



Tracking destination image across the trip experience with smartphone technology



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Examines the evolution of image throughout the trip experience.
- Smartphone technology is used record images and perceptions.
- Image fluctuates during the trip experience.
- Arrival and departure scores have a strong impact on post trip evaluation.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine changes to tourists' image of a destination throughout a trip experience. Using Blackberry technology, a group of Canadian student travelers to Peru were asked to record images and experience about their trip during several key moments (pre-trip, upon arrival, half-way, departure, and post-trip). The results of this mixed methods study indicate that tourists' destination image is dynamic and continuously evolving throughout their trip, and various incidents during the trip could impact it. Of particular importance are the impressions made upon arrival and departure, as they are powerful determinants of post-trip images. Affective image appear to be rather haphazard during the trip whereas most respondents' cognitive image follows a specific pattern where the subjects go through an adjustment period at the beginning of the trip (resulting in lowered scores) but then rebound in a positive direction from that point. Further, post-trip cognitive scores tend to continue to rise significantly while affective scores tend to return to pre-trip levels.

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1. Introduction

One of the challenges with the tourism industry today is to understand how tourists form perceptions of a destination (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Li, Pan, Zhang, & Smith, 2009). A tourist's image of a destination could affect his or her destination choice (i.e., pre-trip

decision making) and overall satisfaction with the destination experience (i.e., post-trip evaluation). Conversely, tourists' travel experience will also affect their destination image, which in turn affects whether or not the tourist will return in the future or spread positive word-of-mouth to others. The present paper focuses on how travel experience shapes one's destination image.

Although researchers have increasingly recognized that destination image is dynamic in nature, most studies to date have used one-off and cross-sectional designs (Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002). The result is that most studies are conducted at just one point in time reflecting a 'snapshot' of destination image (Beerli & Martin, 2004). While this approach has traditionally generated valuable information in relation to tourists' overall satisfaction, it is subject to a filtered impression and could produce skewed results. Recording destination images via survey questions at one time

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point during a trip may only capture a still picture during a continuously flowing process. Further, studies have shown that attitudinal questions are linked with participation propensity and thus, create directional bias (Groves & Peytcheva, 2008; Stinchombe, Jones, & Sheatsley, 1981). For instance, only those who had a particularly positive or negative experience are more likely to respond to these surveys.

Several studies have been conducted in a before-and-after design, demonstrating the importance of examining the variation between pre- and post-trip images (Chon, 1991; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). While some of these studies did ask respondents why changes in their image occurred, they focused on post-experience reflection, and thus are examining recalled events and re-evaluated decisions. As recall is often shaped or distorted by events following the trip, this approach may be susceptible to potential recall bias. Further, a pre- and post-trip comparison of destination image implies viewing one's destination experience as holistic. Nevertheless, it has been suggested repeatedly that travel is an evolving process (Clawson & Knetsch, 1966; Woodside & Dubelaar, 2002), and different contextual factors through the course of a vacation may affect destination image. However, empirical *in-situ* research on tourists' image development across a vacation is lacking (see Vogt & Andereck, 2003 for a notable exception).

The purpose of this study is to start to address these issues by examining how image is shaped throughout the tourist experience and explore future research agenda in this direction. By following tourists through several key phases of travel and assessing their destination image at multiple points during their trips, the authors seek a better understanding of the dynamic nature of destination image and the potential effects of temporal, spatial, and other situational factors embedded in this process. Conceptually, this study echoes the recurrent plea of breaking out the prevailing "trait-like ideologies" and "still-life photograph depiction" of leisure (Stewart, 1998, p. 393), and study travel as a sequential and evolving process.

