



# DESTINATION IMAGE

## Towards a Conceptual Framework

**Martina G. Gallarza**

Facultad de Estudios de la Empresa, Spain

**Irene Gil Saura**

**Haydée Calderón García**

Universitat de Valencia, Spain

**Abstract:** This paper presents a review and discussion of the concept and measurement of destination image, within an intradisciplinary marketing perspective. Both theoretical and methodological aspects of this concept and measurement are treated. Based on the existence of three dimensions of object, subject and attributes, previous studies are analyzed. A taxonomy of the methodological and statistical procedures for measuring the image of the destinations is also proposed in order to help researchers to capture and measure the image construct. The paper proposes a conceptual model featuring its complex, multiple, relativistic and dynamic nature as a more comprehensive framework of destination image. **Keywords:** destination image, perceptions measurement, statistical research procedures, conceptual model. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

**Résumé:** Image de destination: vers un cadre conceptuel. Cet article présente une révision critique et une discussion du concept et du mesurage de l'image de destination à partir d'une perspective intradisciplinaire de marketing. On discute des aspects théoriques et méthodologiques de ce concept et du mesurage. En se basant sur l'existence des trois dimensions de l'objet, du sujet et des attributs, on analyse des études précédentes. On propose aussi une taxonomie des procédures méthodologiques et statistiques du mesurage de l'image des destinations pour aider les chercheurs à capter et à mesurer la construction de l'image. L'article propose un modèle conceptuel qui représente sa nature complexe, multiple, relativiste et dynamique comme un cadre plus compréhensif de l'image de destination. **Mots-clés:** image de destination, mesurage des perceptions, procédures de la recherche statistique, modèle conceptuel. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of the tourist destination's image is universally acknowledged, since it affects the individual's subjective perception and consequent behavior and destination choice (Chon 1990, 1992; Echtner and Ritchie 1991; Stabler 1988; Telisman-Kosuta 1989). This importance has led to a growing body of research on the tourism desti-

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**Martina Gallarza** teaches Marketing at Facultad de Estudios de la Empresa (Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Valencia, Spain. Email <mggallarza@fee.edu>). Her research interests are customer satisfaction in services. **Irene Gil Saura** is Principal Lecturer at the Business Administration Department at Universidad de Valencia. Her research interests are retailing and service quality. **Haydée Calderón García** is Principal Lecturer at the Business Administration Department at Universidad de Valencia. Her research interests are small business internationalization and brand management.

nation image (TDI). The essential characteristic of this research line is its multidisciplinary (Ahmed 1991, 1996; Bramwell and Rawding 1996; Gartner 1989): there are many possible approaches to studying destination image, because this formation has many implications for human behavior, as seen through disciplines such as anthropology (Selwyn 1996), sociology (Meethan 1996), geography (Gould and White 1992; Draper and Minca 1997), semiotics (Sternberg 1997) and marketing (Gunn 1972), with respect to the understanding of tourism consumer behavior.

In the intradisciplinary study of marketing, TDI has been the subject of considerable research during the last three decades. Investigation has been commonly based on either effective destination positioning (Carmichael 1992; Crompton, Fakeye and Lue 1992; Echtner and Ritchie 1991; Eizaguirre and Laka 1996; Reilly 1990) or on the destination selection process (Goodrich 1978; Gunn 1972; Hunt 1975; Oppermann 1996a).

Despite its relevance for tourism marketing, the research on TDI faces many difficulties. One is the tourism product's characteristics such as its complexity (Smith 1994) and multidimensionality (Gartner 1989). Another is that destination marketing involves the consumer physically moving to the behavior scenario (Seaton 1994; Sessa 1989). There is also great subjectivity in providing a tourism service: images are mixed with impressions about residents, retailers, other tourists, and/or employees (Calderón, Gil and Gallarza 1998). But most of all, the intangibility of tourism service hinders image assessment as it depends on invisible elements of pre-visit selection and a pre-taste of the destination (Fakeye and Crompton 1991). Consequently, in tourism research, "...images are more important than tangible resources", all because "perceptions, rather than reality are what motivate consumers to act or not act" (Guthrie and Gale 1991:555).

In spite of the importance of this research line, several authors recognize a lack of conceptual framework around destination image. In the early 90s, one could read "although such studies have become a staple of the tourism research agenda, invariably they have been atheoretical and lacking in any conceptual framework" (Fakeye and Crompton 1991:10) or "researchers have not been successful in completely conceptualizing and operationalizing destination image" (Echtner and Ritchie 1991:10). Later on, in 1993, Gartner suggests that "most tourism image research has been piecemeal without a theoretical basis for support" (Gartner 1993:209).

In order to provide a more comprehensive theoretical framework of TDI, a conceptual model from an intradisciplinary marketing perspective was developed based on previous literature. The model is designed for a better understanding of the strategic importance of destination image. It is based on two sources: a review and discussion of existing theoretical literature about conceptualizing the TDI, and an analysis and taxonomy of methodologies employed for its measurement. The purpose of the model is to contribute to a better understanding of the image concept when applied to tourist destinations

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