

A MODEL DEVELOPMENT OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TOURISM EXPERIENCES AND DESTINATION IMAGE

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ABSTRACT

The latest economic downturn raises new predicaments for DMO's and stakeholders to meet their target's needs, but it also takes to the forefront of the tourism industry the importance to assess how the tourism experiences impact on the tourists' perceived destination image, to prevent money being loss in the wrong promotion strategies. This paper purpose is twofold: A) to review the destination image and tourism experiences constructs; B) to develop a theoretical model between the experiences and the destination image.

Key Words: Tourism experiences, destination image, positioning, satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

At a time differentiation is difficulty to find between competitors (Hudson and Ritchie, 2009), millions of dollars are spent to convince consumers of tourism products inconsistent with the total complex of attitudes, expectations, and beliefs associated with them (Reynolds, 1965). Thus, decision-makers must position their destinations effectively (Calantone et al., 1989) since the increasing competition between destinations affect the way in which they're imaged, perceived and consumed (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). They must also be aware tourists no longer buy or choose brands on the basis of rationality (Holbrook, O'Shaughnessy and Bell, 1990), but instead for their meaning (Levy, 1959). The literature review revealed that the concept of TDI e has been for the last 30 years of high practical importance for Destination Marketing Organizations (Septchenkova and Mills, 2010), to researchers and local stakeholders (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999a), and also, that psychologists have investigating since 1950s the human desire for tourism experiences (Hosany and Witham, 2009). Nevertheless, in spite of these initial sparks both constructs and their relationship revealed to be fragmented and incomplete (White, 2004; Gentile et al., 2007). Thus this paper examines how the tourist experiences relate, modify and can enhance the destination image. The review conducted is summarized and marketing implications for DMOs management and researchers are presented.

1. Tourism Destination Image (TDI) construct

It was Gunn (1972), Mayo (1973) and Hunt (1975), who originally introduced, examined the importance and role of TDI in tourism development. As a result, destination image have had an important role since the 1970's in the various models of travel decision making developed to date (Woodside and Lysonski 1989), and has since become one of the most researched topics in tourism-related research (Septchenkova and Mills, 2010). Destinations compete principally through their image, since image is a decisive factor in the tourists' purchase decisions (Buhalis, 2000) and a critical factor in the destination choice process (Mayo, 1973; Hunt, 1975; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999a; O'Leary and Deegan, 2003; Beerli and Martín, 2004). The influence of the TDI in this process of decision-making has been considered by other authors' models (Schmoll, 1977) because destination holidays are considered as high involvement purchase, and a great amount of time and money is invested by the potential tourist into identifying suitable places to visit (Goodrich, 1978; Laws, 1995).

1.1 The process of destination image formation

The process of image formation results of a complex process, in which tourists' develop a mental construct based upon a few selected impressions among a "flood" of total impressions (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). This flood is coming increasingly from the media and according to several authors (Phelps, 1986; Beerli and Martin, 2004), from different channels, such as "television, movies, books, newspapers, magazines, posters, brochures" (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003:38). Gunn (1988) however, recognized a distinction in the flood of information according to its non-commercial (organic image) or commercial nature (induced image). This is consistent with the notion that information sources and the attributes of the different destinations form the basis for different images and experience expectations (Molina, Gomez and Martin-Consuegra, 2010). Gartner (1993:197) believed in the same way that, "the image-forming process can be regarded as a continuum of different agents or information sources which act independently to form one single image in the mind of the individual". In this context, even if a tourist have never been exposed to any form of commercial information (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003) he can still have an image of a destination because there's a link between a country's touristic image and its national image (Kotler, 1987).

