

COGNITIVE COMPONENTS OF RURAL TOURISM DESTINATION IMAGES: THE CASE OF LAKE PLASTIRAS, GREECE

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This paper aims at exploring issues related to rural tourism destination image (TDI) focusing on the cognitive component. By means of empirical research addressing tourists visiting the Lake Plastiras area, Central Greece, factors comprising the cognitive component of the area's TDI were identified along with their effect on destination attractiveness. Furthermore, the influence of tourists' characteristics on their cognitive TDI was explored. The results indicate that: (1) the area's TDI can be delineated in six cognitive factors; (2) the area's attractiveness is significantly influenced by three of these factors; (3) visitors can be classified in four clusters according to the cognitive factors; (4) tourists' clusters differ in terms of age, education and income as well as number of visits and perception of the area's attractiveness. Such findings point towards the need of both a new strategy for the area's placement within the tourist market and further research.

Keywords: *tourism destination image, attractiveness, cognitive component, rural tourism*

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the intense competition among tourism destinations makes the identification of the destination image (TDI) held by actual and potential tourists extremely important (Ahmed, 1991; Buhalis, 2000). This is so since TDI has been found to exercise a decisive influence on tourists' behaviour (Cooper et al., 1993; Beerli and Martin, 2004b). In the first place, there is a general consensus that TDI plays a significant role in



the process of decision-making/choice (Gartner, 1989; Chen and Hsu, 2000); in this respect, it is maintained that destinations with stronger positive images have a higher probability of being considered and chosen (Hunt, 1975; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Beerli and Martin, 2004b). Moreover, TDI affects tourists' evaluation of the vacation experience and their future intentions (Cooper et al., 1993; Bigne et al., 2001). It has thus, for example, been argued that the image of a destination affects both repeat visitation and the intention to recommend it (Bigne et al., 2001; Cai et al., 2003; Beerli & Martin 2004b; Lucio et al., 2006; Castro et al., 2007).

Thus, considerable research has been carried out on the subject during the last three decades (Xiao and Smith, 2006; Ballantyne et al., 2009). However, the definition of TDI is problematic and a variety of different interpretations has been advanced since its emergence through Hunt's work (1975) (Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; Pike, 2002; Gallarza et al., 2002; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Beerli and Martin 2004a; Grosspietsch, 2006; Martin and Bosque, 2008; Alcaniz et al., 2009). Hunt (1975), for example, states that image is the impression that people hold about a state in which they do not reside. According to Baloglu and McCleary (1999a) image is defined as an individual's mental representation of knowledge, feelings, and global impressions about a destination. A commonly cited, loose definition of a destination's image refers to "the sum of beliefs, ideas, or impressions that a person has of a destination" (Crompton, 1979). Finally, Gartner (1989) described destination image as a function of brand and the tourists' and sellers' perceptions of the attributes of activities or attractions available within a destination area. Such diversity, according to Gallarza et al. (2002) owes to the features of the image construct: "this nature is complex ... multiple ... relativistic ... and dynamic".

Despite such difficulties, nowadays there is consensus on the importance of image for a destination's viability and success, forming the axis of the marketing strategy (Chon, 1991; Gallarza et al., 2002; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Grosspietsch, 2006; Alcaniz et al., 2009). Calantone et al. (1989) have pointed out that it is important to understand the perceptions of tourists, as this helps to target appropriate markets for tourism promotion. It may also assist in improving or correcting the image of the destination; the development of an appropriate image may further enhance tourism development in the destination. Therefore, according to Tasci and Gartner (2007) proper TDI development is important to the overall success of a destination.

Today, there is agreement that TDI is a multidimensional overall impression. Additionally, an increasing number of researchers support the view that TDI is formed by two distinctly different but interrelated components: a cognitive/perceptual/designative component and an affective/evaluative one. The first concerns beliefs and knowledge about the perceived attributes of the destination while the second concerns the individual's feelings towards the destination. Furthermore, the combination of these two components produces a third, compound or overall component of the image, i.e. tourist's overall image of the destination (Hunt, 1975; Lawson and Band-Bovy, 1977; Holbrook, 1978; Phelps, 1986; Calantone et al., 1989; Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; Gartner, 1993; Walmsley and Jenkins, 1993; Dann, 1996; Baloglu and Brinberg, 1997; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999a; Beerli and Martin, 2004b; Pike and Ryan, 2004; Baloglu and Love, 2005).

