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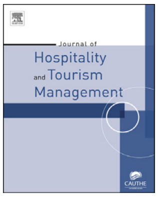

Destination personality and destination image

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A B S T R A C T

This study examines the impacts of destination personality and image on individuals' attitudes and visiting intentions. Based on a sample of 173 Canadians, the study investigates the impact of the perceived personality and image of the city of Dubai on respondents' attitudes and visiting intentions. The results show that destination image is an antecedent to destination personality, which in turn has a direct impact on attitude toward a destination and an indirect effect on behavioural intentions. The results have important theoretical implications for academics and offer intriguing managerial suggestions for destination marketers and public policy-makers.

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1. Introduction

The concept of destination marketing and branding has, over several past decades, become a central factor in the strategy of many localities seeking a competitive advantage in a particular domain (e.g., production, tourism, art, sports). Many governments and stakeholders have invested huge amounts of money in an attempt to improve the image of specific places, reposition them, and thus boost their economies. For example and according to Clark (2006), four million dollars were invested to rebrand Toronto (a major Canadian city). The main purpose of the Toronto Branding Project was to create a unique Toronto city brand and develop a fresh new way of communicating the city's strengths and dynamic identity to the rest of the world. The rebranding led to a 26% increase in the number of overseas tourists to Toronto. The same study reported that a total of 3.3 million pounds (about 6 million US dollars) were invested between 2004 and 2007 on Glasgow's image makeover to position it as a cosmopolitan, modern, and dynamic location for investment and tourism. This rebranding strategy was expected to generate 42 million pounds (about 76 million US dollars) for Glasgow's economy and create up to 1000 full-time jobs.

Similarly and according to Bagaeen (2007), over the last 15 years, Dubai (the most famous city of the United Arab Emirates) has been spending hundreds of billions of dollars to shape its image. As of today, the city has radically changed its infrastructure and moved from a barely known to a well-known place of attraction. According to the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report by the World Economic Forum (2015), the UAE ranks 24th in the world, number one in the Arab world and 26th in terms of tourism service infrastructure. Additionally, FutureBrand (2012), in its list of Future Forward Country Brands, recognizes the United Arab Emirates as the forerunner among tomorrow's leading fifteen country brands. It is also expected that the hosting of Expo 2020 in Dubai will boost the city brand value by an estimated $8 billion (Brand Finance-Nation Brands, 2014).

In addition to the increasing competition among countries/cities across the world, there is a growing rivalry among cities of the same country (e.g., Dubai/Abu Dhabi, New York/Los Angeles, Rome/Venice, etc.) in terms of attracting new investments, more tourists, and international events. A myriad of mega projects are launched in different cities in the world and most, if not all, attempt to boost the city image at the national and international levels. Confirming this view, Smith (2006) emphasizes the contribution of flagship

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projects (e.g., a swimming complex, an athletics stadium) to city image and their role in making the city a more attractive place to visit.

Today, tourist destinations face intense competition (Bigné Alcañiz et al., 2009; Hildebrandt & Isaac, 2015) since tourists often choose among destinations with similar attributes such as beautiful scenery, wide beaches, friendly local communities, and high-quality accommodations (Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). According to Pike (2009), p. 70% of international tourists visit only 10 countries. In other words, the remaining countries compete for 30% of the total of international tourists. To attract tourists, destinations must be unique (Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006; Murphy, Moscardo, & Benckendorff, 2007; Qu et al., 2011; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). Branding therefore becomes a way to differentiate a destination from its competitors. Indeed, many destinations around the world have applied branding strategies to emphasize the characteristics and the uniqueness of their offer (Aarstad et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2007; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). Brand destination provides potential tourists with pre-trip information that lets them differentiate a place from the competition and form expectations. Branding also assists tourists in reinforcing their evaluation of that destination after their trip (Murphy et al., 2007).

Destination branding seeks to develop a favourable global impression about a destination. Prior studies emphasize the role of image and provide empirical evidence that destination image is a valuable concept in understanding tourist preferences, selection processes, intentions to visit, and recommendations (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Kim & Lee, 2015; Kladou & Mavragani, 2015; Nadeau, Heslop, O'Reilly, & Luk, 2008). Since the destination image exerts a decisive influence on tourist behavior, the development of a suitable image is of utmost importance (Bigné Alcañiz et al., 2009; Kladou & Mavragani, 2015).

