



The influence of political conflicts on country image and intention to visit: A study of Israel's image



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The affective image has a greater weight in forming the overall country image.
- Political incidents damage the country image even if the prior image is negative.
- Political incidents have a greater effect on the country's affective image.
- The affective country image influences visitation intentions.
- The perceived level of development of the country affects visitation intentions.

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the image of Israel, a country subject to continuous conflicts, and the effect of a political event on its image. A measurement model is examined before and after a specific international incident, the Mavi Marmara conflict between Turkey and Israel, in order to understand how this event influences the image that the Turks have of Israel, as well as their intention to visit the place. The results confirm that, when people have previous animosity towards a nation, the image of this country is formed mainly through its affective component and not through its cognitive one. The research concludes that a political conflict between two countries significantly damages the country image through the affective component and boosts the previously held animosity. The incident also increases the negative influence of the affective image on the overall country image and on the intention to visit the place.

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1. Introduction

In today's interconnected world tourism is increasingly affected by forces and events in its external environment, so that even small-scale crises may have a considerable impact on a destination, whether the incident is in its immediate vicinity or not (Ritchie, 2004). In particular, much research has focused on the effect of terrorist attacks or political conflicts on tourism, although there are not many studies that consider the relationship between tourism and political crises from a broader perspective (Hall, 2010). As such, the damage done by a specific event to the image of a country or that of its people goes beyond the economic considerations of

number of tourist arrivals, and may have much more far reaching effects, influencing intercultural dialogue (Al-Harmaneh & Steiner, 2004). Although negative events caused by political reasons have been shown to have a direct and negative impact on the tourism activity of the area and the country concerned (Clements & Georgiou, 1998; Gartner & Shen, 1992; Hall, 2002, 2010; Rittichainowat & Chakraborty, 2009; Thapa, 2004), this damaging effect may be short-lived as the tourism demand recovers quickly once the crisis is overcome (Coshall, 2003). In contrast, for some tourism destinations that are continuously subjected to political incidents and conflicts, the crisis situation may be of a much more permanent nature.

International incidents, terrorist attacks or natural disasters also play a role in shaping a place's image since they change the existing knowledge that a person might have about the area. Individuals may gradually become more knowledgeable about a place through their exposure to information (Stepchenkova & Morrisson, 2008), either through planned communication activities, or through

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contact with movies, news or word of mouth. Information that is not controlled by the marketer is referred to as “autonomous” in Gartner and Shen’s (1992) study, and it is thought to have a high level of credibility and therefore a high impact on the destination’s image. In particular, specific conflicts and negative events, such as terrorism or acts of war, may be magnified through the media, thereby giving meaning and interpretation to the incident (Hall, 2002). Especially, events triggered by human violence are usually treated with a lower tolerance and amplified through the international media, in contrast to those resulting from natural disasters (Sönmez, 1998). However, while random incidents or conflicts may affect travel to the destination until the memory of the event fades, a conflict or terrorist attack within the framework of a continuous political crisis may have a more permanent and serious influence on the tourism industry of the destination (Sönmez, Apostolopoulos, & Tarlow, 1999). While the literature has analyzed the impact of specific events on the destination, there is a lack of research concerning the influence of an event in the context of an ongoing crisis situation. In order to find practical solutions to the problems faced by these destinations further investigations into the topic are needed (Sönmez, 1998).

In line with these ideas, this research attempts to answer several questions regarding places in continuous crisis. First, how is the image of a country that is exposed to continuous conflicts formed? Second, is the image that the tourist receives through uncontrolled, autonomous sources stable? What is the impact of a specific negative event on an already unfavourable image? This study aims to answer these questions by analyzing the image formation in the case of Israel, as a country with continuous crises and image problems.

Israel is chosen to be the focus of the research since it is subject to ongoing incidents and particularly bad press. Israel has a problematic public image that affects both its tourism industry and its standing in terms of international relations (Avraham, 2009). This negative perception of the country is expected to be particularly strong among the Turks who are predominantly Muslim and whose Prime Minister Erdoğan has gradually increased his criticism towards Israeli policies. This critical view of Israel has also been echoed in the Turkish media and, therefore, by public opinion. Thus, within this context of a general animosity of the Turks towards Israel, the study aims to understand the effect of a specific incident on the image of the country and on intention to visit.