From a theoretical point of view, there is a general agreement that the combination of cognitive and affective components produces an overall, or compound, image relating to the positive, or negative, evaluation of the product or brand. In the context of tourism, Baloglu and McCleary (1999a, 1999b) and Stern and Krakover (1993) have empirically shown that such cognitive and affective evaluations have a direct influence on the overall TDI. It should also be mentioned that the two dimensions are hierarchically interrelated: the perceptual/cognitive and affective evaluations have a direct influence on the overall image, and also the former, through the latter, have an indirect influence on that image (Beerli and Martin, 2004b).

It should also be mentioned that the study of the cognitive dimension of image predominates (Hunt, 1975; Phelps, 1986; Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; Chaudhary, 2000; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Grosspietsch, 2006) with the affective component been addressed since the late 1990s (Sirakaya et al., 2001; Beerli and Martin 2004a, 2004b; Ryan and Cave, 2005; Son and Pearce, 2005; Hong et al., 2006).

Nevertheless, as in the case of TDI definitions, literature reveals a lack of homogeneity with respect to the attributes relevant to measuring TDI. One of the most influential studies on image scale development was published by Echtner and Ritchie (2003) who suggested a conceptual framework for the operationalisation of all specified components of destination image, and showed that: a) place image should be envisioned as having two main components: attribute-based and holistic; b) each of the components contains functional (or more tangible) and psychological (or more abstract) characteristics; and c) images of destinations can include "common" functional and psychological traits (components) or

more distinctive or even unique features and feelings). Kim (1998) presented a comprehensive review of destination attractiveness studies while Beerli and Martin (2004a), based on a review of the attractions and attributes, classified all factors influencing the image assessments into nine dimensions: natural resources; general infrastructure; tourist infrastructure; tourist leisure and recreation; culture, history and art; political and economic factors; natural environment; social environment; and, atmosphere of the place.

More specifically, from a cognitive point of view, TDIs are assessed on a set of attributes that correspond to the resources or attractions that a destination has at its disposal (Stabler, 1995). Alhemoud and Armstrong's (1996) classification of tourist attractions includes: natural attractions; historic attractions; cultural attractions; and artificial attractions. Gallarza et al. (2002) have presented a selection of empirical TDI research that measure attributed-based image. Beerli and Martin (2004b) developed and empirically validated a model which explains the different factors forming the post-visit image of a destination and delineate TDI in terms of natural/cultural resources, infrastructures, atmosphere, social setting/environment, and tourist leisure/recreation. Such attractions provide the motivations and the magnetism necessary to persuade an individual on visiting a specific place (Alhemoud and Armstrong, 1996).

The aim of the present paper is to shed more light on the study of rural tourism which, according to Fronchot (2005: 345) has been "heavily studied from the supply outlook but remains to be further analysed from the consumer's perspective". Our objective is threefold. First, explore the cognitive components of rural TDI. Second, identify the effect of cognitive TDI on destination attractiveness. Third, investigate the influence of tourists' characteristics on their cognitive TDI. The paper is based on research carried out at the Lake Plastiras area, a Less Favoured Area (LFA) in Central Greece, one of the most rapidly developing (rural) tourism destinations in Greece.

THE RESEARCH AREA

The research was carried out over the 31,400 ha. Lake Plastiras Area, comprising 14 communities located on the Agrafa mountains in the SW part of the Karditsa Prefecture, Central Greece. The Plastiras Lake is an artificial one, constructed in 1958 – 1962, covering a previously fertile mountainous plateau to supply drinking and irrigation water and produce electricity.

