



## Full Length Research Article

### THE TOURIST IMAGERY, EXPERIENCES AND THE DESTINATION'S IMAGE: A PERSPECTIVE

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#### ABSTRACT

The influence of the image regarding the satisfaction and loyalty of tourists seems to have a broad consensus among the current literature, so and given the current situation of the tourist's behavior volatility, it is of utmost importance one to know and to understand both the concepts of tourist imagery and tourism experiences related to any given destination. Often, destinations compete with each other through a little bit more than the image that they can create in the minds of potential travelers – the imagery. The objective of this paper was to give some enlightenment about the subjects here described.

## INTRODUCTION

### Initial Considerations

According to Martins (2015) Tourism may be regarded as a fantasy selling industry striving upon people's dreams, hopes, beliefs, expectations and imaginaries, which are in turn transformed into consumable commodities, or experiences. Such is this that tourism organizations try appealing to the human capability of creative imagining, promoting exotic destinations and unique experiences through exciting narratives and symbols that people want to appropriate and make it their own life stories. Tourism imaginaries, as an idealized and cohesive vision of the world and the self, thus bring tourists and destinations, the object of desire closer, beyond the spatial constraints. As Gastal (2003) said, we do not travel to know the places but to confirm the imagery we had of them. The tourism experiences and its evaluation, is today considered a key factor in what regards to a tourist destination success. The experiences have as outcome a positive or negative influence in the construct satisfaction. However, the construct satisfaction is always very difficult to evaluate in quantitative terms even that it can be considered the best indicator of the tourism's health state, being linked to «loyalty» and likewise to the «competitive advantage». The image of a given destination is very important to the destination managers and marketers because destinations

with recognizable images and positive perceptions have more probability of being chosen. Further, when analyzing destinations images (consciously or unconsciously), potential travelers are making mental and physical comparisons between destinations. The research on tourist imagery, experiences and destination image is today more important than ever, because as Gyriş *et al.* (2015) have pointed out, research fails to simultaneously study and examine the relationship between emotional responses, destination image, satisfaction and behavioral intentions.

### The individual Tourist imagery and its construction

As Martins (2015) said: Planning and going in vacations involves immediately the ability to imagine. According with Lacan (*cit. in* Vincent B. Leitch *et al.*, 2001) the imagery works in tension with the symbolic and the real, it has to do with the perception of the coherence and with the whole's fragmentation. This is described very clearly in the description of the mirror's stage of development, in which an infant finds a picture of himself in a mirror and interprets that image as being a whole, an Ideal - *I*. This is the first time that the children recognize itself as a whole. Before this stage the infant only had experience a fragment reality. As Salemi and Salemi (2011) say, that portrait becomes the subject of self-admiration, where the libido does not strive for some external object, but uses the ego as its object. In tourism, one can also find a kind of narcissistic (self-love) relationship, since the tourist seeks an utopian idealization of himself and of the

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destination, away from the constraints of their usual environment and of the rules of their origin's society, seeking for something more and better in life to include in its *I*. From this perspective, traveling offers an opportunity for strengthening their ego or self-recognition and simultaneously to meet the human desire for social interaction, love and esteem, leading to the creation of a fantasy world (Dann, 1977). Lee and Gretzel (2012) tell us that, when travellers imagine they experience the destination in their minds. On the other hand, MacCannel (2002) stresses the importance of «models» (based on cultural images, past experiences, literature and others) as an idealized representation of a concept or of an aspect of life, which leads to embody an ideal that tourists seek to reflect or live up during their experiences. Then, the same author adds that tourist attractions commercially successful are those that are modelled according to the structure of the ego, those who stage a narcissistic relationship between ego and attraction. For Rachid Amirou (2007), above all the journey begins by being imagined. Tourism expresses a more personal dimension of rupture compared to the usual way of life; he suggests the idea of a passage from a mental or social state to another one, more valued, and lived as "other" ... like other strong moments of life (marriage, promotions, etc.). This author speaks to us therefore of rites of passage, rituals that give to the individual a different status. But, Amirou (2007) goes further by stating that, as more adventurous is the journey, greater is the imagination labour before departure: more than the discovery, the journey is the pursuit of a dream, the promise to literally change the world, returning garnished and different; it is the promise of a new birth.

