

Complex destination image formation: The changes through visitation among domestic tourists

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Abstract

Destination image formation is a dynamic process that evolves over time. This study explores how domestic tourists' destination image and its cognitive and affective components change through direct interaction with the destination. By applying mixed methods to two Alpine destinations, changes in image are analysed across several dimensions: attribute-based versus holistic, functional versus psychological, and common versus unique. The findings reveal that domestic tourists often reaffirm their initial beliefs and struggle to articulate perceived changes in destination image. Most modifications in image occur for both first-time and repeat visitors, indicating that many changes from pre-visit to post-visit may be temporary. While some aspects shift towards more psychological and holistic characteristics, others become more defined by functional and attribute-based information. This dynamic suggests a relationship between the perception of incongruity and the gap between pre-visit expectations and actual experiences. Therefore, destination managers and marketers should aim to generate high expectations and develop compelling narratives for image elements that have high ambiguity. Conversely, they should avoid overpromising on elements with low ambiguity to manage visitor satisfaction effectively.

Keywords: Domestic tourists, pre-visit destination image, post-visit destination image, primary destination image, destination image transformation, reevaluated destination image

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1. Introduction

For destination managers it is crucial to understand if the visitors experience in the destination lives up to their destination image (DI), and how this image changes through the visit, as it is considered “one of the key building blocks of successful tourism marketing” (Dolnicar & Grün, 2013). It has been shown to have a strong influence on the attitudes and behaviour of tourists during the entire travel process: Before the visit, destination image is strongly connected to the intention to visit (Chaulagain et al., 2019), destination choice (Lin et al., 2007) and tourists’ expectations (Wang et al., 2016). During the visit, it is an important antecedent of perceived quality (Bigné et al., 2001) and tourist satisfaction (Ladeira et al., 2016). Furthermore, DI influences post-visit behavioural intentions, summarized by Zhang et al. (2014) as tourist loyalty, including the intentions to revisit (Assaker et al., 2011) and recommend (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020). An overview of these frequently discussed effects is presented in Figure 1.

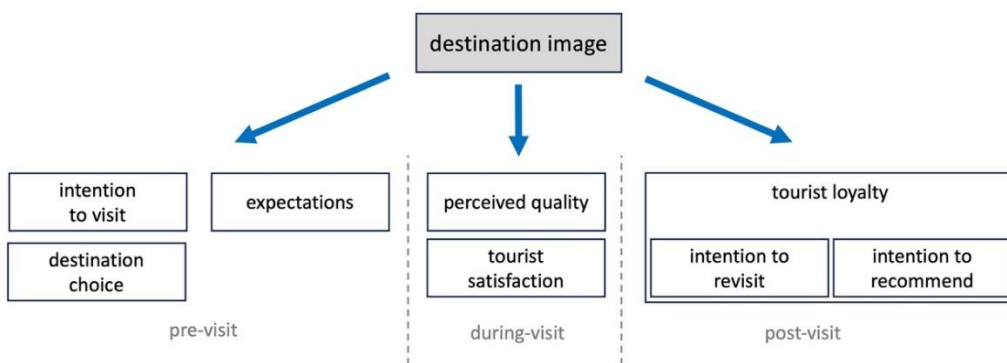


Figure 1. Frequently discussed effects of destination image on tourists’ behaviour and attitudes. Source: Author’s own elaboration based on literature review

While the relationship of these concepts has been well established for the effects of destination image on tourists’ behaviour and intentions (Bigné et al., 2001; C.-F. Chen & Tsai, 2007), it is not so clear how the impressions and evaluations made by visitors during their stay in the destination link back to their post-visit destination image. The tourists’ individual image of any destination is dynamic and therefore the understanding of the processes, how a visit leads to confirmation, or change of DI components is important for any destination manager. However, the question how destination image is in turn influenced through visitation has produced mixed and even contradictory results, as has been pointed out by several authors (Martín-Santana et al., 2017; Tasci & Gartner, 2007; Yilmaz & Yilmaz, 2020). The inherent complexity of the topic impedes a direct comparison and transfer of learnings between case studies and different destinations. So far, there is a limited understanding of the process of change and a shortage of qualitative and longitudinal studies on the subject (Tasci, 2006; Yilmaz & Yilmaz, 2020). To address this research gap, the present study reduces complexity by focusing on a relatively homogenous sample of domestic tourists. The changes in destination image are examined in detail by surveying the same sample before and after their visit of the destination, and a multifaceted qualitative analysis.

2. Complex destination image formation – a literature review

Tourism Destination Image is commonly understood as “the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination” (Crompton, 1979, p.18). Due to its strong connection to destination marketing, it became a subject of interest in tourism research during the 1970s, leading to a multitude of subsequent studies, as is detailed in the literature review by Tasci and Gartner (2007). While several different definitions have been used over the years (Josiassen et al., 2016), most tourism researchers

concur that destination image is a multifaceted concept, including a cognitive component, an affective component, and an overall value judgement (Kock et al., 2016; Martín-Santana et al., 2017). An additional, refined categorization was proposed by Echtner and Ritchie (1993) with the dimensions functional - psychological, attribute-based - holistic, and common - unique.

The main interest of this study is how a person's destination image changes through the visit of the destination. This change has been considered an integral part of image formation from the early conceptualizations on. However, different authors created different terms and definitions for this type of image formation such as "organic" (Gartner, 1994; Gunn, 1972), "primary" (Kislali et al., 2020; Phelps, 1986) or "complex" (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). Moreover, a multitude of conceptualizations and measurements have been used for visitation and related concepts such as experience and familiarity (Yilmaz & Yilmaz, 2020). This study uses the term "complex destination image" to describe the image visitors form during their visit through "actual contact" with the destination as proposed by Fakeye and Crompton (1991). According to their model, a first-time visitor goes through three stages of image formation, starting with organic image which resembles general knowledge through education and media, followed by induced image which is formed through promotional materials during the planning of the holiday, and finally the complex image, which integrates the personal encounter with the destination.