The climate is characterised as half-dry Mediterranean. The area is divided into two main vegetation zones; the first one is dominated by fir trees and the other by oak and chestnut trees. Various rare species of flora and fauna have been identified in the area, including 16 plants endemic of Greece, 27 plants included in the list for the preservation and protection of endemic, rare and endangered plants of the Greek flora and 10 plants included in the CITES convention. The area is part of the NATURA 2000 network. In addition, the area has also got a rich history. Nowadays the most prominent sites are the 6 byzantine churches and 5 monasteries dating since the 16 - 17th century. Quite a number of cultural events mostly related to religious feasts also take place especially during Easter and the summertime.

According to the Censuses, in 1961 – 2001, the area's population has declined by 18.6%. The main population exodus occurred in the period around the time the lake was developed (1961–1971: -32%) while in the period 1991-2001 there has been a considerable increase (+23%). However, field research (ANKA, 1999) revealed a population smaller by 20% than the 2001 Census. Furthermore, it was found that only 43% of the population lives permanently (more than 6 months) in the area.

Census data (1971–2001) also show a decline in the number of farm holdings by half and of cultivated lands by almost 60%. Agricultural land is fragmented (4.5 parcels per holding on average) and small sized (average of 0.33 ha. per parcel). Fallow lands and grasslands account for almost half of the agricultural land and productivity is low. Livestock farming has always been of a 'traditional' character, i.e. labour intensive with low rates of capital investment and heavily dependent on pasturelands for around 6 months per year.

The secondary sector is not well developed in the area. In most of the villages, small-scale family based activities relating to traditional distillation, weaving, carpentry and smithy are found; watermills are still present in a couple of villages. One can also find traditional cafes and taverns (or mixed family businesses) in every village; in some cases the same places serve as small groceries.

Despite its beauty, the lake area was not considered as an important resource for the surrounding communities until 1987. A local development project undertaken by the Prefecture authorities then indicated rural tourism (with an emphasis on agrotourism and various forms of alternative/soft tourism) as the path to development. The dominant vision for the area revolves around the development of soft tourism in a way that will also 'carry along' the rest of the area's (productive) activities. Soft tourism was expected to create alternative

sources of income and facilitate the promotion of local products which would, in turn, tackle the declining socio-economic situation.

Therefore, the local authorities took the initiative/risk to build 7 hostels (owned by local communities but run by private entrepreneurs) around 1992-93 and resulted in increasing numbers of visitors to the area. Advertisement of the natural beauty of the area, investments in infrastructure from public funds (IMP, Regional Programmes etc.) and, later, private investments triggered by the local LEADER II and later LEADER+ programmes, changed the area and making it a major tourism destination among Greeks. In terms of employment, by the end of LEADER II (2001) businesses which had pre-existed that programme employed 257 people (148 full-time, 14 of which resulted from LEADER II) while new businesses employed 241 people (162 full-time). Today there are 31 hostels in the area (vs. 7 before LEADER II), 27 businesses with rooms to rent (vs. 6) and 12 restaurants (vs. 5)

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected through personal, questionnaire-based, interviews with visitors in the period November 2006 to January 2007. The random sample of tourists was drawn among those who visited the Lake Plastiras area and stayed in any of the 70 lodgings of the area for at least one night. The total number of questionnaires was 220.

Given that evaluative attributes are rather abstract and far less applicable (Chen 2001), the survey focused on the cognitive component of TDI. In this respect, a multi-attribute approach was taken; TDI was assessed through a battery of attributes corresponding to the attractions of the locale. Consequently, the first two sections of the questionnaire, aiming at measuring the cognitive component of TDI, comprised a 42 item scale with a different position in the functional –psychological continuum, addressing both area (25 items) and accommodation attributes (17 items). The scale was developed based on both a review of other measurement scales (Kim, 1998; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999a; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Beerli and Martin, 2004b) and the specific attractions of the destination (AN.KA., 1999). Tourists were asked to indicate their level of agreement on each item on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

In this study destinations’ attractiveness was measured also using a seven-point Likert scale. The item was selected since it is regarded “as a cognitive evaluation of destination attributes which are performed on site” (Um et al., 2006: 1146). The importance of attractiveness has been

pinpointed by Hu and Ritchie (1993: 25) as reflecting “the feelings, beliefs, and opinions that an individual has about a destination’s perceived ability to provide satisfaction in relation to his or her special vacation needs”. It follows that determining the relative importance of each attribute in influencing tourists’ evaluation of attractiveness is critical since it “identifies respondents’ salient image attributes and it is these which are most likely to serve as behaviour determinants (Crompton, 1979)” (op. cit: 26).

