TDI and rural destinations' attractiveness: evidence from Greece

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at exploring issues related to rural tourism destination image focusing on TDI cognitive components. By means of empirical research addressing tourists visiting three different areas in Central Greece, the cognitive components of the area's TDI were identified along with their effect on destination attractiveness. Furthermore, the influence of tourists' characteristics on their cognitive TDI was explored. The results indicate that: (1) the area's TDI can be delineated in seven cognitive factors; (2) the area's attractiveness is significantly influenced by four of these factors. Such findings point towards the need of both a new strategy for the area's placement within the tourist market and further research.

Keywords: tourism destination image, cognitive component, attractiveness, mountain rural tourism

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the intense competition among tourism destinations makes the identification of the destination image (TDI) held by actual and potential tourists' extremely important (Ahmed, 1991; Buhalis, 2000). This is so since TDI has been found to exercise a decisive influence on tourists' behaviour (Cooper *et al.*, 1993; Beerli and Martin, 2004b). In the first place, there is a general consensus that TDI plays a significant role in the process of decision-making/choice (Gartner, 1989; Chen and Hsu, 2000); in this respect, it is maintained that destinations with stronger positive images have a higher probability of being considered and chosen (Hunt, 1975; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Beerli and Martin, 2004b). Moreover, TDI affects tourists' evaluation of the vacation experience and their future intentions (Cooper et al., 1993; Bigne et al., 2001). It has thus, for example, been argued that the image of a destination affects both repeat visitation and the intention to recommend it (Bigne et al., 2001; Cai et al., 2003; Beerli & Martin 2004b; Lucio et al., 2006; Castro et al., 2007).

Thus, considerable research has been carried out on the subject during the last three decades (Xiao and Smith, 2006; Ballantyne et al., 2009). However, the definition of TDI is problematic and a variety of different interpretations has been advanced since its emergence through Hunt's work (1975) (Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; Pike, 2002; Gallarza et al., 2002; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Beerli and Martin 2004a; Grosspietsch, 2006; Martin and Bosque, 2008; Alcaniz et al., 2009). Hunt (1975), for example, states that image is the impression that people hold about a state in which they do not reside. According to Baloglu and McCleary (1999a) image is defined as an individual's mental representation of knowledge, feelings, and global impressions about a destination. A commonly cited, loose definition of a destination's image refers to "the sum of beliefs, ideas, or impressions that a person has of a destination" (Crompton, 1979). Finally, Gartner (1989)

described destination image as a function of brand and the tourists' and sellers' perceptions of the attributes of activities or attractions available within a destination area. Such diversity, according to Gallarza et al. (2002) owes to the features of the image construct: "this nature is complex … multiple … relativistic … and dynamic".

Despite such difficulties, nowadays there is consensus on the importance of image for a destination's viability and success, forming the axis of the marketing strategy (Chon, 1991; Gallarza et al., 2002; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Grosspietsch, 2006; Alcaniz et al., 2009). Calantone et al. (1989) have pointed out that it is important to understand the perceptions of tourists, as this helps to target appropriate markets for tourism promotion. It may also assist in improving or correcting the image of the destination; the development of an appropriate image may further enhance tourism development in the destination. Therefore, according to Tasci and Gartner (2007) proper TDI development is important to the overall success of a destination.

Today, there is agreement that TDI is a multidimensional overall impression. Additionally, an increasing number of researchers support the view that TDI is formed by two distinctly different but interrelated components: a cognitive/perceptual/designative component and an affective/evaluative one. The first concerns beliefs and knowledge about the perceived attributes of the destination while the second concerns the individual's feelings towards the destination. Furthermore, the combination of these two components produces a third, compound or overall component of the image, i.e. tourist's overall image of the destination. It should also be mentioned that TDI dimensions are hierarchically interrelated: the perceptual/cognitive and affective evaluations have a direct influence on the overall image, and also the former, through the latter, have an indirect influence on that image (Hunt, 1975; Lawson and Band-Bovy, 1977; Holbrook, 1978; Phelps, 1986; Calantone et al., 1989; Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; Gartner, 1993; Walmsley and Jenkins, 1993; Dann, 1996; Baloglu and Brinberg, 1997; Baloglu and McClearly, 1999a; Beerli and Martin, 2004b; Pike and Ryan, 2004; Baloglu and Love, 2005).