While the conceptual models of destination image formation have evolved over the years, the visitation of the destination was continuously considered an important antecedent of DI, albeit with a distinction: some models categorize the previous experience with the destination as a characteristic of the individual (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997; Tasci & Gartner, 2007; Dominguez Santana & De Sevilha Gosling, 2018), while others define the visit as an external stimulus factor (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004). In a dynamic model of DI formation developed by Glückstad et al. (2020), the visit of the destination is understood as a stimulus which is compared to the prior mental representation of the destination, leading to a positive or negative valence, and finally integrated into an updated posterior mental representation through an "iterative process of concept learning". Conceptually, this model represents a further development of the linear model proposed by Fakeye and Crompton (1991) to a circular model which stays open to new influences but is still consistent with the idea of complex DI formation. A combination of these two models to specifically outline complex DI formation is presented in Fig. 2, which shows how the (organic and induced) pre-visit DI is integrated with the stimulus of the visit to form the (complex) post-visit DI. The dotted lines represent the feedback loops through which intention to revisit leads to a new stimulus, and the post-visit DI of the initial visit becomes the memorized pre-visit DI of this next visit.

Regarding the integration of prior knowledge with new information, the hypothesis was proposed, that the degree of change depends largely on the question, if the pre-trip image is confirmed through the "experience-driven process" during the visit (Kim & Chen, 2016): congruity will cause no changes at all, while extreme incongruity will lead to a strongly transformed destination image. This explanation is compatible with the disconfirmation effect (Oliver, 1977) and assimilation-contrast theory (Anderson, 1973) described in consumer psychology.

However, research on consumer learning has found that learning through experience is difficult due to often ambiguous evidence and biases favouring assimilative processing and confirmation of prior beliefs (Hoch & Deighton, 1989; Hoch & Ha, 1986), and studies in consumer psychology have observed confirmatory tendencies in the interaction between advertisement and evidence for other contexts (Bagchi et al., 2020; Deighton, 1984) to avoid cognitive dissonance (Cummings & Venkatesan, 1976). While it can be assumed that this also applies to some degree to the holiday experience, this problem has received little attention in tourism research so far.

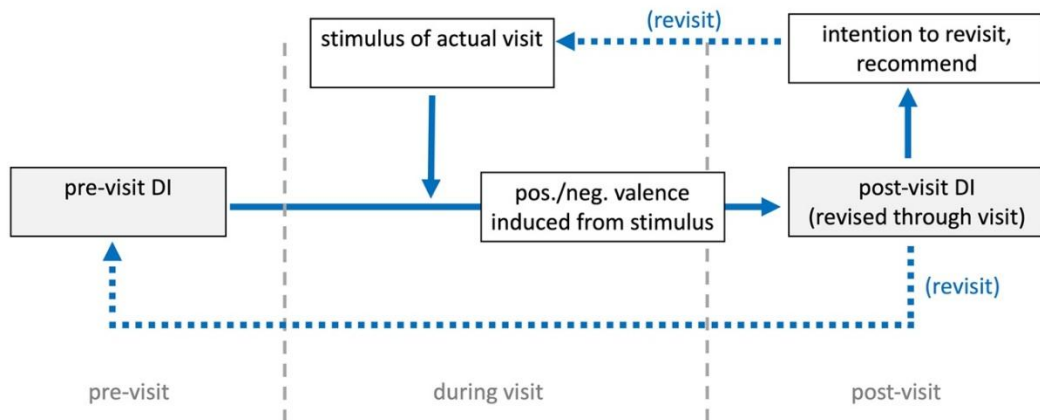


Figure 2. Complex DI formation. Source: Authors own elaboration based on Fakeye and Crompton (1991), Glückstad et al. (2020)

Looking at the empirical evidence from case studies, many publications have found a connection between prior visitation and destination image, however, they often utilize cross-sectional studies comparing visitors and non-visitors. It is questionable if this approach can validly measure complex destination image formation, as it does not control for the strong relationship between pre-visit destination image and the travel decision (Chaulagain et al., 2019; C.-H. Lin et al., 2007) which suggests that visitors already have very different destination images compared to non-visitors, even before they start their trip. This approach can therefore only speculate about the directionality of the relationship between destination image and visitation (Tasci, 2006). Through systematic literature research, publications have been identified that empirically examined the changes in destination image through visitation with longitudinal or more direct approaches. A search was conducted on the databases Web of Science and Scopus for articles containing “destination image” and any of the following words within the title, abstract and keywords: change, *confirmation, congruence, complex, experien*, gap, modif*, organic, primary, reevaluat*, transform*, visit*. The search parameters were restricted to document type: Article, source type: Journal, language: English. No filter criteria were applied for subject area and date of publication. The results have been screened in two rounds, first on the basis of abstract and title, and consequently based on the full text to include original peer-reviewed research articles, empirically measuring the change of destination image through visitation with the following types of studies:

- longitudinal studies surveying the same sample of visitors pre- and post-visit (Chen, 2019; Cheng & Chen, 2014; de Rosa & Dryjanska, 2017; Lee et al., 2012; Li et al., 2023; O’Leary & Deegan, 2005; Oliver, 2003; Papadimitriou & Gibson, 2008; Pavesi et al., 2016, 2022; Pearce, 1982; van der Zee & Go, 2013; Vitouladiti, 2013; Vogt & Andereck, 2003), or at multiple stages pre-, during and post-visit (Kim et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2015; Tasci & Moreno-Gil, 2024)
- cross-sectional studies asking visitors to retrospectively compare their pre-visit destination image to either their current destination image during the visit (Dann, 1996; Iordanova & Stylidis, 2019; Lequeux-Dinca et al., 2018; Syed Jaafar et al., 2022) or post-visit (Akhoondnejad, 2015; Boo & Busser, 2006; Chang, 2012; Jani & Nguni, 2016; B. Lee et al., 2014; E. Lee et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2014; Wang & Davidson, 2010)
- surveys of visitors’ perceived changes in destination image (Beerli-Palacio & Martín-Santana, 2020, 2017; Machado et al., 2009; Martín-Santana et al., 2017),
- comparisons of visitors and non-visitors with large-scale longitudinal data (Tasci, 2006, 2007),

- comparisons of destination image between arriving and departing visitors (Chon, 1991; Yilmaz et al., 2009),
- and comparisons of DI between first-time- and repeat-visitors (Baloglu et al., 2014; Giralaldi & Cesareo, 2014; Hamdy et al., 2023; Molina et al., 2013; Phelps, 1986; Schofield et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2024; Tan, 2017), and additionally non-visitors (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991).

