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DESTINATION IMAGE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Abstract: Tourism is one of the most important sectors in world economy. In order to be competitive and attract tourists and income, destinations need a positive image. It must be the result of joint efforts of authorities, local population, tourism professionals, and scientists. This paper provides a review of scientific publications in the field of destination image for the period 2003–2024, focusing mainly on the research from the last decade.

Keywords: destination image; tourist destination; literature review; tourist brand; destination perception.

Introduction

Tourism plays a significant role in world economy, reaching 7.6% of global GDP and creating 22 million new jobs in 2022[1]. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, the sector has the capacity to contribute directly or indirectly to all of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals defined by the United Nations in its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development[2].

In Bulgaria, tourism is one of the most important economic sectors with its GDP share between 10 and 13% in the decade preceding the COVID-19 health crisis[3]. Reaching the previous levels largely depends on the image of Bulgaria as a tourist destination. The perception of the country as a safe and quality destination is a pivotal condition for the motivation to visit it, both for inbound and domestic tourists. Its destination image is one of the most important factors in deciding to visit and return.

This paper aims to examine significant scientific studies on destination image. For the needs of the current research, a review of the scholarly publications for the period 2003–2024 has been performed, with an emphasis on the research conducted during the last decade.

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Literature Review

Qu et al. (2011) state that destination brand strategy should be built and/or enhanced, bearing in mind the destination image formed by tourists with its three aspects – affective, cognitive, and unique. Their research points out that destination image directly affects the willingness to revisit and recommend to other customers[4]. In 2007, Chen and Tsai described the path between destination image and behavioural intentions as follows: destination image > trip quality > perceived value > satisfaction > behavioural intentions[5].

Del Bosque and Martin (2008) claim that destination image affects loyalty and expectations, which has a positive and significant influence on tourist satisfaction. They also state that positive or negative emotions could be influenced by post-experience cognitions and prior beliefs, and that they are essential in the satisfaction formation process[6].

In 2023, Ahmed argued that cognitive destination image and perceived value had a strong influence on travel satisfaction, while affective destination image did not. According to the study, affective image had the greatest influence on revisit intentions[7]. The positive and significant impact of destination image on these intentions is also studied by Foster and Sidharta (2019)[8], Prayag et al. (2017)[9], Stylos et al. (2016)[10], Hallmann et al. (2015)[11], Chew and Jahari (2014)[12].

Lever et al. (2022) conclude that national identification is directly related to destination image and tourism ethnocentrism. People that perceive their country as a destination with positive image are willing to travel domestically and to recommend it to other potential tourists, both domestic and foreign[13]. Le Hong and Hsu point that highlighting cultural distinctions and uniqueness can have a positive effect on destination image, while the perceived discrimination will definitely achieve the opposite[14].

Zakiah et al. (2023) state that sustainable destination image can be an essential factor in the decision-making process. Tourists are more eager to engage with destinations if they are convinced that their values align with those of the destination. Consumer engagement plays a mediating role between tourists' loyalty and the destination's brand image[15].

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In a study conducted in 2021, Marques et al. tested 12 hypotheses in order to illustrate the connection between cognitive, affective, and unique destination image and tourism satisfaction, post-trip intention to recommend a destination, and post-visit intentions towards products made in the country visited. According to the results obtained, affective image strongly influences tourist satisfaction, with the cognitive one not affecting it significantly, while unique destination image has a slight negative impact. Affective and cognitive image greatly influence the willingness to recommend a destination, while the unique image has a very small effect. All three image factors have a positive impact on post-visit intentions towards products made in the country, but are not directly influenced by tourist satisfaction[16].

After performing four experiments and applying the mere association theory, Lee et al. (2021) concluded that a country's product image can significantly affect its image as a travel destination[17].

According to Echtner and Ritchie (2003), destination image should be studied as a combination of holistic and attribute-based components, each of which has functional and psychological characteristics. The image of tourist destinations can also range from those based on common functional and psychological traits to those based on more distinctive or even unique features, events, feelings, etc. In order to capture all these components, while measuring destination image, a combination of structured and unstructured methodologies should be applied[18].

Pike and Kotsi (2016) argue that the Repertory Test should be used to identify the salient attributes of destination image. Unstructured personal interviews and focus groups (brainstorming) need to be performed in order not to omit the qualitative part of a study. They also state that destination image attribute salience might differ across some travel contexts which should be taken into consideration at the questionnaire design stage[19].

In 2016, Manhas et al. proposed a conceptual model in building destination brand image at three stages of consumption – pre-consumption in which tourists are influenced by marketing promotion and word of mouth; during-consumption which is influenced by personal experience; and post-consumption where satisfaction/dissatisfaction, positive/negative word of mouth and intentions to revisit are formed[20].

