One place, two perspectives: Destination image for tourists and nationals in Abu Dhabi

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A B S T R A C T

Differing from previous studies about destination image, this study proposes a combined model of testing the destination image as perceived by locals living at the destination and by tourists travelling to the destination. This survey-based quantitative research was performed in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, and consists of five parts: top-of-mind image, imaginative and realistic associations, strength of travelling motives, perceived destination image, and place attachment. Independent *t*-tests were performed to understand the differences between Emirati nationals and tourists. Results show significant differences in imaginative association and in the majority of place attachment items. The top-of-mind test puts the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque first for Emiratis, while tourists top-of-mind for Abu Dhabi is sea, sand, and beach. Practical and theoretical implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Destination image has been extensively studied and researchers have found that image has an influence on tourists' choice and intent to visit a destination (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Prayag & Ryan, 2012). A number of studies focus on destination image, tourist experience and the intent to revisit (Chew & Jahari, 2014; De Nisco, Mainolfi, Marino, & Napolitano, 2015), through the survey of tourists at the destination. There are also studies that survey the perception of tourism and destination through the eyes of residents of a destination (Ramkissoon & Nunkoo, 2011; Stylidis, Biran, Sit, & Szivas, 2014). Single studies that include and compare perceptions of destination image from both groups (residents and tourists) are limited.

Studies that considered both groups propose an integrated destination image model (Henkel, Henkel, Agrusa, Agrusa, & Tanner, 2006; Stylidis, Shani, & Belhassen, 2017). They also mentioned that "very few studies have compared the images of tourist destinations formed by the local residents to those held by tourists" (Stylidis et al., 2017 p. 186). The present study examines the gap between how nationals and tourists perceived the image of the same destination. It is the first study to examine the perception of authentic experience within those images. The proposed model tests top-of-mind image, graphic-imaginative and photo-realistic associations, strength of travelling motives, perceived destination image and place attachment in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE). The model was tested on residents of, and tourists to, Abu Dhabi for several reasons. First, destination image research is limited in the Middle East (Martens & Reiser, 2017; Stylidis et al.,

2017), particularly in the Gulf Region. There is research in the UAE, especially focusing on the Dubai image (Souiden, Ladhari, & Chiadmi, 2017), but the other six emirates have been neglected. Considering the fact that Dubai has become an international metropolis, and that Emirati culture has been more protected in other parts of the UAE, we believe the perception of an authentic emirati image is stronger in the more conservative Abu Dhabi. Second, Abu Dhabi, although it is the capital of the United Arab Emirates, operates in the shadow of its immediate neighbor, Dubai, especially in terms of tourism, promotion and branding (Slak Valek, 2017). Third, Abu Dhabi has economically depended on oil production from before the establishment of the UAE in 1971, the emirate is working to overcome oil dependency and diversify the economy with tourism as an important tool (The Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030). This study has been developed to demonstrate the differences and similarities in resident and visitor destination images, to better understand tourism in Abu Dhabi, and to gather data which can help establish the emirate as a popular tourism destination.

The present study examines the differences that exist in the perceptions of Abu Dhabi as a tourism destination between UAE, Emirati, locals who live at the destination, and tourists who visit the destination. Measuring the same attributes among nationals and among tourists will allow a comparison of points of view and reveal any gaps that exist between perceptions of destination image in the two groups. Our primary hypothesis is that local Emiratis perceive Abu Dhabi as a destination differently than the tourists who have made the choice to visit (Bonn, Joseph, & Dai, 2005; Henkel et al., 2006; do Valle, Mendes, & Guerreiro, 2012). Creating and developing a tourism destination,

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requires an understanding of the destination image in both groups. Tourists are clients at the destination, while local residents, are part of the destination brand itself (Konečnik & Go, 2008). As espoused by Ryan and Aicken (2010), it is important that the differences in perceptions between different stakeholder groups are as small as possible in order to create a positive and effective destination image. Theoretically and ideally, if all stakeholders perceive the destination image in the same way, the destination image and its attributes will be consistently communicated to target potential visitors and be experienced by the travelers who choose to come, creating a virtuous circle in tourism promotion for the destination. It is virtually impossible to create the same image among all stakeholders considering their different interests, beliefs and backgrounds. Yet, the goal of destinations is to create a perception that is shared by the various stakeholders.

2. Literature review

A destination image is the sum of beliefs and impressions that people have about a place (Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Ryan & Ninov, 2011). It is a simplification of the range of mental associations that a person has with a place. It is imperative for a destination to shape these associations and their simplifications to distinguish themselves from other destinations. Destination Image is considered by many to be a key factor in choosing a destination to visit (Hunter, 2008). It is through an image that a destination maintains market position and competitiveness (Tasci & Kozak, 2006). The increase in the competitive nature of tourism has made strong destination image a must to attract visitors (Pan, 2011). Building a relatively new tourism destination in any competitive tourism market, the perceptions of the destination image must be studied and improved on the basis of what is found. Iordanova (2015) found that destination image is shaped over time and gathered from a variety of sources including experiences within the destination. Knowing multiple perceptions of a destination image enable more effective image planning and development.