Across these different approaches, the most prevalent finding is a positive effect of visitation on cognitive destination image (Chang, 2012; Chen, 2019; Chon, 1991; de Rosa & Dryjanska, 2017; Iordanova & Stylidis, 2019; S. Kim et al., 2019; B. Lee et al., 2014; Lequeux-Dinca et al., 2018; C. Li et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2014; Pearce, 1982; Tasci, 2006; Tasci & Moreno-Gil, 2024; Vogt & Andereck, 2003; Yilmaz et al., 2009). However, some of the studies find this effect only for a part of the measured items (Cheng & Chen, 2014; Jani & Nguni, 2016; Pearce, 1982; Tasci, 2007; van der Zee & Go, 2013; Y. Wang & Davidson, 2010; Yilmaz et al., 2009), or opposing effects between different cognitive items (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Giralaldi & Cesareo, 2014; C. Lee et al., 2012; O'Leary & Deegan, 2005; Vitouladiti, 2013). A few studies find a partially negative (Papadimitriou & Gibson, 2008) or overall negative effect (Boo & Busser, 2006; Pavesi et al., 2016).

The effect on affective destination image shows variation as well: While several reported a positive (Iordanova & Stylidis, 2019; B. Lee et al., 2014; Lequeux-Dinca et al., 2018; C. Li et al., 2023; Tasci, 2006, 2007) or partially positive effect (Chang, 2012; de Rosa & Dryjanska, 2017; C. Lee et al., 2012; Pearce, 1982; Wang & Davidson, 2010), a few studies showed mixed (Kim et al., 2019; Vitouladiti, 2013), partially negative (Giralaldi & Cesareo, 2014; O'Leary & Deegan, 2005) or negative effects (Boo & Busser, 2006). Vogt and Andereck (2003) found no significant changes.

Regarding the content of destination image, some of the studies found increases in knowledge (Chen, 2019; de Rosa & Dryjanska, 2017; T. Oliver, 2003; Vogt & Andereck, 2003), changes in content (Dann, 1996; Syed Jaafar et al., 2022), or adjustments of previously believed inaccuracies (Phelps, 1986), supporting the summarization of Tasci and Gartner (2007): "{...} researchers agree that visitation results in more realistic images due to first hand experience of the product." While it was also suggested that visitation could increase the psychological, holistic, and unique characteristics of DI (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997), the systematic literature research did not produce a publication tracking the changes of different image items from pre- to post-visit utilizing the categorization of Echtner and Ritchie (1993).

A part of this variation in results can likely be attributed to the broad range of combinations between destinations and visitors: The scope of examined destinations ranges from a single attraction (Cheng & Chen, 2014) to a continental subregion (Lee et al., 2012). Most of the above discussed studies examine international visitors from multiple countries, or visitors from different specific source markets abroad. This is notable, as the nationality and cultural background have been found to have an influence on the change of destination image (Chang, 2012; de Rosa & Dryjanska, 2017).

Some of the main drivers of complex destination image formation were found to be the visitors' on-site experiences (Boo & Busser, 2006; Hamdy et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2015; Syed Jaafar et al., 2022; Tan, 2017). Smith et al. (2015) found that visitors compare their on-site experiences to their pre-visit expectations throughout the visit – a “preconceived notion of what their destination experience will entail”, which directly affects their image, at least temporarily. An important aspect of this comparison is the confirmation of travel motivations that initially led the tourist to choose the destination (Beerli-Palacio & Martín-Santana, 2017). The authors understand motivation in that context as “a state of necessity that pushes the individual to act in a certain way that is assumed will lead to a desirable sense of satisfaction”. This notion is in line with studies that found a connection between the overall satisfaction with the trip and the change of image through the visit (Lee et al., 2014; Machado et

al., 2009). These results support the hypothesis on the role of congruity with the pre-visit destination image (Kim & Chen 2016). However, some of the reviewed studies found that the comparison of experience and expectations, as well as the resulting effect on destination image are subject to cognitive biases and psychological phenomena (Smith et al., 2015; Tasci, 2006). In the case study of Smith et. al (2015), even though the participants disconfirmed their romanticized pre-visit image and partially unrealistic expectations upon arrival, their evaluation of destination image took a positive turn during the stay, before they returned to a level comparable to, or slightly above the rosy pre-trip baseline within a few weeks after the holiday. A similar dynamic was found by Tasci and Moreno-Gil (2024) for both cognitive and affective image: An improvement from pre- to post-visit, but the image one year after the trip was not as positive as the image one month after the trip.

Another factor potentially influencing complex destination image formation is the previous experience. Several studies found a moderating effect of prior experience on the change of destination image through visitation (Molina et al., 2013; Tan, 2017; Vogt & Andereck, 2003). The results range from small differences (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Jani & Nguni, 2016; Phelps, 1986) to considerable differences in the change of cognitive image (Vogt & Andereck, 2003). Silva et al. (2024), who segmented visitors according to the number of previous visits and on-site experience found significant differences between segments for cognitive DI items, but not for affective DI. In a related context, the study of Schofield et al. (2020) did not track the changes in DI, but found that the overall satisfaction with the holiday is influenced by different cognitive DI elements, depending on the number of previous visits. However, Tan (2017) observes that destination image hardly changes at all after the first visit. So far, it is unclear in which cases this factor plays a major or minor role in complex destination image formation.

