

EXAMINING THE IMAGE OF A TOURISM DESTINATION: EVIDENCE FROM CRETE

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The empirical work reported here was aimed at investigating Crete's fundamental attraction elements; six factors related to Crete's image were identified and examined in terms of their significance in predicting and explaining its overall image. While analysing the factors, 'seaside activities' was determined to be the most significant factor in identifying Crete's overall destination image. Through relevant factor analysis and subsequent multiple regression analysis, it was established that highly rated destination image dimensions may be among the most important ones influencing the destination's overall tourism image. Management implications are discussed and recommended.

Keywords: tourism destination, overall destination image, image attraction, Crete.

JEL Classification: *L83, M1, O1*

INTRODUCTION

Researchers in tourism marketing have recognized the critical role of destination image in potential visitors' behaviour (Chon, 1991; Gartner, 1993; Selwyn, 1996; Gallarza, Saura and Garcia, 2001). This construct is particularly important in developing and maintaining a loyalty on the part of customers (Dick and Basu, 1994; Shoemaker and Lewis, 1999), especially in the tourism sector (Opperman, 1996; Bowen and Shoemaker, 1998). Destination image is a socially constructed entity (Crompton and Seong-Seop, 2001) and derived essentially from the visitor's perception of a tourist destination. Image is the most important aspect of a tourist attraction from a marketing point of view. An accurate assessment of product image is a prerequisite to designing an effective marketing strategy. Hence, managing this image is a major priority for destination marketers and researchers. To remain competitive, destination

marketers must be able to understand how tourists perceive the products and services of the destination. Gartner (1996) pointed out that understanding images held by target markets is essential to avoid moving the image into a position held by an able and strong competitor. Destinations need to project their distinctive images in order to enhance tourism appeal.

Many tourism destinations compete mainly on the images held in the minds of potential tourists (Baloglu and McCleary 1999; Naidoo et al., 2012). Developing a distinct position among tourism destinations is often achieved by establishing a favourable image to potential visitors in target markets (Gartner 1993). Available literature (Christou, 2003) indicates that destination studies have rarely discussed about the image of Crete especially from the perspective of international travel, albeit such an understanding should be a prerequisite in designing Crete's tourism market positioning strategies. Hence, prior to developing marketing activities in the international tourism market, it is essential for Crete to analyse its destination image.

The purpose of this study is to explore Crete's image as an international tourist destination, and in particular:

- a) to explore Crete's fundamental image elements as perceived by international tourists;
- b) to identify the important destination elements in determining Crete's overall image.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Destination image is described as the overall impression made on the minds of the public about a geographical area (Kotler, Haider and Rein, 1993; Sigala et al., 2012; Bertan and Altintas, 2013). It is related to the various physical, psychological and behavioural attributes of the tourist destination, such as name or brand, architecture of buildings, landscape, heritage attractions, myths and legends, quality of general and tourist infrastructure, tradition, ideology and local culture, and to the impression of quality communicated by each employee of local tourist enterprises with the destination's visitors. As such, destination image has two principal components: the functional or realistic and the emotional (Dolnicar, Grabler and Mazanec, 1999; Sigala, 2010). The functional component is related to tangible characteristics, which can be easily measured, while the emotional component is associated with psychological traits, which are subjectively perceived from visitors and manifested by feelings and attitudes towards a specific destination.

Gunn (1972) defined images as being formed either on an induced or organic level; while little can be done to influence organic image, marketers can induce an image by investment in promotion (Gunn 1988; Polat, 2013). Crompton (1979) defined image as the sum of beliefs, impressions, ideas, and perceptions that people hold of objects, behaviour, and events. Fakeye and Crompton (1991) argued that destination image is conceptualised as evolving from an organic image, through an induced image, to a complex image. Gartner (1996) explained that destination image is made up of three different but hierarchical interrelated components: cognitive, affective, and conative. Echtner and Ritchie (1993) suggested that various items must be captured in order to measure destination image; these include attribute-based images, holistic impressions, and functional, psychological, unique, and common characteristics.

Chen and Hsu (2000) examined the impact of destination attractions on overall destination attractiveness and suggested that, 'although previous studies have developed critical attributes tied to tourists' destination images, leading attributes that would help tourism scholars and practitioners measure the total attractiveness of a destination are still unknown'(p.411). Chen and Hsu (2000) suggested that the most important factors influencing the overall destination attractiveness might not be those highly rated image attributes, thus argued that 'agreement ratings of destination image attributes might not be an accurate measurement of the overall attractiveness of a destination' (p.412). In practical terms, if their argument is correct, then tourism marketers should not confine their marketing communications activities just on important attractions, because those attractions may not be tourists' main concern in perceiving and assessing its overall image and attractiveness (Farmaki, 2012); however, empirical research is required to examine this further (Christou, 2005; Chatzigeorgiou et al., 2009; Sigala, 2012). In this vein, a null hypothesis is developed for the present study:

H₀: The most important factors predicting the overall destination image are consistent with highly rated attraction elements;

