Mountain destination image held by residents and tourists

Carla Maria Alves Silva¹

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¹ School of Technology and Management, Polytechnic Institute of Viseu, Portugal, phone: +351 232480500, e-mail: csilva@estv.ipv.pt

Supervisors: Prof. Elisabeth Kastenholtz and Prof. Jose Luis Abrantes

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Goal and objectives of the dissertation

Goal

Some tourism destinations have powerful symbolic features that exert a strong influence on destination image formation, such as mountain places. Since the mountain regions have become one of the most attractive tourism destination areas, being the choice of 500 million tourists annually (Thomas, et al., 2006), and their attractiveness is mainly based on their symbolic image, the main goal of this study was to analyse, in a holistic and multi-disciplinary approach, residents' and tourists' images of mountain destinations, and the respective gap.

Objectives

The aim was to develop the MDI Scale - Mountain Destination Image Scale – in order to assess a wide set of tourism mountain destination image parameters. Within the MDI scale, images are related to cognitive and affective factors. The study aimed at understanding, in particular, the differences between local residents and tourists in respect to this mountain image. The study

aimed at increasing social, cultural and scientific knowledge regarding mountains and their social representations (held by tourists and residents), and at thereby helping mountain destinations to define better adjusted management and marketing strategies.

Methodology

The study combined quantitative and qualitative survey techniques. The variables used to assess cognitive destination image in the survey instrument are developed on the basis of an extensive literature review related to destination image and mountain constructs. In total, 103 studies have been reviewed and pre-established scale items are integrated into the developed measurement instrument. The initial scales were adjusted to the reality of tourists and local residents being inquired as well as to the specificity of the mountain destinations being studied.

Tourists and residents were asked to rate the mountain place as a tourism destination by a list of 49 attributes on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (offers very little) to 5

(offers very much). The affective dimension of tourism destination image was measured by 9 semantic differential scales based on a literature review with 22 studies. Both scales – Likert and semantic differentials – were also discussed with experts in the field of destination image measurement. Additionally, respondents were asked to answer open-ended questions and to suggest three adjectives related to their subjective mountain perceptions. This approach helps identify other holistic or unique features associated with the mountain destination.

The questionnaire was personally administered to residents and each individual tourist during their stay at the mountain tourist sites – Peaks of Europe (Spain), Alps (France, Austria and Switzerland) and Serra da Estrela (Portugal). The main survey was conducted from March through July of 2009 and 630 valid responses were obtained.

Results

A extensive literature review focusing on the concept of destination image and social and cultural meanings of mountains overtime, and insights from an empirical study of 315 tourists and 315 residents in European Mountains Destinations – the Serra da Estrela (Portugal), the Alps (France, Austria and Switzerland) and the Peaks of Europe (Spain) - indicate that this multi- dimension scale incorporates five mountain image dimensions held by tourists: (1) historic-cultural, (2) natural/ecological, (3) social and prestige, (4) sport and leisure, and (5) affective; and three images dimensions held by residents: 1) mystique/sacred, (2) historic-cultural and (3) affective.

The content analysis of open-ended questions reinforces these results but additionally reveal “life and health” as a significant dimension of mountain image to residents. The results reveal differences on the mountain destination image held by tourists and residents, suggesting five gaps: (1) natural/ecological, (2) sport and leisure and (3) social and prestige, that is an mountain image dimensions significant only for tourists; and (4) mystique/sacred and (5)

life and health, which are the mountain image dimensions significant only for residents.

Theoretical conclusions

Mountains are cultural, natural, social and physical spaces, which are socially, cognitively and emotionally constructed. Therefore, measuring tourism mountain destinations image implies focusing on tangible mountain attributes and also on mountain intangibles or affective dimensions considering the social and cultural meanings of these spaces overtime. On the other hand, tourists and residents regard the mountain places differently, based on their experience, activities, motivations, values and place-attachment.

Practical application of the dissertation

The study could contribute to tourism marketing and management practice, allowing tourism mountain destinations to implement effective positioning strategies, to increase market segmentation options, enhance product development and communication strategies, and generally improve marketing-mix strategies, particularly concerning the development of an effective mountain destination brand. It is important for mountain destination marketers and managers to understand and analyze different mountain image perspectives and adjust positioning strategies for greater effectiveness, considering both tourists and their host community.

Content of the dissertation

Abstract of chapter one

Chapter one is the literature review of tourism, consumer behavior, mountains, mountain tourism, destination image, place-attachment and impacts of tourism development.

Tourism destinations are spaces strongly affected by imaginary. When considering destination image as the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that an individual has of a destination (Crompton, 1979), it includes cognitive and affective components (Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2008). The cognitive image component consists of beliefs

and knowledge about a destination, primarily focusing on tangible physical attributes (Stabler, 1988; Pike & Ryan, 2004). The affective image component, on the other hand, represents feelings about a destination (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Beerli & Martín, 2004).

The attractiveness of mountains is mainly based on their symbolic image. The motivations and expectations of tourists visiting mountains were in the past, and are still today, associated with different perceptions and social connotations of that particular space (Silva et al., 2009). A lot of representations of the mountain have their origin in an imaginary associated to ancient legends, inherited from a past of magic and mythical faiths common to all humanity.