Overall, the results suggest that complex DI formation depends on the interplay between the characteristics of the destination, those of the visitors, and the resulting on-site experiences. The inherent complexity, which is the result of the individual characteristics of the destination and the visitors attracted by these characteristics, leads to mixed findings in previous research, making it difficult for destination managers to transfer learnings from other destinations to their own case. To create insights contributing to more clarity, the approach of the present study is a reduction of complexity through the choice of destination and visitors to facilitate a detailed examination of the individual changes from pre- to post-visit DI.

As study participants, domestic summer visitors to two European Alpine destinations were chosen for several reasons: Firstly, they are likely to have formed a comprehensive and differentiated organic image through education and general media consumption. This makes them less dependent on information through promotional information from the destination and other induced image agents (Gartner, 1994), which could vary widely between different countries and information sources. To further reduce the influence of secondary stimuli (Glückstad et al., 2020), participants that had already planned or even booked their summer holiday at the time of the pre-visit survey were selected, and the post-visit survey was conducted at a time when the examined regions were not promoted as summer destinations. Secondly, compared to international tourists, domestic tourists are culturally close to the destination, which reduces stereotypes and biases through “cultural baggage” (de Rosa & Dryjanska, 2017). Furthermore, the participant profile was narrowed down to summer visitors, spending their main summer holiday in the destination to ensure a certain homogeneity in the duration of stay and activity profile. Finally, since many countries have a high share of domestic tourists, e.g., more than 50% for European destinations in 2022 (Eurostat, 2023), the study of this group has practical relevance and could allow a more direct transfer of learnings between different destinations than studies of more complex settings. To not rely on one case study alone, this study included two different yet comparable Alpine destinations which attract domestic visitors with similar distances to travel to the destination: The Alpine regions Allgäu in Germany and South Tyrol in Italy.

Reducing complexity allows this study to focus on the individual changes in destination image (DI). In particular, it analyses the role of prior experiences and the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of pre-visit expectations. Therefore, the study is structured around the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the effect of visitation on destination image?

RQ2: Does fulfilment / non-fulfilment of pre-visit expectations contribute to the changes in destination image?

RQ3: What are the differences in the change of destination image between first-time and repeat visitors?

By investigating these three research questions and comparing the findings to earlier research, the aim is to deepen the understanding of the impact of visitation on the process of complex destination image formation.

3. Methodology

The present study was designed as a pre-post qualitative exploration, surveying participants with a web-based tool for qualitative data collection (QDC Studio) before and after their summer holidays in 2021. This approach follows the recommendation of Tasci (2006) to investigate the impact of visitation on DI qualitatively as this allows a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons. The sample was recruited using online panels of Norstat in Italy and Germany (see <https://www.norstatpanel.com/en>) and targeted participants who had already booked or planned a holiday to one of two domestic Alpine destinations: Italians travelling to the destination South Tyrol and Germans travelling to the destination Allgäu. As previous research suggested that most of the changes in DI occur during the first visitation (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Vogt & Andereck, 2003), the quota-sampling was focused to contain a certain number of participants who had not previously visited the destination for a holiday. 145 participants completed the pre-visit survey in May 2021 and were contacted again for the post-visit survey in December 2021, which was completed by 101 participants. To ensure that the sample consists of actual visitors, both surveys contained detailed questions regarding the (planned) summer holidays, and the provided answers were checked for consistency between the pre- and post-visit survey. After the exclusion of 11 data sets due to notable deviations, the final sample used for analysis consisted of 90 participants. Table 1 provides an overview of the final sample structure.

Table 1. *Structure of final sample.*

Previous visitation		Gender	
yes	66	female	49
no	24	male	41
Nationality		University degree	
Italian	50	yes	48
German	40	no	42
Age group		Household income	
18 -29	17	below 2000 Euro	18
30 - 44	23	2000 – 3999 Euro	52
45 - 65	50	4000 Euros or more	20
Children living in household		Place of residence	
yes	49	North Italy, South Germany (close by)	42
no	41	Other Italy/Germany	48

The survey design used a standardized questionnaire with open- and closed-ended questions based on prior research literature to operationalize the central constructs. To investigate the participants'

cognitive destination image, they were presented with a list of 12 randomly sorted items, which were selected based on destination image elements commonly used in prior research, as compiled by Gallarza et al. (2002) and adapted to the setting of an Alpine destination. The participants were asked to select the items they associate with the destination, representing a “forced-choice full binary” format as recommended by Dolnicar and Grün (2013). Subsequently, they were asked to concretely describe their positive and negative beliefs, ideas, and impressions for each of the elements they selected in an open-ended question. In the post-study, this format was repeated and additionally applied to assess the participants’ perceived changes by asking them to select the elements for which they feel their impressions changed through their holidays and then describe the changes. Affective image was measured with four bipolar 5-point scales based on Russell et al. (1981) to describe the affective quality of places. In the pre-visit survey, the participants were asked in open-ended questions to describe their expectations towards their holidays in a narrative way – like they would tell them to a friend. In the post visit survey, the participants were shown their responses regarding their expectations from the pre-trip survey and were asked to compare their experiences at the destination with their expectations. A translation of the survey questions is provided in appendix A.

A qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000) of the text segments provided as answers to the open questions was conducted using MaxQDA. Depending on the specific question, inductive or deductive coding was applied to examine how the descriptions changed from pre- to post-visit. The text segments were translated into English and independently coded by one native German speaker and one native Italian speaker, using both the original texts and their translations. Multiple frames of analysis were applied to examine the occurring changes on a content level: For the first analysis, the texts of the pre- and post-visit survey were compared and coded inductively. After coding 20 cases each, the codes were compared and discussed to develop final categories and criteria for the final round of inductive coding. Since the aim of this study is a detailed examination on a content level, a further level of analysis utilized the categorization attribute-based/holistic, functional/psychological, and common/unique which was developed by Echtner and Ritchie (1993) based on consumer behaviour and psychology (MacInnis & Price, 1987). Due to its multidimensionality, this model is used as a reference framework in several conceptual papers arguing for a more differentiated and holistic approach of measuring destination image (Gallarza et al., 2002; Kislali et al., 2020) and is considered specifically suited to provide a more comprehensive picture of the complex concept of destination image (Lin et al., 2012; Scorrano et al. 2018). The descriptions of the selected destination image items were coded with a deductive approach, identifying the different categories within the comment. The final coding was then compared and merged before interpreting the results and conducting additional statistical analysis using SPSS 28. A detailed description and translated excerpts as examples for the coding are provided together with the respective findings.

4. Results

4.1 Change in the selection of cognitive destination image elements

A first step of analysis compares the cognitive DI elements which were selected for pre- and post-visit destination image, and the elements which participants felt had changed. Table 2 shows which percentage of the sample selected the elements regarding these questions. For orientation, the elements are sorted by the percentage of participants that selected them as part of their DI in the pre-visit survey.

The comparison of the elements selected pre- and post-visit shows that almost all items were selected more frequently post-visit. The only exception is the element *nature and landscape*, which slightly decreases yet remains the most-chosen item in the post-visit survey. On average, the participants selected 3.4 elements out of 12 in the pre-visit survey, and 4.9 post-visit. The differences in percentage between the items is less pronounced post-visit, and the ranking between the elements changed slightly. For most elements, a little less than half of the participants who selected the element as part of their

post-visit image also selected it for perceived change. This proportion is comparatively high for the elements culture and tradition, hotels and accommodations, and atmosphere and lifestyle, and low for traffic, public transport, accessibility, as well as for sports and activities. Almost a quarter of the sample reported that their destination image changed for none of the elements.

Table 2. *Cognitive image elements selected pre-visit, post-visit, and for perceived change, in % of N.*

	Selection of DI elements (forced binary)		
	% of selection pre-visit	% of selection post-visit	% of selection for perceived change
nature and landscape	81%	74%	38%
regional cuisine and gastronomy	50%	62%	26%
atmosphere and lifestyle	40%	47%	28%
climate and weather	28%	42%	18%
hotels and accommodations	26%	48%	30%
sports and activities	23%	39%	10%
safety and hygiene	23%	42%	17%
culture and traditions	17%	32%	21%
spa, wellness, health	17%	29%	13%
events and entertainment	12%	21%	8%
traffic, public transport, accessibility	11%	26%	6%
local price level	11%	31%	13%
(none of these elements)			24%

4.2 Participants' descriptions of perceived change

The next step focuses on the perceived change of DI: After choosing the elements for which they feel their image has changed in the post-visit study, the participants were asked to describe this change for each element in open-ended questions.

Surprisingly, the biggest part of the provided comments did not specify a change of image, even though the elements were chosen in the forced-binary question. Some of the answers stated that they cannot describe the change, e.g., Participant 2 (nature and landscape): "I don't know". Others were inconclusive, as they did not describe a change: Participant 65 (nature and landscape): "beautiful". Both types of answers were coded as *not specified*.

Of the coherent answers, the most frequently described change is that the participant found the element to be better than expected, which was coded *perceived better*. Most of these descriptions do not provide much additional information: Participant 45 (culture and tradition): "better". Only a few of the comments specify the change to the better more concretely, e.g., Participant 53 (culture and tradition): "I discovered traditions that I did not know and was pleasantly surprised."

Much rarer was the opposite change, which was coded *perceived worse*, e.g., Participant 25 (traffic, public transport, accessibility): "Considerably worse than expected". This description of perceived change was found sporadically distributed with one or two cases for different elements, and slightly accumulated only for the element local price level.

Even less frequently, the comments describe that the content of the participant's image change without attaching a value judgement, which was coded *perceived different*: Participant 25 (nature and landscape): "much flatter foothills, more lakes". Table 3 shows how frequently these different types of descriptions of perceived change were expressed for the different DI elements.

Table 3. *Coding of comments for perceived change.*

	Visitors' own description of perceived change (in % of N)			
	perc. better	perc. worse	perc. different	not specified
nature and landscape	11%	0%	1%	26%
regional cuisine and gastronomy	7%	1%	0%	18%
atmosphere and lifestyle	4%	2%	1%	21%
climate and weather	1%	0%	2%	15%
hotels and accommodations	11%	1%	0%	18%
sports and activities	3%	0%	0%	7%
safety and hygiene	3%	0%	1%	13%
culture and traditions	6%	0%	1%	14%
spa, wellness, health	7%	1%	0%	5%
events and entertainment	1%	0%	1%	6%
traffic, public transport, accessibility	0%	2%	0%	4%
local price level	2%	7%	0%	4%

4.3 Comparison pre- and post-visit descriptions

To examine the change of DI more objectively, the next step compared the participants' descriptions of the elements they selected in the pre- and post-visit survey as part of their DI, including cases when the element was selected and/or commented in only one of the two surveys.

In many cases, the participants provided more associations and/or more detailed descriptions of the respective element in the post-visit comments, often showing an increase in knowledge of the specific characteristics of the destination, for example Participant 5 (regional cuisine and gastronomy) pre-visit: "one eats very good"; post-visit: "Dumplings, spaetzle, strudel, bacon". As this represents a change of the cognitive component of DI, this type of change was coded *more cognitive*. This type of change occurred rather evenly across all elements (see Table 4).