Nevertheless, as in the case of TDI definitions, literature reveals a lack of homogeneity with respect to the attributes relevant to measuring TDI. One of the most influential studies on image scale development was published by Echtner and Ritchie (2003) who suggested a conceptual framework for the operationalisation of all specified components of destination image, and showed that: a) place image should be envisioned as having two main components: attribute-based and holistic; b) each of the components contains functional (or more tangible) and psychological (or more abstract) characteristics; and c) images of destinations can include "common" functional and psychological traits (components) or more distinctive or even unique features and feelings. Kim (1998) presented a comprehensive review of destination attractiveness studies while Beerli and Martin (2004a), based on a review of the attractions and attributes, classified all factors influencing the image assessments into nine dimensions: natural resources; general infrastructure; tourist infrastructure; tourist leisure and recreation; culture, history and art; political and economic factors; natural environment; social environment; and, atmosphere of the place.

More specifically, from a cognitive point of view, TDIs are assessed on a set of attributes that correspond to the resources or attractions that a destination has at its disposal (Stabler, 1995). Alhemoud and Armstrong's (1996) classification of tourist attractions includes: natural attractions; historic attractions; cultural attractions; and artificial attractions. Gallarza et al. (2002) have presented a selection of empirical TDI research that measure attributed-based image. Beerli and Martin (2004b) developed and empirically validated a model which explains the different factors forming the post-visit image of a destination and delineate TDI in terms of natural/cultural resources, infrastructures, atmosphere, social setting/environment, and tourist leisure/recreation. Such attractions provide the motivations and the magnetism necessary to persuade an individual on visiting a specific place (Alhemoud and Armstrong, 1996).

The aim of the present paper is to shed more light on the study of rural tourism which, according to Fronchot (2005: 345) has been "heavily studied from the supply outlook but remains to be further analysed from the consumer's perspective". Our objective is twofold. First, explore the cognitive components of rural TDI. Second, identify the effect of cognitive TDI on destination attractiveness. The paper is based on research carried out in three mountain tourism destinations in Central Greece.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected through personal, questionnaire-based, interviews with visitors in the period November 2010 to April 2011. The random sample of tourists was drawn among those who visited three popular mountain tourist destinations in Central Greece (Lake Plastira, Pertouli area and Mt Pelion) and stayed in any of the lodgings of these three areas for at least one night. The total number of questionnaires was 746 (265 from Pertouli, 250 from Lake Plastira and 231 form Pelion).

Given that evaluative attributes are rather abstract and far less applicable (Chen 2001), the survey focused on the cognitive and affective components of TDI. In this respect, a multi-attribute approach was taken; TDI was assessed through a battery of attributes corresponding to the attractions of the locale. Consequently, the first three sections of the questionnaire, aiming at measuring the cognitive component of TDI, comprised a 35 item scale with a different position in the functional –psychological continuum, addressing both area (24 items) and accommodation attributes (11 items), comprised four attributes. The scale for the cognitive component was developed based on both a review of other measurement scales (Kim, 1998; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999a; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Beerli and Martin, 2004b) and the specific attractions of each destination (AN.KA., 1999; KENAKAP, 1999; EAP, 1999). Tourists were asked to indicate their level of agreement on each item on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7).

In this study, destination attractiveness was measured also using a seven-point Likert scale. The item was selected since it is regarded "as a cognitive evaluation of destination attributes which are performed on site" (Um et al., 2006: 1146).

The importance of attractiveness has been pinpointed by Hu and Ritchie (1993: 25) as reflecting "the feelings, beliefs, and opinions that an individual has about a destination's perceived ability to provide satisfaction in relation to his or her special vacation needs". It follows that determining the relative importance of each attribute in influencing tourists' evaluation of attractiveness is critical since it "identifies respondents' salient image attributes and it is these which are most likely to serve as behaviour determinants (Crompton, 1979)" (op. Cit: 26).