1.2 Concept and dimensions of TDI

The definition of the TDI construct hasn't been achieved and some are quite vague or not even explicitly stated (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Beerli and Martín, 2004; Pike and Ryan, 2004; Septchenkova and Mills, 2010). Nevertheless, the TDI concept has been generally considered an overall mental picture (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003) consisting of an individual's mental representation of knowledge (beliefs), feelings, and total impression about an object or destination (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999b). For several authors the TDI is formed by rational and emotional interpretations (Gartner, 1993; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999b; Septchenkova and Mills, 2010). In the same way, Echtner and Ritchie (2003) conceptualized the destination image consisting of two components, attribute-based (containing functional characteristics) and holistic ("more abstract" psychological characteristics). On the other hand, White (2004) explains that images are formed by three different but interrelated components: cognitive (refers to all knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs that potential travelers hold about a destination and interprets image as a set of relevant attributes), affective (refers to tourists' feelings about a destination, which can be favorable, unfavorable, or neutral) and conative (which relates to the actions of a tourist). For Gartner (1993) these three components are hierarchically formed. Another approach considers the cognitive evaluation of objects and the affective responses to be formed as a function of the cognitive process (Hunt, 1975; Phelps, 1986; Calantone et al., 1989) creating an overall image of a place, as an outcome of both evaluations (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999b). But as noted by Rodrigues and Brito (2009) this outcome also means that a positive or negative image of a destination is created.

1.3. Factors affecting the TDI

In this context, various authors state the main influence to the image-forming process and the choice of destination (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999b; Beerli and Martín, 2004; Ahmed et al., 2006) is the perceived destination image which is mediated by socio-demographic, personal and psychological consumer characteristics, such as travel motivations, aspects of learning, age, gender, social class and cultural background. As posit by Gallarza et al., (2002) the residents' influence is another factor to affect the formation process of the TDI. Furthermore, the image can be modified by the holiday experience, and loyalty to the destination will only be strengthened if tourists' image of the destination continues to be positive (Bigné, Sánchez and Sánchez, 2001). The decision of a tourist on his or her choice of destination will also be based on a "benefit package, which comes from the tourist's experience and expectations that result from image formation" (Ahmed et al., 2006:63).

2. Tourism Experiences (TE)

To this end, the challenge today for DMO's is to influence tourists' attitudes and correctly conceptualize an experience (Tung and Ritchie, 2011), because tourist are daily engaged in emotional events and behaviors (Angrilli et al., 1997). Moreover, since the tourism experiences are produced and consumed simultaneously, it implicates that the tourist and all of those participating actively in an event, create meanings during the consumption of the experiences (Carù and Cova, 2003). In other words, the experiences that consumers encounter occur inside the tourist, and the outcome or experiential consumption depends on how the tourist, based on a specific situation or state of mind, reacts to the staged encounter (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Pine and Gilmore, 1999). The personal nature of TE forces managers to be aware that tourists recall experiences subjectively and uniquely even though destination managers may have delivered similar services (Tung and Ritchie, 2011).

These experiences according to some authors derives from a set of complex interactions between the tourists and the service supplier but as Smith (1978) reminds, tourists seek to experience change, but to same extend, experiences at the destinations are being commodified due to unauthentic experiences in which, the tourists' state of mind (Andersson, 2007), multiplicity of available experiences, different consumption sets (Cohen, 1979) and desires (Uriely, 2005) aren't taken into consideration. Tourism represents "an alternative experience of time, that is, time off or holiday time, which appears as an alternative rhythm, free from constraints of the daily tempo" (Wang, 2000: 216), transforming the tourists into seekers of sensational authentic experiences (MacCannell, 1976).

2.1 Concept and dimensions of TE (Tourism Experiences)

For Carù and Cova (2003), Tung and Ritchie (2011) the term experience is still ill-defined, and as Gentile et al. (2007: 397) adds there is a lack of conceptual models that offer "a common terminology and a shared mindset". Nevertheless, Tung and Ritchie (2011:3) defined tourism experiences as "an individual's subjective evaluation and undergoing of events (i.e., affective, cognitive, and behavioural) related to his/her tourist activities which begins before (i.e., planning and preparation), during (i.e., at the destination), and after the trip (i.e., recollection)." In the recent years, a consensus has emerged as to the different dimensions or factors that contribute to form the holistic view that characterizes consumer experience as a multidimensional 'holistic' evaluation (Gentile et al., 2007) even if in some cases, a person is only aware of them at the subconscious level (Hosany and Witham, 2009).