The third section of the questionnaire comprised questions on tourists’ socioeconomic characteristics (e.g. age, gender, annual family income, marital status, education, etc.). Many models have shown that such characteristics influence tourists’ perceptions of places (Beerli and Martin, 2004; Martin and Bosque, 2008); furthermore, according to Crompton (1979) and Obenour et al. (2005) TDI is not only an individual perception but can also correspond to the perception held by a segment of tourists. Finally, this section also contained questions concerning the characteristics of travel such as the number and duration of both previous and the current visit, companion, means of transport, etc.

In this piece of work data from section one (re: area attributes) and partially from section three (re: socioeconomic data) were utilized. Besides frequencies, in order to explore the structure of cognitive TDIs an explanatory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted; a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was also carried out in order to validate the factor structure extracted from EFA. Following, a Structural Equation Model (SEM) investigated the effect of cognitive image factors on destination attractiveness. Subsequently, a cluster analysis based on the cognitive TDIs factor solution revealed a number of tourists segments. Finally, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) explored between segments differences on tourists’ socio-demographics. Data analysis was performed with SPSS/PC 16 and LISREL v.8.54.

DATA ANALYSIS

Tourists’ socio-demographic characteristics are shown on Table 1. Gender was equally distributed across respondents. Most of the respondents were between 25-44 years old, married, with higher education and diversified income levels (34.5% did not respond); the majority visited the area for the first time and considered it as very or extremely attractive.

Additionally, 98.6% of respondents were Greeks, mainly residents of the two major Greek urban centres, Athens and Thessalonica (53%). Most

(52.3%), stayed at least for two nights (50.9%), mainly with friends (49%) or else with family (32.3%) or their partners (30.5%). The main reasons for visiting the lake area were: i) the fame of the lake (37.3%), ii) recommendation by friends (28.2%) and iii) previous visit (25.5%).

Table 1. Summary of Tourists' Characteristics (N = 220).

Characteristic	Frequency	%	Characteristic	Frequency	%		
<i>Gender</i>			<i>Education</i>				
Male	116	52.7	Primary (6 yrs)	11	5.0		
Female	104	47.3	Gymnasium (9 yrs)	11	5.0		
<i>Family income (in Euros)</i>			High School (12 yrs)	72	32.7		
			Higher (> 12 yrs)	126	57.3		
			<10,000	14	6.4	<i>Marital status</i>	
			10-15,000	34	15.5	Single	77
15-20,000	27	12.3	Married	126	57.5		
20-25,000	20	9.1	Widowed	6	2.7		
25-30,000	14	6.4	Divorced	10	4.6		
>30,000	35	15.9	<i>No. of visits</i>				
No response	76	34.5	1 (first-time)	115	52.3		
<i>Age</i>			2	45	20.5		
15-24	34	15.6	> 2	60	27.3		
25-34	60	27.5	<i>Area attractiveness</i>				
35-44	59	27.1	Moderate	13	5.9		
45-54	41	18.8	Attractive	28	12.7		
55-64	13	6.0	Very attractive	89	40.5		
>65	11	5.0	Extremely attractive	90	40.9		

Following, an EFA was conducted with the 25 items used in this study to address the cognitive component of TDI relating to area's attractions. The extraction method used was Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation. A satisfactory solution was found to be a six-factor solution using 18 items of the initial scale. The factor solution explained 67.7% of the total variance, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure score was 0.827 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity 1470.85 (df=153; p=0.000). Factors retained in the solution were those with eigenvalues

above 0.9 since the scree plot analysis revealed that the sixth factor should be kept in the interpretation (Hair et al., 1995; Malhotra, 1996). Results and reliability scores are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. EFA on cognitive TDIs.

