

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1. Introduction

Tourism is perceived as an economic and social driving force supporting regional and/or local development (Brouder, 2014; Brouder, Clavé, Gill, & Ioannides, 2016; Pimentel, Emmendoerfer, & Tomazzoni, 2014). However, with the increased competition between similar destinations and demand flexibility, many classic tourist destinations are being replaced (Li & Petrick, 2008; Mussalam & Tajeddini, 2016). The prosperity of destinations depends on a constant flow of tourists, but, with the emergence of new markets and competitors (Tasci & Gartner, 2007), only well managed destinations have the capacity to continue attracting visitors (Buhalis, 2000; Camisón & Forés, 2015).

Over the last few years, the development of this industry has made tourism marketing quite challenging, as alternative destinations are constantly expanding and tourist destination marketers are finding it increasingly difficult to influence individuals' decision making (Baloglu & Mangalolu, 2001; Souiden, Ladhari, & Chiadmi,

2017). According to García, Gómez, and Molina (2012), for destinations to gain competitive advantage, it is necessary not only to differentiate their image with regard to customer needs but also to understand the importance of creating unique features that distinguish them from similar destinations.

From this perspective, destination image has an important role because it influences tourists' behaviour (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Souiden et al., 2017). This influence starts when prospective travellers choose their destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999), so persuading potential visitors to select particular destinations is an essential aspect of successfully developing any locality's tourism destination image. Some well thought-out effort, thus, is needed to build or improve destination image (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Grosspietsch, 2006; Kock, Josiassen, & Assaf, 2016; Mussalam & Tajeddini, 2016; Souiden et al., 2017; Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007; Zins, 2010).

Tourism marketing strategies cannot be ignored as they are important vehicles in the social construction of tourism destinations (Kavaratzis, 2012). Tourism marketing strategies tend to homogenise and differentiate destinations in terms of context and content, which creates territorial boundaries (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003). The role of tourism travel intermediaries – as stakeholders – is important as they are important players influencing the

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representations and images of tourism destinations (Jeuring, 2016; Kavartzis, 2012).

In this context, tour operators and travel agents link tourism supply and demand, as they act as information providers and tourism product facilitators between the supply and the demand. Thus, both customers and suppliers rely on tour operators and travel agents, which gives the latter great influence in sales and distribution in this industry (Budeanu, 2005).

The importance of intermediaries in the tourism industry is not new, despite several claims that travel agencies and tour operators could disappear (Čavlek, 2013). Their persuasion knowledge is very important in the believability to publicity and advertising (Kim, Kim, & Marshall, 2016). With functions such as informing potential visitors and developing and promoting destination tourist packages, these professionals are key influencers in the tourism industry as 'their image of, and knowledge about, destinations will have a significant impact on potential travellers' vacation decision-making processes' (Baloglu & Mangalolu, 2001, p. 1). Nevertheless, the majority of research regarding marketing strategies has over-emphasised the representation of image among tourists overlooking the important role tourist travel intermediaries play in the construction of tourist destination images (Baloglu & Mangalolu, 2001; Calveras & Orfila, 2014; Grosspietsch, 2006; Čavlek, 2013).

Researchers' interest in tourism destination image has increased considerably over the last few decades (e.g. Kock et al., 2016; Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010; Tasci et al., 2007; Zins, 2010). However, the existing literature is far from unanimous about the most appropriate methods to use when building tourism destination image, since this process is quite dynamic – changing markedly according to various situational factors.