The third section of the questionnaire comprised questions on tourists' socioeconomic characteristics (e.g. age, gender, annual family income, marital status, education, etc.). Many models have shown that such characteristics influence tourists' perceptions of places (Beerli and Martin, 2004; Martin and Bosque, 2008). Furthermore, according to Crompton (1979) and Obenour et al. (2005) TDI is not only an individual perception but can also correspond to the perception held by a segment of tourists. Finally, this section also contained questions concerning the characteristics of travel such as the number and duration of both previous and the current visit, companion, means of transport, etc.

In this piece of work data from section one (re: cognitive TDI) and partially from section three (re: socioeconomic data) were utilized. Besides frequencies, in order to explore the structure of cognitive TDIs an explanatory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted. Following, destination attractiveness was regressed on the extracted cognitive image factors. Data analysis was performed with SPSS/PC 19.

DATA ANALYSIS

Tourists' socio-demographic characteristics are shown on Table 1. Most of the respondents were females (55.4%); between 25-44 years old (69.8%); married; with higher education (75.1%); and diversified income levels (28.3% did not respond). The majority of the respondents were repeated tourists (55.2%) and had positive or very or extremely positive image for the area (94.1%).

Additionally, all respondents were Greeks, mainly residents of the two major Greek urban centres, Athens and Thessaloniki (68%). Most stayed at most for two nights (50.4%), mainly with friends (48.5%) or else with family (24.1%) or their partners (44.5%). The main reasons for visiting the lake area were: i) the fame of the area (65.1%), ii) recommendation by friends (58.7%) and iii) previous visit (50.9%).
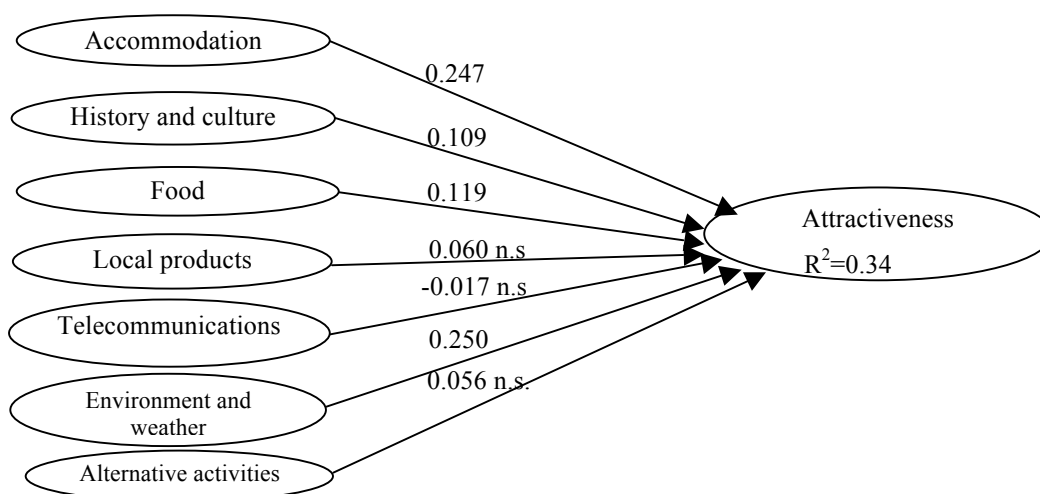
Table 1. Summary of Tourists' Characteristics (N = 746).

Characteristic	Frequency	%	Characteristic	Frequency	%
Gender			*Education*		
Male	333	44.6	Primary (6 yrs)	4	0.5
Female	413	55.4	Gymnasium (9 yrs)	13	1.7
			High School (12 yrs)	169	22.7
Family income (in Euros)			Higher (> 12 yrs)	560	75.1
<10,000	47	6.3			
10-15,000	96	12.9	*Marital status*		
15-20,000	74	9.9	Single	348	46.6
20-25,000	75	10.1	Married	376	50.4
25-30,000	75	10.1	Divorced	20	2.7
>30,000	168	22.5	*Widower*	2	0.3
No response	211	28.2			
			No. of visits		
Destination image			1 (first-time)	334	44.8
Extremely negative	2	0.3	2	157	21.0
Very negative	1	0.1	> 2	255	34.2
Negative	8	1.1			
Moderate	33	4.4	*Age*		
Positive	186	24.9	18-24	82	11.0
Very positive	285	38.2	25-34	339	45.4
Extremely positive	231	31.0	35-44	182	24.4
			45-54	94	12.6
			55-64	45	6.0
			>65	4	0.5

