

Chapter 10

Evaluating the Image of Tourist Destinations: A Theoretical and Empirical Approach

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ABSTRACT

As the tourism marketplace is currently highly competitive, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) need to have a thorough understanding of the actual perception of their destinations and even of the desired perception they should have to adequately implement measures to alter or maintain such images. In this context, the present chapter provides an overview of tourist destination image evaluation, from both a theoretical and empirical perspective. It outlines the role of conducting research in order to evaluate destination image as key strategic information which has to be provided to DMOs. The chapter provides a theoretical framework to destination image evaluation as well as a case study on the evaluation of a Romanian city's image as a tourist destination.

INTRODUCTION

In today's consumer society, where touristic images are considered as an object of consumption and the tourist product is among the most virtual ones in services sectors, clients can get knowledge of it only in the consumption's moment (Selwyn, 2001). As current destinations have been more competitive with other destination markets, a clearer understanding of destination image formation has become a fundamental step and procedure to enhance destination attractiveness as well as market competitiveness

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(Yoon & Kim, 2000). A better understanding of destination image is vital in order to develop appropriate marketing strategies based on tourists' perception and behaviour so that more competitive destinations' products are delivered to current and potential tourists (Kim & Yoon, 2003; Walmsley & Young, 1998).

The tourist destination image plays a fundamental role in the marketing process, because it provides important information about how the place is perceived by tourists. The starting point of any image policy must consist in assessing the current perceived image, this because visitors are those who make the destination image and, based on this, they decide to purchase or not those tourism packages (Ispas & Saragea, 2011). Thus, it is not enough to create tourism packages to sell the tourist destination, but it is necessary to know every time the image process and the factors' influence, as well as the information channels used by visitors. The role of image in destination marketing is therefore directly related to its role in tourist behaviour, as destination marketing attempts to influence the latter via image manipulation (Kastenholz, 2002).

Considering these issues, the present chapter aims to define destination image and outline its role in destination marketing, to provide relevant information on destination image formation and measurement and to present a case study from an urban area in Romania, regarding the evaluation of its image as a tourist destination.

BACKGROUND

Many specialists have paid attention to analysing the importance of tourist destination image in the planning and strategic development of a certain tourist region. People tend to associate Paris with style and romance, Japan with technology, Brazil with samba, carnival and football, Switzerland with well-being and accuracy, Germany with punctuality and Africa only with poverty and hunger. These kinds of stereotypes, either negative or positive, are the fundamental basis of our tourist behaviour. Therefore, the tourist advertising and, inherently, the image of a country play an important role in reinforcing the competitive level of a tourist destination to the others.

Defining the Destination Image

According to Jenkins (1999), "at the heart of the definitional dilemma is the understanding of the term image" (p.1). As Pearce (1988) comments, "image is one of those terms that won't go away ... a term with vague and shifting meanings" (as cited in Jenkins, 1999, p.1). Image is a term that has already been used differently in a large number of contexts and disciplines, thus creating different meanings. In psychology, "image" tends to refer to a visual representation, whereas in behavioural geography the concept of "image" is more holistic and it includes all of the associated impressions, knowledge, emotions, values and beliefs.

There is no universal definition, accepted and shared by neither the scientific community nor governments. However, the different meanings given to the image over the course of time can be grouped, according to Ugarte Otero (2007), in three categories as follows:

- *Image as fiction.* Supporters of this idea argue in favour of the image as something created, different from the reality which represents.
- *Image as icon.* From this point of view, the image is seen as a symbolic representation of an object.

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