Variables	Loadings					
	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6
<i>F1: Culture and scenery</i>						
Lake's history	0.83					
Scenic sights	0.69					
Monasteries	0.67					
Cultural heritage	0.65					
<i>F2: Local products</i>						
Visits to local craft stores		0.82				
Visits to local food stores		0.80				
Visits to local museum		0.74				
<i>F3: Vacations and hospitality</i>						
Quiet and calm area			0.78			
Ideal place for vacations			0.78			
Hospitable local people and society			0.61			
<i>F4: Alternative activities</i>						
Alternative athletic activities				0.80		
Observation of wild life and birds				0.74		
Organized group tours				0.60		
<i>F5: Cuisine and entertainment</i>						
Local cuisine					0.71	
Good night life/entertainment					0.69	
Place to meet people					0.59	
<i>F6: Weather and environment</i>						
Weather and climate of the area						0.85
Natural environment						0.61
Variance explained	31.4	11.1	7.5	6.8	5.8	5.2
Cronbach's alpha	0.66	0.70	0.77	0.82	0.65	0.49

In order to validate the extracted factor structure, a CFA was performed in the factor solution extracted by the EFA. The model showed satisfactory fit: comparative fit index (CFI) = 1.00, normed fit index (NFI) = 1.00, root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.078 and $\chi^2[120]= 279.77$.

The six factors were labelled as: “*Culture and scenery*” (Factor 1; 31.40% of the variance), “*Local products*” (Factor 2; 11.10%), “*Alternative activities*” (Factor 3; 7.50%), “*Vacations and hospitality*” (Factor 4; 6.77%), “*Cuisine and entertainment*” (Factor 5; 5.80%) and “*Weather and environment*” (Factor 6; 5.15%).

Next, the causal structure of the proposed research model was tested using structural equation modelling (SEM). The fit measures for this model suggested a satisfactory fit: the comparative fit index (CFI) = 1.00, normed fit index (NFI) = 1.00, root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.077, and $\chi^2[132]= 302.96$. The standardized solution is shown on Figure 1. The factors “Local products”, “Alternative activities” and “Weather and environment” were found to be statistically significant thus playing a key role in tourists’ perception about the area’s attractiveness. “Local products” and “Weather and environment” had a positive effect on destination’s attractiveness, “Alternative activities” had a negative effect.

Further, a cluster analysis was conducted based on the factor solution on the cognitive TDIs. The cluster method employed the k-means procedure, with the option of identifying four clusters, which was indicated by a hierarchical cluster analysis. The first cluster was labelled “Low TDI” (15% of sample) since tourists in this cluster scored low across all TDI factors while the third cluster in which tourists scored the highest values across most TDI factors was labelled “High TDI” (22% of sample). Consequently, the second cluster was labelled “Medium/low” (29% of sample) and the fourth cluster “Medium/high” (34% of sample).

Table 3 reports the means of each factor for the four clusters. The means of the factors were significantly different among clusters. In addition, comparison of means using Duncan’s post-hoc test revealed that each cluster was significantly different from every other cluster for all six factors, with few exceptions. Thus, the solution was found to be quite satisfactory and robust.

Table 4 provides the description of the clusters’ profiles. Socio-demographic characteristics that statistically differentiate the clusters are age, education, income and previous number of visits. Moreover, tourists differ on their overall evaluation of the area’s attractiveness.

Figure 1. Final Model of Area's Attractiveness.

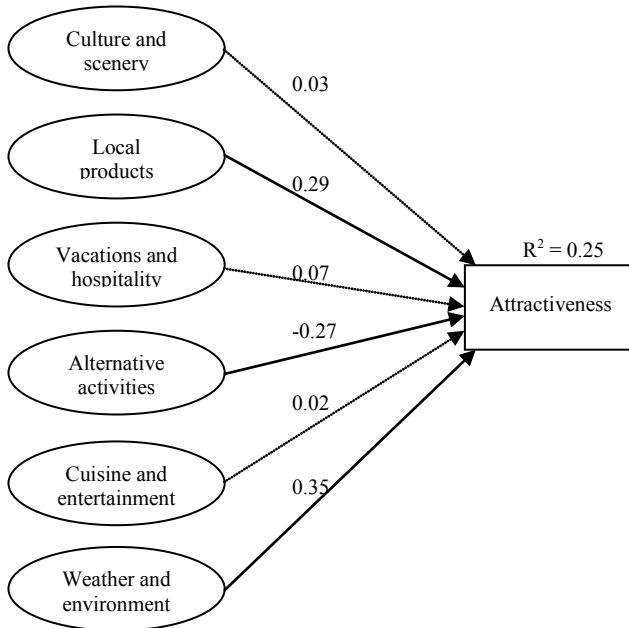


Table 3. Mean Factor Scores across Each Cluster.