Although there is plenty of research on tourism destination image (e.g. Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Kock et al., 2016; Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010), few studies analyse the roles of business travel intermediaries as facilitators in the creation of Brazil's tourism destination image (Bandyopadhyay & Nascimento, 2010; Mariutti & Giraldi, 2014; Mariutti, Giraldi, & Costa, 2013; Mariutti, Trench, Montanari, & Giraldi, 2017; O'Neil, 2007; Pike, 2016; Rezende-Parker, Morisson, & Ismail, 2003). Moreover, as emphasised by Sonmez and Sirakaya (2002), it is important to carry out research on image in developing countries and add that these destinations have to consider carefully how they are positioned in the international market in order to develop and increase their participation in the tourism industry. Therefore, the article focuses on building of Brazil's tourism destination overall image specifically on Portuguese travel intermediaries' perception Brazil as a tourist destination. For that this paper analyses how Brazil's overall image is influenced by intermediaries' cognitive image, affective image and marketing communications strategy, taking into account the mediating effect of the intermediaries' influence after visiting Brazil. For that cognitive image and affective image are analysed as independent variables as antecedents of overall image. This latter variable is analysed as a compound, combined perspective of Brazil as a tourism destination.

To this end, this paper is organised as follows. After this introduction, the second section presents the theoretical framework constructed based on the assumptions underlying the various relationships discussed in the literature. It also presents Brazil as a tourism destination. Section three describes the research methodology, as well as the scales used, the sample and the data collected. Section four presents the results of the model's estimated parameters, followed by a discussion of the results. Finally, section five covers the study's conclusions and limitations and future research directions.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

2.1. The importance of destination image studies for tourism marketing

Tourism products are subjective, resulting from both individuals' image and expectations. Thus, tourism policymakers need to assess their destinations' image and resources through proper image and marketing studies (Buhalis, 2000). According to Fakeye and Crompton (1991), the success or failure of tourism in many destinations strongly depends on the effective management of image, as well as an understanding of individuals' image of specific locations. The increased competition in the tourism industry has forced destinations to develop well-studied plans and efficient marketing strategies (Baloglu & Mangalolu, 2001).

In this context, marketing researchers have studied the impact of brand image on consumer behaviour, given that studies have provided proof of brand image's strong influence on attitudes (Elliot, Papadopoulos, & Kim, 2011). This concern is also found in tourism marketing as "marketers are interested in the concept of tourist destination image mainly because it relates to decision making and sales of tourist products and services" (Jenkins, 1999, p. 2). Tourism destinations are constantly being compared with their competitors in the market on the basis of their perceived image (Baloglu & Mangalolu, 2001).

According to Stepchenkova and Mills (2010, pp. 575–576), "destination image research has been one of the major areas in tourism scholarly inquiry for more than three decades due to its high practical importance for destination management, marketing, and branding." The concept of destination image has attracted much attention among tourism professionals and researchers due to the fact that image differentiates tourism destinations from their competitors and strongly influences future visitors' decision making (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997). McLellan and Foushee (1983) also argue that, besides influencing tourists, destination image also affects business travel intermediaries such as travel agents and tour operators.

In addition to recognising image's importance for the success of tourist destinations, the literature reflects a consensus regarding this concept's complexity. Consequently, a profound understanding of its characteristics, components and relationships is required for the organisations managing tourism destinations to exploit the positive elements of destination image and alter any negative ones (Elliot et al., 2011).

As stated by Rodríguez del Bosque and San Martín (2008), destination image has been widely discussed because it influences individuals' behaviour. However, when researching what constitutes state of the art destination image building, the literature contains little research exploring how tour operators and travel agents perceive or influence destination image (Baloglu & Mangalolu, 2001; Grosspietsch, 2006; McLellan & Foushee, 1983; Rodríguez del Bosque, San Martín, & Collado, 2006; Santos, 1998). The reason for this gap is unclear since understanding how tour operators and travel agents influence tourism destinations is essential to tourism policymakers, professionals and academics.

McLellan and Foushee (1983) conclude that travel intermediaries as sources of information contribute to the creation of the destination images upon which tourists base their decisions. Santos (1998) contends that a country's projected image influences the image that tour operators project of that country to their clients, which be considered as the perceived overall image of the destination. Therefore, it is important to understand clearly how travel agents and tour operators' perceived images can assist tourist destination managers whenever the former professionals revise destination images in the market and influence these images and

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