Tung et al. (2021) state that the negative host-guest interactions can be compensated by positive tourist perceptions of other destination resources (natural, cultural, etc.), so that the destination image can be kept positive[21]. According to Kostadinova (2023), tourist destination with its narrow specifics positively influences the tourist product of the destination. However, some local obstacles need to be overcome, such as ones in the local public and private sector[22].

For the purposes of studying tourist destination image, Gosheva (2012) suggests to separate the emotional (climate, landscape, culture, similar mentality, etc.) from the rational aspects (accommodation, food, prices, accessibility, proximity to home, etc.) of tourists' perceptions[23]. Aleksandrova (2018) states

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that the creation of preferences for the specifics of the regions, and, accordingly, the development of unique and non-interchangeable products, are of crucial importance for building destination image[24].

Chi and Qu (2008) propose a nine-factor model of destination image that includes travel environment, natural attractions, entertainment and events, historical landmarks, infrastructure, accessibility, relaxation, outdoor activities and prices, detailed by 34 subfactors. They also suggest seven general dimensions of attribute satisfaction – shopping, activities and events, lodging, accessibility, attractions, environment, and dining, supported by 33 subfactors[25].

Alqahtani and Makki (2023) suggest a cause-and-effect grouping of the factors that impact destination image. Starting with the most influential factor, the cause group includes tourism infrastructure, environment, safety and security, information and communication technology, policy rules and regulations, fairs, exhibits and festivals, economic development and affluence, and political stability. Following the same pattern, the effect group of factors includes human resources, quality of services, health and hygiene, prices, hospitality, friendliness and receptiveness, transport infrastructure, natural and cultural resources[26].

In a study published in 2017, Dimitrov et al. outline eight factors for destination image – services, nature, culture, hospitality, prices, accessibility, infrastructure and recreation, together with 28 subfactors[27]. In 2018, Dyankov et al. evaluated country brand identity by using 11 factors and 79 subfactors, conducting a survey among inbound tourists[28].

In a study from 2008, Hristov describes 12 factors that influence tourist destination image – demographic, economic and social profile of the potential user, perceptions, motivation, personal experience, needs, preferences, expectations, other users' opinion, education, media, personality, marketing mix[29]. Temelkova (2018) suggests ten groups of attributes that form destination image – natural resources, recreation, environment, general infrastructure, culture, history and arts, social factors, tourist infrastructure, political and economic factors, entertainment[30].

Rodrigues et al. (2023) investigate the role of digital marketing in the creation of interest and engagement to tourist destinations. If conducted strategically, professionally, and with high quality content, these marketing activities will have a significant impact on destination image[31].

The importance of big data (social media, press, travel platforms, etc.) research for the image of the destination, both positive or negative, is presented in studies conducted by Galiano-Coronil et al.

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(2023)[32], Kasapoğlu et al. (2023)[33], Lyndon (2023)[34], Tham et al. (2023)[35], Irfan et al. (2022)[36], Farhangi and Alipour (2021)[37], Garcia-Haro et al. (2021)[38], Guo et al. (2021)[39], Varadzhakova et al. (2021)[40], and Lam et al. (2020)[41]. All scholars agree that destination marketers should take into serious consideration the digital channels as a chance to enhance destination image or to overcome the negatives. Wang et al. (2023)[42] state that online travel information quality has a four-dimension impact on cognitive resonance (value-added, relevancy, completeness and design) and a three-dimension effect on emotional resonance (interestingness, design and amount of information), among which completeness (cognitive) and design (emotional) have the greatest influence.

Several studies have been carried out on how travel journalists' materials (Freire & Curvelo, 2021)[43], fiction movies and online video games affect destination image and travel intentions: Dela Cruz and Lacap (2023)[44], Sharma et al. (2023)[45], Gupta et al. (2020)[46], Spears et al. (2013)[47], Mestre et al. (2008)[48]. Researchers agree that fiction movies and online games "silently" give information about destinations' cultural, environmental, infrastructural, political, ethnical, economic, etc. characteristics, and that their influence on destination image is significant.

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Conclusions

The results of the literature review show scholars' keen interest in destination image and, in particular, in its study and measurement, the factors that form it, its aspects, its interrelationships with travel intentions, tourist satisfaction, the recommending possibility, etc. Once built, the positive image must be maintained and enhanced, and the negative image must be changed. This should be the result of the joint efforts of authorities, the local population, professionals, and scientists. Modern technologies (digital marketing, social networks, travel platforms, media) are of great help in this regard. Those in charge of building destination image should closely monitor the content in them, as well as what information is presented about the destination through movies, video games, etc. A limitation to this paper was the lack of studies of non-fiction and documentary movies' influence on destination image.

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