



A comparison of pre-visit beliefs and projected visual images of destinations



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ABSTRACT

Destination image is one of the main decision factors for tourists' destination choice. The aim of this study is to compare the perception of consumers' destination image and the actual projected image of DMOs. Two studies are conducted to reach this aim. The first study was an online survey regarding the destination image of selected US cities from the consumer side. The second one was a qualitative study to investigate the visual representation of the destination image of the same cities from the supply side by analyzing their official destination websites. Although the results show an overall match between the two studies, weather conditions, natural views, and shopping were the mismatched topics. The results of this study suggests how the DMOs official communication might benefit from a monitoring/understanding of their perceived image by prospective travelers in order to match tourists' expectations, and/or better place their images.

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1. Introduction

Tourists are generally attracted to destinations by the combination of attractions, events, and services that they offer. Thus, destination suppliers need to project images in order to reach prospective tourists, constantly maintain and/or increase the desirability of their places, and ultimately form an overall positive image of their own destination. In addition, destination image plays an important role during travel decision making such as for destination choice. Thus, for a destination image in order to be effective it must be valid and not based in fantasy, be realistic and therefore believable, be simple, have appeal and differentiate destination from others by emphasizing the unique characteristics (Joppe, Martin, & Waalen, 2001). According to LaPage and Cormier (1977) prior visitation, a tourist's image of a destination is formed by his mental image and this image is more effective than the actual facts when making destination choice decisions. Moreover destination image affects the travel satisfaction or dissatisfaction of an individual. This depends on whether the expectation about a destination and the destination's image is in congruence with the reality (Pike, 2002).

Baloglu and McCleary (1999) indicated that overall image is more likely influenced by affect than perceptual/cognitive evaluations and affect together. Affect is more likely to serve as a principal variable between perceptual/cognitive evaluations and overall image. That is, if the motivations of the tourist and the destination are similar then

destination image is positive. Sönmez and Sirakaya's (2002) study also confirms the fact that cognitive images are formed prior to affective images that may be formed during the information search process.

Destination image influences travel decisions prior to visit as well as post visit. Prior visit destination image may influence an individual to visit a destination and post visit destination image may influence repeat visitation and satisfaction. According to Beerli and Martin (2004), factors that influence destination image formation are: motivations, experience of vacation travel, and socio-demographic characteristic of tourists.

Destination image is duplicity because there is not one single interpretation of a mental image that is shared by all researchers; however, this is the result of multidimensional human perception (Hunter, 2008). Thus, according to Hunter (2008) the goal of researchers is to have enhanced interpretative analyses, which can capture this multidimensionality and have tangible data by narrowing down the scope of research to improve the research.

In this context, online contents and in particular visual material, such as pictures, represent the most influential type of data in the early stages of decision making for a travel experience as they portray destinations' image attributes (Albers & James, 1988). Scholars investigated the role of official and unofficial sources in affecting decision making and image formation (Albers & James, 1988; MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997; Govers & Go, 2005; Ye & Tussyadiah, 2011; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013; Pourfakhimi, Abdullah, Khalifah, & Ying, 2015; Stepchenkova, Kim, & Kirilenko, 2015) However, findings were limited to a selection of social media contents, and it was suggested to further investigate also online contents projected online by DMOs websites in order to

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identify potential mismatch between users' prior belief and the actual topics communicated online by DMOs. In addition, previous studies usually include one destination as the research subject, which makes generalization of the results not possible. However, in this study, there are 8 destinations from the US, and the results can be beneficial for US cities in general.

Therefore, this research posits a study design that captures answers to open questions on what users know about a destination before a visit and compares the beliefs of individuals with the projected image from the official destination website. Thus, the study objectives are:

1. Identify the most frequently used words and/or phrases describing each city by the survey respondents (those who have not visited the destinations).
2. Analyze visual information on each destination on their official tourist board website and interpret the visual images.
3. Compare the image of destinations from the survey (before the exposure to the stimuli and for the ones who have not been to the destination) with the official tourist websites to see if there are disparities in image representation and provide marketing and managerial implications for each destination.

The plan of this paper is as follows: [Section 2](#) describes the previous studies; [Section 3](#) explains the study methodology and interprets the results; [Section 4](#) lays out the conclusion and managerial implications for tourism industry.