H₁: The most important factors predicting the overall destination image are not consistent with highly rated attraction elements.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the present study was to explore and identify the image elements of Crete as perceived by international visitors. The research instrument used was a structured questionnaire; respondents were asked

to state their level of agreement to destination attraction statements using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

To create a list of destination attributes for the survey, previous destination image studies (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991; Phelps, 1986; Gartner 1989; Christou, 2011a; David, 2012; Sigala, 2013) were examined. In addition, relevant publications and brochures on Crete’s tourism attractions were studied. At the end, 27 items were selected to depict Crete’s destination attractions. In terms of Crete’s overall image, two items with 5-point Likert-scale were used as indicators of the overall attractiveness. Content validity and reliability of the questionnaire was examined through a pilot test - no significant improvements were required for the final questionnaire. The initial questionnaire was written in English, and then translated into Greek, German and Italian.

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A convenience sampling was employed to collect the data, as it was practically not realistic to adopt a probability sampling approach. The survey was performed during August and September 2013. Out of 256 questionnaires completed, just 216 were usable. Data was analysed by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program. Factor analysis was performed in order to group the destination into a smaller set of elements. The oblique principal-component method was adopted, while multiple regression analyses were performed to determine the impact of destination elements on the overall destination image. Destination elements, which were extracted from factor analysis, are used as independent variables, while South Tyrol’s overall image was adopted as the dependent variable.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Respondents’ demographic profile shows that the majority of respondents are female (61.4%), with males representing 39.6% of the sample. In terms of age, the main age groups are those between 31-40 years (34%), 51-60 years (16%), and 41 and 50 (27%). The majority of respondents were first time visitors (54.8%). Most of the visitors were pleasure tourists (68.4) and VFR (visiting friends and relatives - 21.2%).

Destination's Fundamental Elements

The findings of factor analysis are described in Table 1. Six elements comprising 26 saliently loaded items emerge from the analysis which, accordingly, are labelled as 'cultural attractions'(F1), 'travelling and access'(F2), 'Island activities'(F3), 'mountain landscape'(F4), 'local people'(F5), and 'lodging and leisure'(F6). The factors explained 68.20% of the variance with eigenvalues ranging from 1.36 to 9.10. The Cronbach's alphas for the six factors range from 0.720 to 0.890, all above the minimum value of 0.50, which is considered acceptable for research in its exploratory stages (Nunnally 1978).

Table 1 Factor analysis results (n=216)

<i>Factor 1 -Cultural Attractions</i>	<i>Loadings</i>	c15-lots of recreational facilities/activities	0.662
c4-beautiful town/city centres	0.892	c18-skiing slopes and facilities	0.657
c3-interesting museums and heritage sites	0.844	c10-attractive unspoiled forests	0.622
c1-interesting Island history	0.794	c11-beautiful national parks	0.604
c2-a taste of the Mediterranean life and culture	0.698	<i>Factor 4 – Mountain Landscape</i>	<i>Loadings</i>
c7-interesting festivals and culture activities	0.642	c8-magnificent Alpine scenery	0.788
c6-appealing archaeological attractions	0.587	c9-diverse landscape	0.764
c5-attractive local music	0.532	c12-well-preserved natural environment	0.622
<i>Factor 2 – Travelling & Access</i>	<i>Loadings</i>	<i>Factor 5 – Local People</i>	
c27-moderate prices	0.806	c16-friendly locals	0.944
c26-convenient	0.787	c17-helpful locals	0.836

local transportation							
c25-easy accessibility	0.763	Factor 6 –Lodging & leisure				Loadings	
c13-moderate climate	0.622	c22- accommodation options				.722	
Factor 3 – Sea Activities	Loadings	c21-active nightlife and entertainment				.700	
c19-sea-based activities	0.862	c24-positive shopping experience				.635	
c20-other adventurous activities	0.766	c23-local food and drinks				.607	
		F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6
Eigenvalue		9.10	2.66	1.78	1.62	1.34	1.36
Variance (percent)		39.54	10.16	6.72	6.20	4.32	4.39
Cronbach's alpha		0.847	0.834	0.852	0.720	0.897	0.726
Summated Mean		3.90	3.24	4.12	3.42	3.38	3.31
Number of items (total=26)		7	4	6	3	2	4

Overall Destination Image

Two determinants were used as a converging indicator of Crete's overall image: a) respondents' intention to revisit Crete, and b) respondents' behaviour for attracting new visitors. Reliability analysis was used to test these two determinants' internal consistency which is 0.786. The average mean of these two items is 4.8, indicating that respondents perceive fairly positive about Crete's overall image. The result of multiple regression analysis of the destination elements against the dependent variable of 'overall image' using backward method is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2 Multiple regression results

	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Regression	48.514	9	8.840	48.888	0.000
Residual	32.054	138	0.164		
Total	80.568	147			
$R^2 = 0.624$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.588$					

Variables in the equation:

<i>Variable</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>VIF</i>	<i>Condition Index</i>
<i>Constant</i>	0.323		1.685	0.200		
<i>Sea Activities</i>	0.702	0.638	9.037	0.000	2.217	1.000
<i>Travelling & Access</i>	-0.312	-0.316	-4.786	0.000	2.066	17.555
<i>Cultural Attractions</i>	0.342	0.266	4.214	0.000	1812	19.050
<i>Mountain Landscape</i>	0.324	0.346	4.942	0.000	1.528	21.535

The standardised regression coefficient ‘beta’ is used to indicate the relative importance of each element contributing to the overall image of Crete. Based on the Beta, the most important element is ‘Sea activities’ (Beta = 0.638), followed by ‘travelling & access’ (-0.316, which has a negative effect on the dependent variable), ‘mountain landscape’ (0.346), and ‘cultural attractions’ (0.266). Hence, ‘Sea activities’ is the most significant predictor, especially when compared with the beta of the other three elements.

FURTHER DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

Six fundamental elements were identified and used to outline Crete’s destination images. The element of ‘Sea activities’ got the highest ratings (summated mean of 4.12). The ‘cultural attractions’ element was second in terms of summated mean ratings (3.90) and is close to 4.0, indicating visitors’ positive agreement on its significance, even though it was initially expected that this element would obtain a higher mean rating. Perhaps this was due to the fact that the attributes representing ‘cultural attractions’ are not the most significant or distinguishing characteristics representing Crete’s image, or they may not be solely associated to Crete but also to other destinations. Hence, it would be interesting to perform a comparison study with other Mediterranean destinations in terms of sea attractions. Stabler (1988), Gregory (1989), Shaw and Williams (1994) and Lange-Faria and Elliot (2012) provided evidence that destinations may project distinguishing images as a reflection of the distinctiveness of their particular natural environment, culture, heritage and economy. However, visitors seem to prefer tourist destinations with powerful and prominent images (Woodside and Lysonski 1989; Christou, 2011b).

Other elements' summated scales are just a little bit higher than the neutral point of 3, showing that the visitors have not projected a greatly affirmative consideration of the attractiveness of other elements. In terms of Crete's natural attractions, it is a surprise that a nature-related element which is considered by Cretans as its major attraction ('mountain landscape') was not ranked very positively by the visitors. However, it is suggested that Crete marketers should not isolate the assessment of the destination elements or attractions, but rather to compare these attractions with those offered by other Mediterranean destinations.

It is interesting to note that two particular elements ('local people' and 'lodging & leisure') were not included in the predicting model (Table 2). 'Local people', was excluded from the predicting model because there was no significant relationship found with the dependent variable. However, this does not necessarily mean that this element has absolutely no importance in shaping a destination's overall image; past research provides evidence that in a number of cases the characteristics of local people pose an essential dimension for tourists' attraction. According to Pearce (1980) and Vitouladiti (2013) locals' negative attitude towards tourists could lead to reduced visitors' satisfaction and eventually pose a threat to destination's image. However, Knox (1982), Christou and Nella (2010) and Ihamaki (2012) empirically established that locals' behaviour may in some cases improve or alternatively ruin visitors' experiences. Hence, the function of the element 'local people' should be taken into consideration when developing and maintaining the overall image of a tourist destination, even though this element was excluded from the predicting model reported in the present survey. Finally, regarding 'lodging & leisure', even though it shows a noteworthy relationship with the dependent variable, its partial relationship is not significant hence it was decided to exclude it from the predicting model.

Based on the empirical evidence of the present study, the most important determinant Crete's overall destination images is 'Sea activities', which also has the highest summated scale and is included in the predicting model; therefore, the null hypothesis has to be accepted. However, this finding is not consistent with the findings of Chen and Hsu (2000), as well as Anderson (2012) who argued that the leading factors assessing the overall destination attractiveness were not those highly rated destination attributes. On the other hand, the findings reported in the present study provide empirical evidence that agreement ratings of destination attributes or elements may be a valid and reliable approach to measuring tourist destination's overall images. Hence, it is advisable for destination tourism marketers to primarily focus their marketing

communication efforts on exploiting favourably and promoting the highly rated destination elements. At the same time, destination marketers also should try to explore other potential factors that may be equally important in forming the tourist destination's overall images.

In the past, Crete has infrequently caught researchers' attention in studying its destination image as perceived by tourists. This exploratory survey presented here can be used as a basis for further research on: a) examining in greater extent its tourist destination image attractions and attributes; and, b) developing integrated marketing communication for the effective positioning of Crete in the international tourist market.

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One limitation of the work reported here is that, it was not possible to perform an image difference analysis for the major market segments visiting Crete (Germans, British, Greeks, Austrians, Italians, etc.). However, taking into account that visitors from different backgrounds, nationalities and cultures may express diversified perceptions, it becomes evident that further research could focus on examining different homogenous groups of visitors and on exploring their perceptions and attitudes towards Crete's image as a tourist destination.

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