The new paradigm in tourism research emphasizes, besides destination image, also the understanding of emotional and symbolic subjective meanings associated with nature places and also the connection of people to them (Williams & Vaske, 2003). Moreover it stresses that natural areas are more than geographical environments with physical characteristics. They are fluid, convertible, dynamic contexts of interaction and memory, and therefore susceptible to distinct forms of place-attachment (Stokowski, 2002). Additionally, these environments are also particularly vulnerable (Hillery et al., 2001; Diedrich & García-Buades, 2009). In nature areas, specifically in mountains which are characterized by fragility of both social and ecological systems, tourism is known to induce a series of social, cultural, ecological and economic changes, most of the time irreversible (Stonich, 1998, 2000; Belsky, 1999).

In sum, tourism mountain destinations are places with powerful symbolic features that exert a strong influence on destination image formation, eventually leading to high levels of place attachment. On the other hand, mountains, as natural spaces, are more vulnerable to the effects of tourism development.

Abstract of chapter two

Chapter two presents the development of a conceptual model resulting in the mountain destination image scale – MDI Scale - and incorporated seven categories of image: (1) Mystique/Sacred, (2) Natural/Ecological, (3) Historic-Cultural, (4) Social and Prestige, (5) Sport and Leisure, (6) Facilities and Infrastructures, and (7) Affective.

Mountains are perceived as sacred places and source of spiritual renewal (Jokinen & Veijola, 2003), an image reflected in their designation as "cathedrals of the world" (Mathieu, 2006). Moreover, mountains are seen as an ecological, scenic and environmental sanctuary of nature (Veyret, 2001; Krauchi et al., 2000).

Also, mountains are genuinely guardians of a historic and cultural heritage that are a part of local people's identities and with a strong touristic value (Goeldner et al., 2003), making them singular, alternative and prestigious spots (Vengesayi & Mavondo, 2004).

The social meaning of mountains combines also mountains and sports in an adventurous way associated with specific equipment, facilities and infrastructures (Nepal & Chipeniuk, 2005). Last, but not least, mountains are regarded as affective places capable of inducing strong feelings and emotions to those who visit them or live there.

Abstract of chapter three

The methodology is described in chapter three with the description of data analysis, which is mainly quantitative, but also incorporates a qualitative element.

The validation of the proposed conceptual model was achieved through four procedures of analysis. Firstly, a descriptive data analysis was undertaken with univariate and bivariate analysis, taking into account statistical indicators. The second procedure was exploratory factor analysis (EFA), aiming at determining the relationship between the observed and latent variables. Thirdly, once defined the variables that represent each factor and the number of factors, a

confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was applied using full-information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation procedures available in LISREL (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993). In order to assess nomological validity, measures were tested with respect to some other constructs to which destination image is theoretically related (cf. Churchill, 1995), such as place-attachment and impacts of tourism development. In this sense, the analysis and data processing were performed using the programs SPSS and LISREL, in their latest versions.

Finally, and in order to assess content analysis, the adjective words suggested by the respondents were first categorized and then analysed within broader categories, which were treated as dimensions of the mountain destination image construct, with frequencies of occurrence revealing the importance of each dimension.

Abstract of chapter four

The results are presented in chapter four. From both quantitative and qualitative analyses two different scales resulted: the TMDI, a mountain destination image scale held by tourists; and the RMDI, a mountain destination image scale held by residents.

Tourists associated mountains with historic-cultural, natural/ecological, social and prestige image elements, sports and leisure and an affective image dimensions. On the other hand, residents perceived mountains as mystique/sacred, life and health, historic-cultural, and affective places. Also, tourists and residents were shown to establish different emotional bonds with mountain sites. Due to their temporary permanence, tourists tend to be less territorially bound, consequently revealing less place-attachment than residents. One of the features of modern tourism is the fact that tourist trips, particularly those involving longer distances, disrupt the sense of belonging to a specific place. If tourists do not feel any belonging to the place they visit, they may lose the sense and comprehension of the environmental limits of human action. Likewise, tourists do not reveal

a strong sensitivity regarding environmental impacts in mountains.

Abstract of chapter five

Chapter five presents the conclusions of the study namely: discussion of results, implications, limitations and directions for future researches.

Tourism mountain destinations have a particular image and meaning to tourists and residents. Tourism mountain destinations image held by tourists integrate the natural/ecological, social and prestige, historic-cultural, affective, and sport and leisure dimensions. On the other hand, in the perspective of local residents, mountains are regarded as mystique/sacred, life and health, affective and historic-cultural spaces.

These results could help assist mountain destinations areas managers in their marketing strategy definition. In fact, effective tourism marketing is impossible without an understanding of consumers' image, while integrated destination marketing leading to sustainable tourism development should also include residents' views.

There are still some study limitations to be considered. From a theoretical standpoint, despite the extensive literature review, the study might omit and therefore not consider other specific relevant mountain image dimensions.

The ideal would be the application of this conceptual model as an image measurement instrument to all mountain destinations, which however would have been out of the scope of this individual PhD project. In any case, the replication of this study and corresponding extension of the model to other mountain destinations (or other destinations with similar characteristics), particularly out of Europe, would be most interesting for a more general validation.

Finally, tourism destination image is a dynamic concept because images are not static but change overtime (Gartner & Hunt, 1987; Gallarza *et al.*, 2002). Therefore it

would seem desirable to carry out longitudinal studies that deal with the process of the formation and changes in image over longer time periods.

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