The conflict chosen as the stimulus of the research is the Mavi Marmara incident of May 2010, which is still affecting the relationship between Israel and Turkey. The study is carried out by collecting data before and after the event from Turkish students in a public university. This represents a sample of individuals that are expected to already show a certain animosity towards Israel as a country, so that the research analyzes whether the exposure to the political event generates a short term and direct impact, or whether the existence of continuous conflicts generates a psychological barrier that leaves opinions unchanged. The study also tries to determine which dimensions of country image, cognitive versus affective, are mostly affected by the exposure of the individual to the additional negative information of the incident.

2. Literature review

2.1. Country image

Country image is an important concept that has been studied from several perspectives that include tourism, international marketing or international relations. A country may be evaluated as a tourism destination, taking into consideration the tourism related aspects of the place (Baloglu & Mangalolu, 2001; Mercille, 2005; Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2008), or it may be considered in relation

to the “country of origin effect”; that is the influence that its image may have on the perceptions of the products that are produced in the place (Laroche, Papadopoulos, Heslop, & Mourali, 2005; Lee & Ganesh, 1999; Maher & Carter, 2011; Martin & Eroglu, 1993). From the point of view of international relations, the image of a country may also have important political and strategic considerations, even affecting European Union or NATO membership (Van Ham, 2001). Therefore, when delineating the concept of country image, it becomes necessary to draw from several disciplines and establish parallels between different aspects of this image.

One widely used definition is that of Kotler, Haider, and Reiner (1993, p. 141, as cited in Kotler & Gertner, 2002, p. 251) who state that the image of a place refers to “the sum of beliefs and impressions people hold about places. Images represent a simplification of large number of associations and pieces of information connected with a place. They are a product of the mind trying to process and pick out essential information from huge amounts of data about a place”. Thus, image is seen as a multidimensional concept that incorporates an individual’s assessment of different aspects of a place (Baloglu, 1997; Gallarza, Gil Saura, & Calderón García, 2002). Recent literature has also stressed the complex nature of the image construct that includes both cognitive and affective evaluations (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Maher & Carter, 2011; Moutinho, 1987). The cognitive dimension of image refers to the beliefs and opinions that an individual may have regarding a place, whereas the affective one includes emotions and feelings (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Maher & Carter, 2011). A conative component of image, which refers to the behaviour of the individual following the evaluation of the place, is also advocated in several studies (Choi, Lehton, & Morrison, 2007; Dann, 1996; Gartner, 1993; Parameswaran & Pisharodi, 1994). Thus, the current consensus in the literature defines image as a two-component construct leading to behavioural intentions. In addition, several studies have also determined that the affective and cognitive dimensions of image form the overall image, which summarizes a negative or positive assessment of the place by the individual (Lin, Morais, Kerstetter, & Hou, 2007; San Martín & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2008). That is, the overall image of a place is a second level construct formed by a cognitive and an affective component (Campo & Alvarez, 2010).

Several studies (e.g., Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011) have determined a greater influence of the cognitive component on the overall image, for those places that are more developed and well known. In contrast, Baloglu and McCleary (1999) explain that for areas with a more negative prior image and for those that have not been previously visited, the affective image may have a greater weight. This conclusion may be explained by the significance that feelings and affect have on attitude formation and change (Edwards, 1990). Following this line of research, Lepp, Gibson, and Lane (2011) analyze Uganda’s image as perceived by potential tourists, and conclude that the negative image is mainly associated to affective components that relate to poverty, war and disease, rather than to cognitive attributes. Kim and Yoon (2003) also demonstrate the greater weight of the affective image on the overall image construct in the case of a developing country. This conclusion is also confirmed by Campo and Alvarez (2010) in their research on Turkey’s image, commonly described as negative, biased and distorted (Sönmez & Sirakaya, 2002; Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007). Following this argument, the current study proposes that for Israel the affective image is more important than the cognitive one in the creation of the overall image. This idea stems from the generally accepted view that Israel suffers from a “problematic public image” (Avraham, 2009, p. 230). Therefore, the study’s first hypothesis states that:

H1. The affective image of Israel has a greater weight than the cognitive one in the formation of the overall country image

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