Pine and Gilmore (1998) posited that the sensory impressions that tourists feel during experiences could be differentiated in terms of the level of customer involvement (*passive vs. active participation*) and participation (*absorption vs. immersion*). They considered the existence of four realms or dimensions comprehending: a) entertainment experiences – which refers to the tourist passive involvement; b) education experiences - in which companies can offer an educational experience to their customers (Hosany and Witham, 2009); C) escapist experiences – in which a tourist is submerged and absorbed in the event (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990); D) esthetic experiences - tourists' interpretation of the surrounding physical environment (Hosany and Witham, 2009). For Schmitt (1999) on the other hand, customer experience can be defined in terms of five dimensions: sensory experiences (sense); affective experiences (feel); creative cognitive experiences (think); physical experiences, behaviours and lifestyles (act); and social-identity experiences (relate). Gentile et al., (2007) also added a further component - pragmatic, defined as the practical act of doing something. Other authors, focused more on the roles of authenticity (Wang, 1999), while others on the serendipitous moments (Cary, 2004).

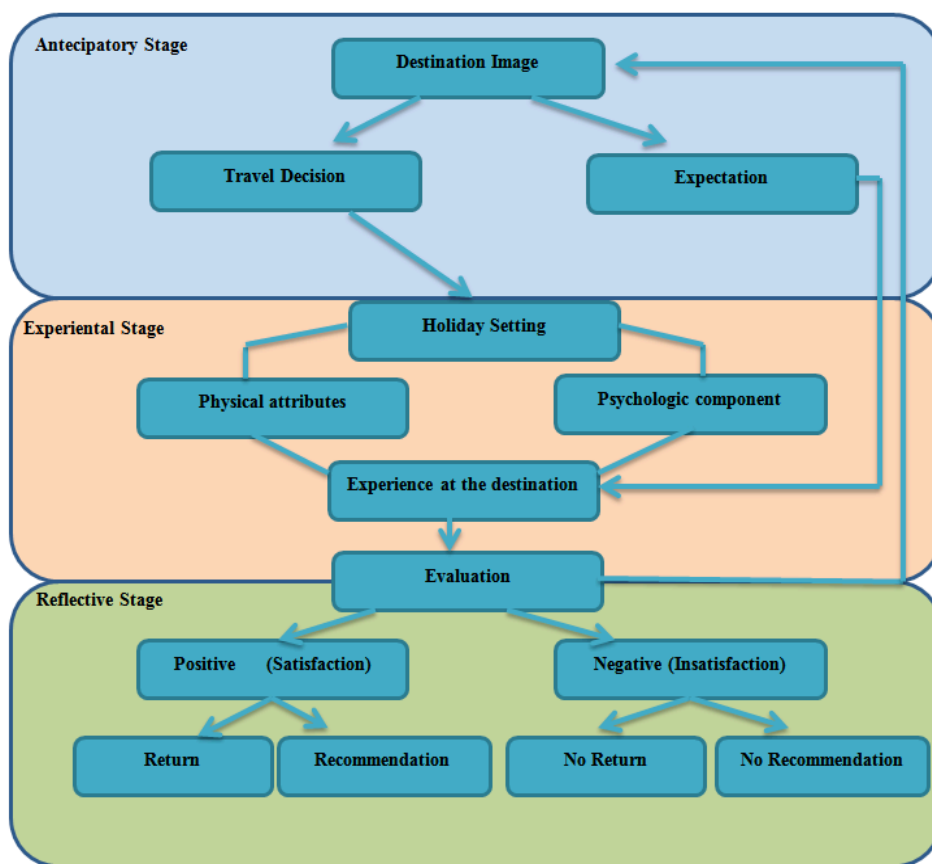
3. Model of relationship between Tourism Experiences and Tourism Destination Image

Based on the above discussion, and the literature research which states that images at different time points, such as pre- and post-visitation images, differ (Pearce, 1982; Phelps, 1986), and that any gap between imagery and experience may impact on the traveller's sense of authenticity (Amoamo, 2003) and its intention to return (Assaker et al., 2011), a framework (Figure 1) is proposed to represent the relationship between the TE and the TDI in the hospitality and tourism industry. It is suggested that tourists go through different stages: 1st stage comprehends the anticipatory stage, before the visit to the holiday destination. In this stage it is posit that the destination image influences the tourists' expectations about the holiday destination and also influences the choice of the holiday destination, and also, the destinations with the strongest image have the higher probability of being chosen. As Reynolds (1965:75) points out "tourists' differ in their capacity to create and elaborate an image and in the prior information at their disposal". These images influence spending, duration of stay, activity patterns (Ahmed et al., 2006), and destination choice process (Beerli and Martín, 2004) which is based on expectations of holiday pleasures, but experiences may or may not measure up to expectations (Ashworth and Goodall, 1990).