2. Review of literature

It has been suggested that often, it is the image of a place rather than its actual characteristics that affects tourist decision-making (Carmichael, 1992). Ryan and Cave (2005) suggest that "the cognitive and affective skills possessed by humans impute values and feelings to images, so images are not always perceived as either neutral or devoid of evocative power" (p. 143). Although collective impression or image of a destination held at the population level is generally hard to change (Gartner & Hunt, 1987; Li & Vogelsson, 2006), images held by individuals could be dynamic (Gallarza et al., 2002) and may be altered by one's experience. With this, tourists' image plays a critical role in how they engage and evaluate the product and relate the experience to others. It is therefore critical that tourism planners understand how the destination is being perceived by tourists and how that image is being shaped at different points during the travel experience.

Earlier image studies mainly focused on the cognitive aspect of the construct (Li et al., 2009). Cognitive image can be described as the logical perspective one develops regarding a product based on a variety of evaluative criteria (Schlosser & Shavitt, 1999). In a tourism context, cognitive image typically relates to the perception of whether the destination has sufficient resources needed to ensure tourists' comfort and safety (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Stabler, 1995). This view focused on the "pull" aspect of travel. In particular, items such as weather at the destination, being 'all inclusive', or being a 'safe' destination are critical items. There are, however, potential constraint components such as price, tour availability,

ease of access, and time availability. In the case of this study, how crowded the city is, whether proper infrastructure is available (e.g. access to enough bathrooms during the visit), and whether or not tourists think they have received a good value for the money spent, all play critical roles in gaining a positive perception of the destination and are considered as the components of cognitive image.

Affective image refers to the emotional perspective one has related to image (Beerli & Martin, 2004). Most researchers conceptualize affective image as the subjective and affective responses to one's cognitive knowledge of a destination, with the cognitive and affective images interacting and forming the gestalt of overall image (Li et al., 2009; Pike & Ryan, 2004). Compared to the plethora of studies measuring cognitive image, there is less research that delves into the emotional state, and there are even fewer studies examining both cognitive and affective images (Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010). Methodologically, affective image does not easily lend itself to structured, quantitative analysis (Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007), and researchers hence opt to employ unstructured, qualitative approach to elicit and analyze free, individualistic responses on affective image (with notable exceptions such as Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Pan & Li, 2011; Stepchenkova & Li, 2012). Despite the difficulty of modeling emotion and its resultant non-rational state of decision-making in this study, it is expected that travel experience-related emotion will contribute greatly to tourists' overall destination image.

In terms of operationalizing destination image, there has been recurring criticism within the tourism literature on the use of attribute lists in determining image (Dann, 1996), particularly cognitive image. Nevertheless, no consensus has been reached on the method to replace the multi-attribute measurement. There has been, however, a move towards using a mixed methods approach to image research (Li et al., 2009; Pan & Li, 2011). Indeed, Tasci and Gartner (2007) and Tasci et al. (2007) noted that most studies measuring affective image, or both cognitive and affective images, used a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, which was originally advocated by Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993). The use of mixed-methods has been shown to provide both the depth and breadth needed to understand the complex undercurrents related to destination image.

2.1. Conceptualizing image formation

There seems to be at least two streams of studies on destination image formation. One line of research focuses primarily on agents and factors affecting destination image formation (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997). Tasci et al.'s (2007, pp. 209–210) review identified that "respondent characteristics such as region of residence/origin of tourists, distance from the destination, religious orientation, age, gender, income, class standing, household status, familiarity through previous visitation, and other variables such as ad exposure, media, and travel context" have all been "tested as possible determinants of destination image." Some of other traits include image holders' marital status, education, and geographic distance, etc. (Tasci & Gartner, 2007).

Another line of studies directly investigated the development process of image per se. For instance, Gunn (1972, p. 120) conceptualized the image formation process as intertwined with tourists' travel experience, involving seven steps—"accumulation, modification, decision, travel to destination, participation, return travel, and new accumulation." For the first two phases, which are accumulation of mental images about vacation experiences (Stage 1) and modification of the accumulated mental images by further information (Stage 2), Gunn (1988) coined the terms "organic" and "induced" images. The former refers to image developed from noncommercial sources of information, whereas the latter is

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