	Low TDI	Medium/ low TDI	High TDI	Medium/ high TDI	F (p-value)
Culture and scenery	3.1 ^a	3.7 ^b	5.7 ^c	4.6 ^d	68.1 (0.000)
Local products	2.0 ^a	2.9 ^b	4.6 ^{c,d}	4.5 ^{c,d}	80.6 (0.000)
Alternative activities	4.4 ^a	5.5 ^b	6.1 ^{c,d}	6.2 ^{c,d}	38.4 (0.000)
Vacations and hospitality	2.7 ^{a,b}	3.1 ^{a,b}	5.3 ^c	4.2 ^d	48.4 (0.000)
Cuisine and entertainment	1.8 ^a	3.8 ^{b,d}	5.4 ^c	3.8 ^{b,d}	109.2 (0.000)
Weather and environment	4.2 ^a	5.3 ^b	6.3 ^c	5.7 ^d	29.1 (0.000)

Note: Different superscripts indicate significantly different means following a Duncan post hoc test.

Table 4. Tourist Clusters' Profiles

	Low TDI	Medium /low TDI	High TDI	Medium /high TDI	F (p-value)
<i>Age</i>					3.1 (0.028)
15 - 24	15.2	27.7	6.3	10.8	
25 - 34	21.2	29.2	27.1	28.4	
35 - 44	33.3	18.5	33.3	27.0	
>= 45	30.3	24.6	33.3	33.8	
<i>Gender</i>					1.4 (0.251)
Male	66.7	52.3	43.8	52.7	
Female	33.3	47.7	56.3	47.3	
<i>Marital status</i>					2.1 (0.102)
Single	39.4	43.1	29.2	29.7	
Married	51.5	53.9	54.2	64.9	
Divorced/widowed	9.1	3.1	16.7	5.4	
<i>Education</i>					4.4 (0.005)
Primary	3.0	3.08	12.5	2.7	
Gymnasium	3.0	4.6	10.4	2.7	
High school	18.2	30.8	33.3	40.5	
Higher education	75.8	61.5	43.8	54.1	
<i>Income</i>					3.2 (0.025)
< 10,000	6.1	0.0	10.4	9.5	
10 – 15,000	9.1	16.9	20.8	13.5	
15 – 20,000	9.1	9.2	10.4	17.6	
20 – 25,000	3.0	10.8	10.4	9.5	
25 – 30,000	6.1	4.6	8.3	6.8	
> 30,000	24.2	15.4	18.8	10.8	
No Response	42.4	43.1	20.8	32.4	
<i>Number of visits</i>					2.9 (0.037)
1 (first-time)	54.6	47.7	43.8	60.8	
2	18.2	21.5	14.6	24.3	
>2	27.3	30.8	41.7	14.9	
<i>Attractiveness</i>	5.7	6.1	6.5	6.3	6.8 (0.000)

The tourists' cluster labelled as 'high TDIs' comprises individuals who are the most often repeat visitors and tend to regard the area as very-extremely attractive. The cluster concerns individuals largely over 35 years old with varying incomes and educational levels. On the other hand, the 'low TDIs' cluster concerns mainly first-time visitors who consider the area to be attractive-very attractive; it comprises visitors over 35 years old characterised by higher education and medium (between 15,000 and 30,000 €) to high (over 30,000 €) incomes. The 'medium-low' cluster comprises younger tourists with higher education, rather medium incomes, almost equally divided between first-time and repeat visitors who find the area very attractive. The last cluster, 'medium-high TDIs' largely concerns first time visitors, over 35 years old, mostly with moderate incomes and high to higher education, who find the area very attractive.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current presentation aims at exploring the main characteristics of tourists visiting the Lake Plastiras area, a Less Favoured destination in Central Greece, as well as their TDIs and perceived attractiveness of the area. According to Kokkali et al. (2008) tourists' characteristics match with those of tourists in similar rural destinations in Greece and abroad. In addition, the cognitive components of TDIs were delineated, thus arriving at six factors: 'Culture and scenery', 'Local products', 'Alternative activities', 'Vacations and hospitality', 'Cuisine and entertainment' and 'Weather and environment'. It was also found out that the factors 'local products' and 'weather and environment' contribute positively to the area's attractiveness while 'alternative activities' does negatively.