Another common change was that compared to the pre-visit comment, the post-visit comments contained more, and/or more strongly worded descriptions of how the participants feel about the DI elements, phrased from a more personal perspective, as can be seen the following example,: Participant 56 (nature and landscape) pre-visit: "Alpine pastures, nature and plants of the mountain world, clear mountain streams"; post-visit: "Endless hiking trails where you can enjoy nature and tranquillity very much. Surprising viewpoints, paths are very well signposted." This type of change was coded *more affective*. The example demonstrates that this change can occur together with *more cognitive* aspects. However, the distribution across the DI elements is more differentiated: The addition of *more affective* aspects is notably high for the elements nature and landscape, as well as atmosphere and lifestyle; and low for the elements traffic, public transport, accessibility, and local price level.

In a few cases, the participant provided a shorter and/or less detailed description of the element in the post-visit survey, or very similar descriptions in the pre- and post-visit survey, showing no notable changes. These cases were respectively coded *less* and *similar*.

The second round of coding analysed the text applying the categories developed by Echtner & Ritchie (1993). Using the element nature and landscape to provide examples for the coding, "mountains, lakes" was coded as *attribute-based*, "cultural landscape" as *holistic*, "perfect landscape for hiking" as *functional*, "peaceful nature" as *psychological*, "nice landscape" as *common*, and "Dolomites" as *unique*. Table 5 shows how the proportion of comments containing these characteristics changed from the pre-

visit to the post-visit descriptions. E.g. for the element nature and landscape, 44% of the pre-visit comments and 43% of the post-visit comments were coded to be based on *attributes*, thus the table shows the change of -1%. The difference in percentage was color-coded for an easier overview of the dynamic. An extended version of the table showing all proportions pre- and post-visit can be found in appendix B. Elements with similar dynamics of change have been grouped with hierarchical cluster analysis (farthest neighbour = complete linkage, Euclidian distance).

Table 4. *Coding of comments for comparison pre- and post-visit.*

	Change in descriptions of selected elements, comparison pre-post visit (in % of N)			
	more cognitive	more affective	less	similar
nature and landscape	24%	33%	14%	22%
regional cuisine and gastronomy	27%	14%	10%	12%
atmosphere and lifestyle	14%	31%	9%	7%
climate and weather	19%	13%	10%	10%
hotels and accommodations	27%	22%	4%	8%
sports and activities	20%	11%	9%	10%
safety and hygiene	16%	17%	2%	8%
culture and traditions	22%	12%	1%	3%
spa, wellness, health	12%	10%	3%	3%
events and entertainment	12%	8%	4%	1%
traffic, public transport, accessibility	16%	3%	2%	4%
local price level	23%	2%	2%	4%

Table 5. *Change in comments from pre- to post-visit, adapting categories of Echtner and Ritchie (1993).*

		Change in characteristics of description (difference in % of provided comments)					
		attribute-based	holistic	functional	psycho-logical	common	unique
cluster 1	local price level	16%	0%	16%	0%	16%	0%
	climate and weather	20%	-9%	8%	3%	10%	1%
	safety and hygiene	34%	-20%	25%	-18%	25%	0%
	hotels and accommodations	20%	-24%	36%	-1%	14%	-2%
	events and entertainment	10%	11%	21%	0%	33%	-13%
cluster 2	atmosphere and lifestyle	8%	24%	11%	17%	15%	-6%
	spa, wellness, health	8%	29%	6%	7%	9%	0%
	nature and landscape	-1%	24%	8%	30%	-13%	0%
	culture and traditions	11%	35%	-16%	21%	18%	24%
cluster 3	sports and activities	-19%	34%	-4%	7%	-17%	0%
	traffic, public transport, accessibility	-26%	8%	-20%	9%	4%	-16%
	regional cuisine and gastronomy	3%	-14%	13%	2%	-23%	1%

This analysis shows considerable differences between pre- and post-visit DI, and two almost opposed dynamics of change: The change for cluster 1 trends towards more *attribute-based* and *functional*

descriptions, with only events and entertainment gaining evenly in *attribute-based* and *holistic* characteristics. In contrast, clusters 2 and 3 show a shift towards more *holistic* and *psychological*. Almost all elements showed an increase for the code *common*, with a few exceptions for the elements nature and landscape, sports and activities, and regional cuisine and gastronomy. Only culture and traditions showed a clear increase in *unique* characteristics.

4.4 Changes in affective DI

To track the changes in affective DI, table 6 displays the means and standard deviations of the 4 bipolar scales for pre- and post-visit, as well as the significance of a Related-Samples Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test, to check for changes in the medians between the measurements of the pre-visit and post-visit survey. Additionally, figure 3 visualizes the individual changes of the participants from pre- to post visit. Since the items were measured with scales from the negative pole (-2) to the positive pole (2), positive numbers represent a change towards the positive pole and vice versa. The means of all four bipolar scales are slightly higher and standard deviations slightly smaller post-visit: the affective rating of the destinations overall became more positive and homogenic. However, this change is only significant for the scale arousing - sleepy. The breakdown of individual changes shows that most ratings remained the same and while the positive changes slightly prevail, some participants ratings also changed towards the negative poles.

Table 6. *Affective DI, pre- and post-visit.*

	mean		standard deviation		Wilcoxon
	pre-visit	post-visit	pre-visit	post-visit	sign.
unpleasant – pleasant	1.56	1.69	1.06	0.63	.297
gloomy – exciting	1.03	1.17	0.95	0.83	.231
distressing – relaxing	1.52	1.67	1.07	0.61	.192
sleepy – arousing	1.16	1.48	1.02	0.62	.004*