Some cities, however, find it difficult to create a clear unique selling proposition that promotes their images. For instance and according to Balakrishnan (2008), Dubai strives to position itself as a city of luxury brands, yet it is associated with several images, not all of them genuinely reflect the image of Dubai. This may lead to some confusion in Dubai's brand perception. The author adds that, in contrast to some cities such as New York, there is no single logo or symbol representing Dubai. Also, positioning the city on a single but too vague concept (e.g., a dream city) would not help in creating a longstanding and strong image. Images can be short-lived and their impacts are likely to be effective in the short and medium term (Souiden, Pons, & Mayrand, 2011). Like people and brands, cities need to develop steady personality traits that better describe them. This is in line with Berens' (1999) opinion which states that a personality is a stable set of characteristics and tendencies that have continuity in time. Thus, and based on this definition, destination or city personality seems to be an important asset to city branding.

Recent studies stress the role of destination personality in influencing touristic choice behaviour (Baloglu, Henthorne, & Sahin, 2014; Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Hosany et al., 2006; Murphy et al., 2007; Zeugner-Roth & Žabkar, 2015). These studies claim that a strong positive brand personality leads to a favourable destination evaluation. But despite the many studies on destination image, understanding the relationships between destination image and personality and their effects on attitudes and behavioural intentions still requires more research (Murphy et al., 2007; Qu et al., 2011). In particular, the casual relationships between destination image and destination personality have not been fully investigated (Kim & Lee, 2015). This study contributes to the literature by developing and empirically testing a conceptual model that discusses these relationships. It attempts to first examine the causal relationships between destination personality and destination image and second, to examine their mutual (direct and indirect) impacts on tourists' attitudes and behavioural intentions. The study's conceptual model is compared to other alternative models that emphasize different roles of destination personality and destination image as antecedents and stimulators of tourists' attitudes and behavioural intentions.

2. Literature review and conceptual model

2.1. Destination image

Brand image is defined as the set of all associations linked, in the consumer's memory, to a brand (Aaker, 1991). Aaker (1994) argues that brand image creates value for the brand for at least five reasons: it helps the consumer process information on the product, it differentiates the product and its positioning, it provides reasons for the purchase, it tends to develop a positive feeling towards the brand, and it allows for brand extensions.

When applied to a country, image concept is defined as “the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country” (Martin & Eroglu, 1993, p. 193). Nagashima (1970, p. 68) adds that country image: “is the picture, the reputation, the stereotype that businessmen and consumers have of a specific country. This image is created by such variables as representative products, national characteristics, economic and political background, history, and traditions”.

According to Nadeau et al. (2008), although the literature on ‘product-country image’ and ‘tourism destination image’ has evolved separately (the former is commonly investigated in business and marketing journals while the latter appears in tourism-specific journals), these two concepts overlap. Both examine consumer perceptions of places and how they may affect consumer decisions. Destination image, an important element of the destination brand, is defined as “an attitudinal construct consisting of an individual's mental representation of knowledge (beliefs), feelings, and global impression about an object or destination” (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999, p. 870). Factors that may contribute to influence the image of a destination include media and international events (e.g., cultural and sports events). For instance, Mercille (2005) argues that the media influenced tourists' views of Tibet. Likewise, Kladou and Mavragani (2015) report the role of social media in influencing the image of Istanbul. According to Nadeau et al. (2008) and Smith (2005), a city image can be related to sporting events.

Destination image is thus considered a key factor in understanding tourists' post-purchase behaviour (Bigné, Sánchez, & Sánchez, 2001). Buhalis (2000) says that the image a tourist has of a particular destination before visiting is a determinant factor in his decision-making process. Confirming this view, Ahmed (1991) states that the establishment of a positive destination image determines a place's ability to attract and retain tourists. Thus, the previously held image influences the choice of tourism destinations (Mathieson & Wall, 1982) and destinations with stronger positive images have a higher likelihood of being selected (Johnson & Thomas, 1992) and revisited (Kim & Lee, 2015).

When examining destination image, most studies (e.g., Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993) focus on functional and psychological attributes such as landscape/surroundings, nature, cultural attractions, nightlife and entertainment, shopping facilities, residents' receptiveness, and safety (Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002). Nadeau et al. (2008) report that natural environment beliefs (about scenery, wilderness, and activities) and built environment beliefs (about nightlife, shopping, and sports) have positive significant effects on destination evaluation (memorability, satisfaction, etc.). Bigné Alcaniz et al. (2009) examine the

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