Following, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted on 35 cognitive items used in the study (measured on a Likert 7-point scale; 1= 'not important' to 7= 'extremely' important). The extraction method used was Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation. A seven-factor solution was produced explaining 69.1% of the total variance. KMO score was 0.888 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity 6940.02 (df=231; p<0.000). Factors retained in the solution are those with eigenvalues above 1 (Hair et al., 1995; Malhotra, 1996; Field, 2005).

The seven factors were labelled as: "Accommodation" (Factor 1; 32.96% of the variance), "History and culture" (Factor 2; 8.84%), "Food" (Factor 3; 6.06%), "Local products" (Factor 4; 5.85%), "Telecommunications" (Factor 5; 5.57%), "Environment and weather" (Factor 6; 5.04%) and "Alternative activities" (Factor 7; 4.79%).

The results from the regression (see Figure 1) revealed that the factors "Accommodation", "History and culture", "Food" and "Environment and weather" had a significant positive effect on tourists' perception of the area's attractiveness. On the other hand, "Local products", "Telecommunications" and "Alternative activities" did not have any significant effect.

Figure 1: Final model of area's attractiveness

Accommodation — 0.247
History and culture — 0.109
Food — 0.119
Local products — 0.060 n.s
 — -0.017 n.s
Telecommunications — 0.250
Environment and weather — 0.056 n.s.
Alternative activities

Attractiveness
$R^2=0.34$

DISCUSSION

The current presentation aims at exploring the main characteristics of TDIs concerning mountainous, rural destination in Central Greece (Lake Plastiras, Pertouli area and Mt Pelion). Tourists' characteristics match, in general lines, with those of tourists in similar rural destinations in Greece and abroad. In addition, the cognitive components of TDIs were delineated, thus arriving at seven factors: "Accommodation", "History and culture", "Food", "Local products", "Telecommunications", "Environment and weather" and "Alternative activities". It was also found out that the factors "Accommodation", "History and culture", "Food" and "Environment and weather" contribute positively to the areas' attractiveness. This, in turn, implies that the areas under consideration attract tourists as places characterised by the wide range of qualitative accommodation alternatives, their distinctive history and culture, culinary heritage as well as their beautiful, unharmed natural environment.

On the other hand, attention should be drawn to the fact that especially two among the three other factors, namely "Local products" and "Alternative activities", do not appear to relate to the areas' attractiveness. This is so since, first, in all the target-areas at least some activities such as ski centers, horse riding, etc. are offered to tourists. Nevertheless, given the heterogeneity of the target-areas vis-à-vis the activities offered such a result may be reasonable. As far as "Local products" are concerned it may be argued that despite the fact that there are such products in the target-areas their quality is not secured and their marketing is underdeveloped. Finally, as far as the factor "Telecommunications" is concerned it may be argued that tourists are not especially interested for such facilities due to their short-stay in the areas as well as due to their main aim is to relax in a pleasant environment. Nevertheless, if younger tourists are to be targeted this may become an issue of concern. Such findings are considered important for decision-makers and can lead to a more efficient development of the TDIs conveyed to tourists by the local agencies as well as of the strategy concerning the areas' placement within the tourist market. However, it has to be stressed that the marketing of such destinations, due to their environmental and socioeconomic peculiarities and thus restrictions, should not have as its exclusive target the increase of tourists' inflows to the areas.

Our first findings also point towards the need for further research concerning the investigation of TDIs tourists hold before visitation in the area, the complex processes of their formation and the sources contributing to it (Gartner, 1993; Gallarza et al., 2002; Pike, 2002; Govers et al., 2007), as well as the evaluation of tourists' satisfaction and loyalty (see: Kaplanidou and Vogt, 2007); in addition, tourism promotion by local agencies etc. is in constant interaction with other sources of information (Gartner, 1993; Govers et al., 2007), such as previous visitors (who either revisit or disseminate information) as seen in the current study as well.

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