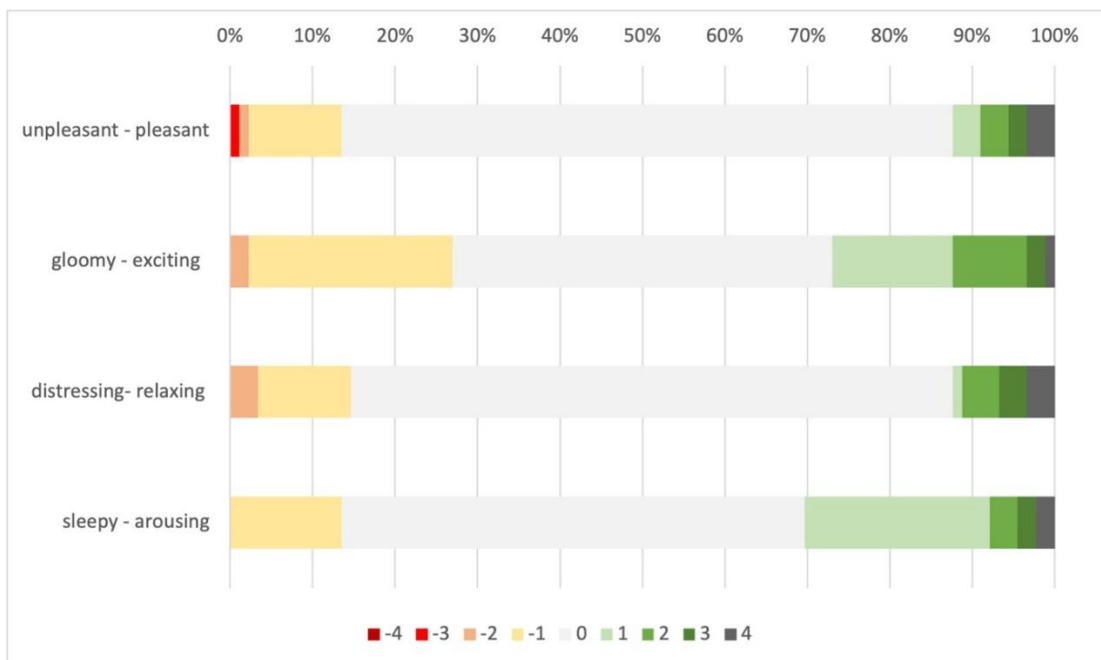


Figure 3. *Individual changes affective DI from pre- to post-visit, in % N*

4.5 Fulfilment of expectations

In the post-visit survey, the participants were confronted with the expectations they had formulated in the pre-visit survey and asked to describe in how far their expectations were fulfilled by their holidays. Of the 89 participants that answered this question, seven declared their expectations at least partially unfulfilled, 69 as fulfilled, and 13 stated that their stay in the destination exceeded their expectations. All outcomes of this comparison were found for first-time and repeat visitors, as is displayed in table 7. While first-time visitors have a slightly higher share of unfulfilled and exceeded expectations, the difference is not significant (fisher exact test, sig. 0.381). The fulfilment of expectations was used as a grouping variable for further analysis.

Table 7. *Fulfilment of expectations for first-time and repeat visitors*

	first-time visitors		repeat visitors		total	
	n	% n	n	% n	N	% N
expectations unfulfilled	3	13%	4	6%	7	8%
expectations fulfilled	17	71%	52	80%	69	78%
expectations exceeded	4	17%	9	14%	13	15%

To determine the differences in the change of DI between visitors with unfulfilled, fulfilled and exceeded expectations, an Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test has been conducted, checking for significant differences in the distribution of the coding from the qualitative analysis and the changes on the affective scales. An overview of the test results is displayed in Table 8.

The only significant differences found between visitors with fulfilled, unfulfilled, and exceeded expectations also relate to the description of the perceived change of DI – in this case if certain elements of DI were perceived in hindsight better or worse than expected. Participants who stated that their expectations were not fulfilled also described significantly more elements *worse*, and significantly less elements *better* than participants with fulfilled or exceeded expectations. All other changes occurred similarly, independent of the fulfilment of expectations. However, it should be kept in mind that this comparison is based on small case numbers.

4.6 First-time and repeat visitors.

The differences in the change of DI between first-time and repeat visitors have been checked with an Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U test, the results can be found in Table 8. This comparison found three significant differences, the first two concern the change of the descriptions of DI elements from pre- to post-visit: Repeat visitors more frequently write *less* about DI elements after the current visit, and also the change *more affect* was more common for repeat visitors, even though two participants with the most descriptions containing *more affect* were first-time visitors.

Concerning the participants' description of their perceived change, the first-time visitors reported more perceptions of an element as *different* than expected. For the interpretation of this comparison, it needs to be remembered that the sample contained only 24 first-time visitors and there might be further differences that could not be detected due to small case numbers.

Table 8. *Non-parametrical tests for differences in changes between groups.*

		Visitors with unfulfilled, fulfilled, exceeded expectations	First-time, repeat visitors
		Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test
description of perceived change		sig.	sig.
	perc. better	.023*	.671
	perc. worse	.016*	.460
	perc. different	.264	.025*
Change in description of selected elements pre-post	similar	.550	.129
	more cogn.	.073	.136
	more affect	.114	.042*
	less	.334	.026*
change in characteristics of description pre-post	attribute-based	.060	.753
	holistic	.420	.726
	functional	.114	.775
	psychological	.969	.597
	common	.202	.985
	unique	.655	.975
change in affect	pleasant - unpleasant	.529	.377
	exciting - gloomy	.398	.161
	relaxing - distressing	.472	.085
	arousing - sleepy	.270	.481

5. Discussion

This empirical study examined three research questions concerning the effects of visitation on the change of DI for domestic tourists. Overall, the cognitive changes are nuanced and for a large part of the sample, the affective DI hardly changed at all. In this regard, the findings are similar to the findings of O'Leary and Deegan (2005) for travellers outside their own country: Their study found only subtle changes between the pre- and post-visit ratings for a series of cognitive and affective attributes, showing that "Ireland's destination image is largely confirmed by the experience of French visitors". As this study investigates the DI of domestic tourists for two mature nature destinations, it should be noted that even prior to any exposure to promotional information and visitation, the participants have a formed a comprehensive organic DI (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991), through geography lessons in school, national news reports, or holidays in similar destination.