2. Literature review

2.1. Destination image

Image formation process has been defined in various ways in previous studies. According to [Gunn \(1972\)](#) image is formed in two different ways: organic and induced images. Organic images are formed from newspaper reports, books, movies, which are not directly related to tourism. Induced images are formed from marketing promotions and advertisement of destinations. [Gartner \(1993\)](#) proposed eight agents of image formation which are: overt induced I agent (traditional forms of advertising); overt induced II agent (information received from tour operators); covert induced I agent (second-party endorsement of products through traditional forms of advertising); covert induced II agent (second-party endorsement through unbiased reports such as newspaper articles); unsolicited organic agent (unsolicited information received from friends and relatives); solicited organic agent (solicited information received from friends and relatives); and organic agent (actual visitation).

Some other factors that were defined by research that affects destination image formation include: previous visitation or direct experience with a destination ([Hahm, J., et al., 2005](#)), cultural background ([MacKay & Fesenmaier, 2000](#)), the experience level of the tourist ([Baloglu & McCleary, 1999](#)), tour operators, travel agents, guidebooks, word of mouth ([Baloglu, & Mangalolu, 2001](#)), and familiarity ([Baloglu, 2001](#)). In addition to these facts [Vogt and Andereck \(2003\)](#) found that destination perceptions change during the course of a vacation as tourists become more experienced. Although [Fakeye and Crompton \(1991\)](#) concluded that many of the perceptual changes occur during first direct experience rather than multiple experiences or visits. On the other hand, destination image formation for non-visitors was investigated by [Cherifi, Smith, Maitland, and Stevenson \(2014\)](#) in a qualitative study. The results show that individuals imagine a destination through comparison of their own experience such as comparing the destination with their hometown or another destination they believe to be similar to the destination in question.

[Marchiori, Cantoni, and Fesenmaier \(2013\)](#) investigate the importance of different messages that are involved in online conversations as proxies of public opinions and conclude that message sidedness, consistency, overall argument strength of the message, and the attitude of

users (i.e. to be reputation seekers) have a significant influence on the dominant opinion about a destination, which is expressed online.

The hierarchical nature of cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of destination image has been empirically confirmed by [Agapito, do Valle, and Mendes \(2013\)](#), as proposed by [Gartner \(1993\)](#). There is still a lack of research on the conative component of destination image such as declaration of behavioral component. In addition, less research has been conducted regarding verbally reported self-perception on the baseline image and the enhanced image (e.g. after an exposure to online contents). Moreover, there is a gap in tourism literature in the investigation of conative component expressed online publicly.

The three main components of destination image are summarized in [Fig. 1](#). These are: a) cognitive components (i.e. what someone knows or thinks he or she knows about a destination); b) affective components (i.e. how one feels about this knowledge); c) conative components (i.e. how one acts on the information and how he or she feels about it) ([Um & Crompton, 1990](#)).

The conative component is about the intention to visit the destination that includes the probability of first time visits as well as repeat visitors to the destination, which are influenced by cognitive and affective images. In order to distinguish the different stages of image development in tourists' mental representation before and after active online information search [Li, Pan, Zhang, and Smith \(2009\)](#) proposed the terms baseline image and enhanced image. Baseline image refers to the mental representation derived from passive or ongoing information gathering, whereas enhanced image refers to the mental representation as a result of active information search.

Visual images such as photographs are important for creating destination image ([MacKay & Couldwell, 2004](#)) and especially in the early stages of destination evaluation ([MacKay & Fesenmaier, 2000](#)). In addition, visual stimuli are recalled more and influence attitudes towards advertising tourism products ([Laskey, Seaton, & Nicholls, 1994](#)). According to [Hunter \(2008\)](#), photographic representations that are used in tourism destination promotion include the simulated version of the original characteristics of the destination. These photographic representations that have complex and multidimensional effects on tourism then are conveyed via various media for promoting the destination. [MacKay and Fesenmaier \(1997\)](#), show that destination image dimensions that are generated from visuals were attractiveness, uniqueness, and texture were the most important visual dimensions in creating destination image.

Generally a destination's image is managed by the Destination Marketing Organization (DMO), since it prepares the promotional materials, both for offline and online channels, such as brochures, video commercials, and destination websites ([Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013](#)). In this marketing material, a huge role is given to visual solutions, such as pictures. The photographs used by DMO's are the result of selecting how the destination will be portrayed in films and other promotional materials ([Hall, 1982](#)).

So far, the role of visual images on DMO official communication has two main implications: i) from a destination perspective: the use of visual images helps DMOs to promote a desirable destination image for tourists, which can create an interest for potential tourists, reinforce their previous image regarding the destination, and influence their perception of the destination ([Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013](#)). ii) From a

Cognitive components	Affective components	Conative components
Mental responses to the stimuli in the environment	How one feels about this knowledge	Behavioral/attitudinal components

Fig. 1. Image components. ([Gartner, 1993](#); [Crompton, 1979](#); [Um & Crompton, 1990](#))

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