On the 2nd stage which is an experiential stage, the tourist lives the experiences at the selected setting which is composed of physical attributes but also of a psychological component. It is these two components "as one" holistic offering, that define the experience at the destination, e.g. the tourists' attachment, involvement or immersion with the destination. As Stern and Krakover (1993) state it's the combination of the cognitive and affective components that an overall image of the destination is made. Beerli and Martín (2004), also reaffirm that the actual experience at the destination has an important effect on de TDI and that tourists' who have had previously visited a destination held different images from the non-visitor of the destination. This relativistic and dynamic aspect of TDI, that images change from person to person, along the time and also according to the destination geographical proximity is reminded by Gallarza et al. (2002).

Finally the 3rd stage is a reflective stage, in which the tourists evaluate the experience and reflect and talk to friends, family and relatives about their experiences, and depending on the evaluation the previous destination image may change, but also, depending on the positive or negative evaluation the tourists' decision may be either to recommend or return (if positive), or not to recommend and not to return (if negative). Upon returning home tourists tend to evaluate their experiences in terms of how interesting, exciting, stimulating or enjoyable experiences are (Gunn, 1988; Hosany and Witham, 2009), therefore a "performance indicator of a destination's tourism success as consumption of the product and service that has already taken place" (Bornhorst et al., 2010: 584). In addition, Oh et al., (2007) posit that arousal, defined as the intensity of the physiological response to a stimulus, is a key indicator of sensory-based experience, especially during the consumption of experiences. Thus, the creation of an arousing experience with enduring memories is central to generate high levels of satisfaction and positive behavioral intentions (Hosany and Witham, 2009), because the tourism product is not canned or shrink-wrapped, but rather, a collection of the tourists' experiences gained during the visit (Gunn, 1988), which are highly correlated to an evaluative congruity of a tourist's pre-visit destination images and his or her post-visit recollection of experiences (Chon, 1991) and as consequence, tourists change their images and perceptions of a destination (Pearce, 1982).

Figure 1
A Conceptual Model of Relationships Between Tourism Experiences and Tourism Destination Image



In sum, TDI plays an important role in the behavior of tourists during the different moments which involves their experience: in the decision process of choosing a destination (*a priori* image); in the process of verifying the expectations held with the experiences met, which precedes the state of satisfaction and perceived quality (image in loco); in the process of revisiting and recommending the destination to friends and family (*a posteriori* image) (Hunt, 1975; Galí and Donaire, 2005; Tasci and Gartner, 2007; Bosque and Martin, 2008; Bosque et al., 2009). In turn the same can be said about the evaluation of the destination experience, which influences the tourists' image of the destination (Fakeye and Crompton, 1991) and determines the consumer's satisfaction (Assaker, Vinzi and O'Connor, 2011).

Conclusions and implications

This paper aimed to discuss the theoretical underpinnings of TE and TDI and proposed a conceptual framework to better understand the relationship between these two constructs in a hospitality

and tourism context. Given the existing quantity and quality of research production in the hospitality field, there is still much to learn about these constructs but for managers, understanding the distinction and relationship between both constructs is of vital importance in order to fully understand their customers' views regarding a service or product (White, 2004). Since the destination choice is inextricably linked to what it provides, it is critical for destinations to be aware of how they are experienced, and define the best practices to manage and develop its facilities (Laws, 1995). The findings will bring new insights into understanding the meaning and importance tourists assign to their experiences (Uriely, 2005). Destination marketers need to understand what to include in brochures, before placing their promotional strategies in tourist markets (Jalil, 2010). Therefore, the primary goal should be to project desirable images of a destination to potential tourists in order to facilitate their visits (Ahmed et al., 2006), and even a confused image, can be turned into an asset, if handled skillfully by a marketer, since dissonance offers a real opportunity for creativity to be exercised (Reynolds, 1965), to boost positive aspects and correct negative ones (Alegre and Garau, 2010), and the "more favorable the perception, the greater the likelihood of choice from among similar alternatives" (Goodrich, 1978:8). As Pine and Gilmore (1999) point out selling experiences is the solution, because experiences can 'touch' people better than products or services and offer great value to tourists, since they are memorable, thus creating and supplying experiences will be a way for producers to survive in the ever more competitive future.

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