While most studies of destination image have focused on visitors or potential visitors there is also a growing literature that considers destination images held by residents (Stylidis et al., 2017; Stylidis, Sit, & Biran, 2016). Stylidis et al. (2017) argue that it is imperative to consider the destination images held by all stakeholders before planning and promotion, and that includes the destination images held by residents. Their idea finds support in stakeholder theory (Mitroff, 1983), which proposes that the purpose of a business is to create value for all stakeholders. Businesses clearly need to consider customers, suppliers, and employees, but they must also consider the views of communities and shareholders. A tourism destination, as a 'business', involves tourists as paying customers. A destination also involves residents, who are a key part of the destination image because they embody the culture of the place and are an integral part of the cultural experiences that are possible. There is no culture without people and there is no cultural experience for tourists without local people. Ryan and Aicken (2010) argued that if both residents and visitors share the same value systems, then visitors will behave in ways acceptable to residents, who in turn will look favorably upon tourism. Thus, it is our belief that ideally a successful tourism destination needs to be seen similarly (if not the same) by both, tourists and residents. There is strong evidence that the destination image held by residents is based on the same cognitive and affective components that are the foundation for the destination image held by visitors (Gallarza, Saura, & García, H. C., 2002). With residents, however, there is a strong theoretical emphasis on the cognitive components of the destination images they hold (Henkel et al., 2006; Schroeder, 1996; Stylidis et al., 2016). When residents do not see a place in the same way as visitors they may find the visitors a nuisance rather than a benefit. When Ryan and Aicken (2010) looked at tourists and residents in Waiheke Island, New Zealand, they found significant agreement in the cumulative destination image of each group, which can also be considered when explaining why '100% pure New Zealand'

is one of the most successful tourism destination brands ever (Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2002; Yeoman & Mcmahon-Beattie, 2014). On the other side, there was disagreement on the destination image in Thailand between visitors and residents. Researchers feared that this undermines the tourism industry in the country (Henkel et al., 2006). Hofstede's (1983) theory of national cultures may also be at work here, which explains how tension can be created when tourists and residents do not share cultural attributes and this can be made manifest in their cumulative images of a destination.

Considering both theories, it can be hypothesized that a destination creates greater value, and is more successful, when visitors and residents share cultural values. It is a challenge for a tourism destination where different cultures meet, to create an environment where all stakeholders understand the place in the same way. This understanding exists at the very core of each groups' collective understanding of the world. This research will demonstrate whether stakeholder agreement is possible in a tourist destination where nationals have an established culture that is very different from the culture of the people who come to visit.

The synchronization of tourist and resident images is important because a great deal of tourism involves the interaction of visitors and residents within a destination. Residents also engage with attractions in their home as well as the various amenities that establish its identity as an interesting and inviting destination (Ji & Wall, 2011; Xu, Hui, & Chan, 2015). "It is one of the greatest challenges of destination management organizations to understand that they serve not only to tourists and stakeholders directly related to tourism, but also to the local community" (Agapito, da Costa-Mendes, & do Valle, P. O.., 2010, p.91). Still there is a lack of resident image studies (Ku & Mak, 2017). Most studies continue to emphasize the destination image held by visitors (Chew & Jahari, 2014; De Nisco et al., 2015; Ji & Wall, 2011; Xu et al., 2015). The destination image of residents can have a significant impact on the image and experience of visitors (Chan & Marafa, 2016). Residents interact with visitors and their attitude and perceptions can influence those visitors (Ji & Wall, 2011). Residents are a part of the destination and the image (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; McDowall & Young-Soo, 2010). Thus, we believe that residents need to be considered when studying destination image and they need to be involved when implementing new strategies in a destination. Analysis of resident perception and support of tourism has been a key focus in the study of residents and tourism (Schroeder, 1996). Stylidis et al. (2017) found that residents in Eilat, Israel posed a threat to its sustainability as a tourism destination because of their indifference toward the city. Recently, Stylidis et al. (2014) found in Kavala, Greece that residents perceived a positive impact on the city from tourism, economically, socially and culturally. They also found that respondents with a more positive image about the place had a more positive perception of the impact of tourism.

Destination image, rather than perceptions of impact, have been important in more recent non-comparative resident-based research. Xu et al. (2015) found that the importance of resident destination image is undeniable and enables DMOs to engage local people, investing them in the creation and maintenance of destination image, and improving their attitudes toward, and behaviors with, visitors. Agapito et al. (2010) and Plumed, Berrozpe, and Saso (2016) came to the same conclusion. Do Valle et al. (2012) found that residents put importance on tradition and did not like the idea of feeling like strangers in their own home. Stylidis, Belhassen, and Shani (2015) found that DMOs need "to acknowledge the fact that the same destination may mean different things to different stakeholders" (p. 712), emphasizing the importance of understanding the destination image held by residents as well as visitors.

Comparing the divergent views of visitors and residents, Gil and Ritchie (2009) proposed a model for the formation of destination image and tested it with residents as well as visitors to a museum in the Canary Islands of Spain. Less than half of the respondents were visitors to the island and less than a quarter came from outside of Spain. The