



A multidimensional analysis of the information sources construct and its relevance for destination image formation



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Weighing the information sources in the overall information source construct.
- Multidimensional methodology that uses a combined weight of various web platforms.
- Moving beyond the influences of traditional, offline sources of information.
- Analyzing information of 541 tourists and residents of Mallorca
- Results indicate the influences of information sources and their combination.

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ABSTRACT

The images of a tourist destination often depend on information and contents generated by travelers, suppliers, and residents. This article analyzes the weight that different information sources exert in defining the overall information source construct. The authors adopt a multidimensional methodology; unlike prior research, this study considers the combined weight of various web platforms for determining the images of tourist destinations. Thus, in addition to integrating various explanatory models to detail how the images of a tourist destination form, this study adds web platform factors and thereby moves beyond the influences of traditional, offline sources of information. The results of a survey of 541 tourists and residents of Mallorca, according to different descriptive statistics and exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, indicate that different websites, reflecting both supplier- and user-generated content, exert important influences and combine to form an information source construct. Furthermore, users who publish tourist information online value web platforms that offer user-generated content when they seek information about a tourist destination for themselves. These findings in turn offer several managerial recommendations.

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1. Introduction

When it comes to forming an image of a tourist destination, the Internet represents a widely consulted source, complementing information obtained from traditional sources, such as friends and

acquaintances, commercial agents, suppliers, destination marketing organizations, advertising, popular media, and travel guides or documentaries (Gartner, 1993; Gunn, 1988). As well as an information source, the Internet constitutes a communication channel that many traditional information sources leverage. For example, various tourism service providers transmit information about a destination using diverse web platforms to publish content, including details about the destination, available products, and tourist services (WTT, 2011).

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Some studies assume the Internet is merely a consultation source that complements traditional channels (Beerli & Martin, 2004); others focus on the web as a formal information source that defines the virtual images of a tourism destination (Hyun & O'Keefe, 2012). We propose instead that the web differs from traditional sources and that formal sources do not have a monopoly on information transmission. The proliferation of social media and social networks makes it possible for anyone—including consumers and residents—to publish information about a destination that other tourists may consult. Suppliers and local marketing organizations publish contents too, in an effort to reach tourists directly without relying on intermediaries (WTT, 2011).

Several studies have sought to understand how tourists use Internet-based communication channels to gather information, as well as how tourism suppliers can best exploit those channels (e.g., Buhalis & Law, 2008; Casaló, Flavián, & Guinaliú, 2010; Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Ho, Lin, & Chen, 2012; Huertas, 2012; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Lookinside Travel, 2012; Munar, 2011; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Most studies analyze different channels separately, without considering the combined weight of various web platforms for determining the images of tourist destinations (cf. Hyun & O'Keefe, 2012). For this study, we incorporate the uses of different web platforms as information sources by tourists planning a trip. By adopting a multidimensional methodology, we analyze the weight exerted by different information sources on the overall information sources construct. Moreover, we consider the variables that reflect measures of user-generated content (UGC) (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2008) to determine whether usefulness varies with the ways potential tourists employ the Internet (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

2. Literature review, conceptual framework, and hypotheses

2.1. The web and social media as information sources for destination image formation

Various web platforms influence consumers' formation of images of a tourist destination, similar to the way traditional, offline information sources might. The boom in new web platforms and social media make it possible for virtually every consumer and every organization to publish contents, including details about tourist destinations and offers. In turn, the Internet has become a primary source of tourist information (Buhalis, 1998; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Buhalis & Licata, 2002; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Wu, Wei, & Chen, 2008), especially as virtual experiences continue to shift from the search for and consumption of information to the creation of information, connections, and exchanges. Previously passive consumers now generate content, collaborate, and comment through social networks. These contents in turn enable users to move beyond a reliance on official or paid descriptions of a destination, because they can instantaneously access reviews from other consumers who have experience with the destination (WTT, 2011). In analyzing the relationship between UGC and a destination brand, Munar (2011) shows that tourists do not incorporate the formal elements of the brands in their accounts of destinations; slogans and logos are practically nonexistent in UGC. Instead, tourists share online knowledge and information (Buhalis & Law, 2008), as well as emotions and experiential moments (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012). Other consumers perceive such information as more likely to provide reliable information than the content posted by tourism organizations, which ultimately could challenge the capacity of destination branding to tailor and frame the image of the destination (Munar, 2011). Thus, tourists actively influence the formation of destination images through their personal accounts of experiences and textual or visual contributions. Furthermore,

individuals and groups often develop their own mental constructions or representations of a destination image, focusing on particular attributes, depending on their beliefs, ideas, attitudes, and motivations (Beerli & Martin, 2004).

The acquisition of information online differs from its offline forms; information shared through the Internet specifically influences the process by which people develop images of the destination (Biswas, 2004). The destination image can be shaped strongly by UGC on social media, because consumer-generated content significantly and quickly influences images (Lim, Chung, & Weaver, 2012). Therefore, it is important to account for how such content contributes to not only the creation of but also changes to a destination image. In particular, several studies note that negative consumer comments in Web 2.0 spaces spread quickly, with great potential for damaging the image and reputation of a brand (e.g., Siano, Vollero, & Palazzo, 2011). Because UGC in a tourism setting means that tourists send instantly updated, real-time information about any problem, deception, or situation experienced at the destination (Munar, 2011), the potential negative impact is nearly incalculable; it is difficult to measure the consequences of a negative video or a terrible review. Nor can the effect be compensated for, because scientific controls of all the dangers and consequences associated with UGC in a tourism context likely are impossible. Finally, as Choi, Lehto, and Morrison (2007) note, image formation has been examined thoroughly in prior literature, but research into image formation through the Internet remains nascent.

2.2. Forming the image of a tourist destination

Due to the growth of web platforms as information sources, methods for managing brand or destination images have changed (Christodoulides & Jevons, 2011; Christodoulides, Jevons, & Bonhomme, 2012). Much research has focused on analyzing the impact of the Internet on corporate brands (e.g., Ind & Riandino, 2001; Lindstrom, 2001; Stuart & Jones, 2004); fewer studies address its effect on brand images (cf. Merrilees & Fry, 2003). Furthermore, there are several approaches to measuring brand image (e.g., Lassar, Mittal, & Sharma, 1995; Low & Lamb, 2000; Tsai, 2005). For destination brand images in particular, various researchers note the capacity of the Internet to affect subjective, individual perceptions and choice, such that the image of the destination is (1) a significant concept in tourist management (Chen & Hsu, 2000; Kozak, 2001, 2002; Seddighi & Theodorou, 2002), (2) a principal dimension of the value of the brand (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007), and (3) an important component for establishing a brand model for the destination (Cai, 2002). Thus the same destination could produce different images for various collectives of potential consumers (Serra, Freyer, Garau, & Vich, 2002). That is, the image of a destination implies perceptions of a place, as reflected by associations that tourists store in their memories (Cai, 2002).

Different approaches to measuring a destination's image rely on indicators and variables that can be classified in different ways. In their review of prior studies, Echtner and Ritchie (2003) suggest ordering the attributes of a tourist destination on a scale ranging from psychological to functional. Echtner and Ritchie (1991) previously proposed a list of attributes for measuring the characteristics of a destination, divided into two classes: related to the specific characteristics of the region (e.g., friendliness of inhabitants, beauty of the city or region, quality of food) or related to infrastructures and entertainment. Other classifications suggest dividing the attributes of a tourist destination into cognitive and affective attributes (e.g., Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011). Cognitive evaluations imply beliefs or knowledge about the attributes of a destination; an

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