Furthermore, tourists have been classified according to the aforementioned six cognitive factors; subsequently the clusters were tested for differences in tourists' characteristics. In the first place, four tourists' clusters were identified with each cluster being significantly different from every other cluster for almost all the six cognitive factors. Moreover, age, education and income were found to differentiate the clusters along with the number of visits and tourists' perception of the area's attractiveness. Results indicate that first-time visitors with higher education and medium- to high incomes are more cautious with reference to their cognitive TDI components and their perception of the attractiveness of the area as compared to the rest of the first-time visitors;

younger, well-educated visitors also seem rather cautious as compared to other tourists but the ones comprising the aforementioned cluster.

It follows that the Lake Plastiras area attracts tourists as a place characterised by its beautiful, unharmed natural environment and its local products. On the contrary, tourists seeking alternative activities are not attracted to the area. However, quite a number of such activities (ski, canoe-kayak, mountain bike, horse-riding, trekking, climbing, bird-watching etc.) are found in the area (Kokkali, 2008). Results also clearly indicate differentiations among segments of the area's visitors in both their characteristics and their cognitive TDI components thus on their perception about the area's attractiveness.

Our findings are thus considered important for destination-marketers since in the first place, recognising the images tourists have of a destination is necessary to identify its strengths and weaknesses. This, in turn, allows for the creation and management of positive expectations based on the construction of distinctive and appealing images as well as, tentatively, the creation of differentiated offers than those of competitors. It finally facilitates the design of an efficient strategy concerning the area's placement within the tourist market, notably through the segmentation of the market and the development of specific communication for each group based on different components of TDIs (see, for example: Ahmed, 1991; Calantone and Mazanec, 1991; Buhalis, 2000; Bigne et al, 2001; Martin and Bosque, 2008). The Lake Plastiras area seems to be and has the potential to develop further as an important (rural) tourism destination in Greece. This is so as it offers diverse accommodation options, a wide range of activities as well as important environmental assets and lovely sights (Kokkali, 2008). However, it has to be stressed that its marketing, due to its environmental and socioeconomic peculiarities and, thus, restrictions, should not have as its exclusive target the increase of tourists' inflows to the area (see: Koutsouris, 2007 and 2009).

Our findings also point towards the need for further research concerning the investigation of TDIs tourists hold before visitation in the area, the complex processes of their formation and the sources contributing to it (Gartner, 1993; Gallarza et al., 2002; Pike, 2002; Govers et al., 2007), as well as the evaluation of tourists' satisfaction and revisitation intentions and loyalty (see: Kaplanidou and Vogt, 2007).

The contribution of this piece of work concerns the fact that although TDI has been extensively investigated, it advances this line of research by exploring the cognitive component of image in a rural, mountainous area. From a conceptual point of view, due to the fact that this paper only

begins to analyse the topic, it is limited since other factors which are known to exist and affect TDI were not included, notably the second section of the survey questionnaire addressing accommodation items. In the first place, further analysis of the existing data is therefore deemed necessary; moreover it would be interesting to undertake further research that includes those types of variables not included in the survey (i.e., affective TDI component). These are expected to improve the obtained results since the examined components of the cognitive image only explain 25% of the variance of attractiveness (see also: Alcaniz et al., 2009). Finally, the generalisation of the results is another constraint; our results may not be generalised beyond this population and the Lake Plastiras area. Hence, it is advisable to replicate such research and analyse factors that influence TDI in other rural destinations.

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