### Tourism Experiences

Many considerations exist in what regards to the definition and the dimensions that constitute the tourism experiences concept, however, as Tung and Ritchie (2011) say, there isn't still an agreement in the building of a comprehensive definition. Serena Volo as two interesting definitions of tourism experiences, the first one related to the experience offering and it tell us that: it is the experience essence that happens in the mind of tourists and does not relate to any particular product or service, rarely happens on command and it is very subjective... (Volo, 2009); the second one related to the experience essence and it tells us that: it is an occurrence experienced by a person outside the 'usual environment' and the 'contracted time' boundaries that is comprised of a 'sequence' of the following events: sensation, perception, interpretation and learning (Volo, 2010). Chon (1989) found that the tourist satisfaction was based on the goodness of the fit between their expectation about the destination and the perceived evaluative outcome of the experience at the destination area, which is simply the result of a comparison between their previous images of the destination and what they actually see, feel and achieve there. For their turn, Barsky & Labagh (1992) introduced the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm (EDP). Basically the proposed model was that customer satisfaction was the function of disconfirmation, which was measured by nine «expectations met» factors that were weighted by the attribute – specific importance. The result of their study pointed out that customer's satisfaction was correlated with the willingness to return.

As Beerli and Martin (2004a) pointed out, not only the experience but also the intensity of the experience must be taken in account; so one can say that it matters not only what tourist have lived and felt but how they lived and felt it. Without understanding this, it will be difficult to understand the perceived image generated by the experience. Brakus et al. (2009), conceptualized tourism experiences as being composed of affective, sensorial, intellectual and behavioural dimensions, once, in addition to feelings and impressions, physical actions are also undertaken by tourists. But one must never forget that in the end, tourism experiences and satisfaction have also some or even a great degree of dependence of the imagery previous built on the tourists' mind.

### Destination Image

Kotler e Gartner (2002) define the destination image as the sum of beliefs and impressions people hold about place. Images represent a simplification of a larger number of associations and pieces of information connected to 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. In the image formation process, images differ depending on proximity or distance from the destination. This means that potential travelers, who are closer in distance from a destination, tend to have a more approximate image of the destination. Thus, the greater the distance, the more unrealistic and inaccurate the image becomes (Stepchenkova *et al.*, 2010). Destination image has the power to influence the decision making process of the tourist. If the tourist constructs a favorable destination image on their mind then it is probable that they will visit the desired tourist place (Beerli and Martin, 2004b; Bonn *et al.*, 2005). Destination images influence tourists' travel decision making and their behavior towards a destination, as well as, it influences the satisfaction levels and recollection of the experience. Therefore, perceived images are the basis of the evaluation or selection process and thus provide the link between motivations and destination selection (O'Leary, and Deegan, 2003). Della Corte and Micera (2007) highlight the importance of the image in the actual demand of a destination, not only in the mind of the potential tourists; defining destination image as the whole of beliefs, ideas and impressions a destination can generate in potential and actual tourists' minds. Images can be explained as representing a simplification of a large number of associations and pieces of information connected with a place. They are the product of the mind trying to process and essentialize huge amounts of data about a place» (Pike *et al.*, 2004). It has been suggested that images held by potential travelers are so important in the destination selection process that they can affect the very viability of the destination (Pike *et al.*, 2004). According to Hall and O'Sullivan (1996), there are three essential factors that help to build a destination; First of all, the word-of-mouth. If the tourist spread positive word of mouth, then it will be easy to build a strong image of a destination. Secondly, image making of media and lastly policies and interest taken by the destinations' governments.

### Final Considerations

This paper had as objective to analyse and review the role played by the imagery and the tourist experiences in the

construction, maintenance and possible modification of a destination's image. One as demonstrated here that the quantitative research conducted is and will always be very reductive when one addresses to the constructs and concepts here referred. As told by Gyrish *et al.* (2015) the research on tourist imagery, experiences and destination image is today more important than ever, because as many pointed out, research fails to simultaneously study and examine the relationship between emotional responses, destination image, satisfaction and behavioral intentions. It is very important because as Chon (1989) found out, the tourist satisfaction is based on the goodness of the fit between their expectation about the destination and the perceived evaluative outcome of the experience at the destination area, which is simply the result of a comparison between their previous images (imagery) of the destination and what they actually see, feel and achieve there. So, to understand the outcome of the construct satisfaction one must quite well comprehend and study the imagery and the tourist experiences. Kotler e Gartner (2002) define the destination image as the sum of beliefs and impressions people hold about place. Images represent a simplification of a larger number of associations and pieces of information connected to 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. So, understanding the tourist's imagery, experiences and ultimately their behavior, stakeholder's will be able to define better their marketing strategies and more importantly, will be able as Echtner and Ritchie (2003) say to manage their destinations more easily. One concludes then, that these issues here addressed should continue to be subject of more research given the lack of studies, as well as, the existence of some conceptual blurring.

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