5.1 Changes in DI

Summarizing the cognitive changes, the post-visit DI is overall thematically broader, deeper in detail and more connected to emotion. This is in accordance with results by the qualitative study of Smith et al., (2015), who found a lasting change in cognitive DI one month after the trip. However, since these effects were found for first-time and repeat visitors alike, this change appears to be renewed through each visit. Some information got lost in the transition from pre-visit to post-visit DI, which can be interpreted as an exchange in the weighting or emphasis of the different DI elements. While all elements gained *more cognitive* aspects in the descriptions, the type of added detail/information varies between different elements. MacKay and Fesenmaier (1997) hypothesized that image of visitors is more holistic, psychological, and unique than the image of non-visitors. While this hypothesis has been confirmed in comparisons of visitors and non-visitors (Lin et al., 2012; Scorrano et al., 2018; Styliadis & Cherifi, 2018), this study was to the best of the author's knowledge the first to examine these changes by surveying the

same sample pre- and post-visit. The findings show that this development does not occur for all DI elements alike: while about half of the DI elements shift towards more holistic and psychological, the other half shows a complete reverse dynamic, gaining in attribute-based and functional characteristics, and only one element showed more unique characteristics.

An unexpected result was found concerning the tourists perceived change of DI: Often, the participants selected DI elements for “perceived change” in the forced-binary format but did not provide a conclusive description of this change in the compulsory follow-up question. Though the participants feel that something has changed, they either cannot or do not want to specify what exactly changed. Possibly, these perceived changes are very subtle and hard to pinpoint. In this context, it should also be noted how rarely any elements of DI have been described as *different* or *worse* than expected. The highest proportion of concrete descriptions of the perceived change were given for local price level – which seems to be the elements that could be compared to the pre-trip expectations most unambiguously.

Even more subtle than the changes in cognitive DI are the changes in affective DI: As the ratings were already very positive in the pre-visit survey, they did not have much room to move upwards, similar to the results of Vogt and Andereck (2003) on domestic tourists in the US, and in line with the observation of Smith et al. (2015) in an international setting, who found that affective ratings had mostly returned to pre-trip levels one month after the trip. However, the descriptions of DI elements showed a clear increase in affective wording. While the personal experience in the destination did not have a major impact on the ratings of affective DI, it seems to change how the cognitive and affective components of DI are connected: post-visit, a wider range of cognitive DI elements are associated with positive affect. In the light of these findings, it seems that the use of aggregated scale ratings of the destination as whole is a practical tool to compare different destinations, but not an adequate approach to capture the complexity of the change of affective perceptions.

5.2 Fulfilment of expectations and the change of DI

The second research question focused on the role of expectations and their fulfilment through the visit. The confirmation of travel motivations was shown to be an antecedent of DI change by Beerli-Palacio and Martín-Santana (2017), who measured the constructs with scale ratings during the holiday. This study aimed to gain a more differentiated insight through open-ended questions asking the participants in the post-visit survey to reflect on the level of fulfilment of the expectations they had formulated themselves in the pre-visit survey. The presented findings show a connection between the fulfilment of expectations and the perceived change of DI, but only for value judgements in the sense of *better* or *worse*. This adjustment of value judgements if product performance sharply deviates from expectations is in line with the moderation of image according to the level of congruity (H. Kim & Chen, 2016).

Further observations on the relationship between expectations and change of DI can be inferred from the differentiated analysis of the various changes: As some of the previous studies had found opposing changes between different cognitive DI elements (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; O’Leary & Deegan, 2005), this study made a point of tracking the changes for the single elements on a content level and found substantial differences. The importance of the elements nature and landscape, as well as food and gastronomy could be expected, as these are some of the main attractions of the examined destinations. Two further elements that contribute in a particular way to the change of DI are atmosphere and lifestyle, as well as culture and traditions: The descriptions of these elements revolve around getting in touch with the local population and experiencing a different culture and way of life, which is difficult to anticipate pre-trip and makes a notable impression on the visitors’ DI: the descriptions relating to atmosphere and lifestyle show the second highest value for *more affect*, and the descriptions of the element culture and traditions show the biggest changes towards more *holistic* and *unique*. These findings complement the insights of the study by Pavesi et al. (2022) on the influence of social

interactions within the travel group, the findings of Styliadis et al. (2022) on the positive effect of interaction quality between residents and tourists on destination image, satisfaction, and loyalty, and confirm a point discussed by Fakeye and Crompton (1991), that it is especially the contact to the local culture which potentially creates a more complex and differentiated image.

Some of the most substantial changes from pre- to post visit DI were found for the element *hotels and accommodations*: Regarding the selection as being a part of DI, it went from a quarter of the sample pre-visit to almost half in the post-visit survey, elevating it to one of the central elements of post-visit DI. It also has the second highest value for *perceived change* and shares first places for being perceived *better* and gaining *more cognitive* aspects with predominantly *attribute-based*, *functional* and *common* characteristics. This is particularly noteworthy, as it contrasts the results of Fakeye and Crompton (1991), who found a negative effect of visitation on the rating of accommodation: “the perceptions of nonvisitors significantly exceeded the reality reported by visitors”. Accordingly, this seems to be an element which becomes more concrete during the visit and is distinctively compared against pre-visit expectations, either based on DI or a personal standard. The findings show a similar dynamic (increased selection as an element of post-visit DI with a shift towards more *attribute-based* and *functional* characteristics) for safety and hygiene, as well as the local price level which is the only DI element in this study aggregating some post-visit perceptions as *worse*. Similarly, some of the biggest discrepancies between pre- and post-visit DI in the study by O’Leary and Deegan (2005) was that visitors perceived Ireland as “(...) relatively expensive as a holiday destination, and not particularly clean.”, and Hamdy et al. (2023) identified improvements in safety and cleanliness as the most important measures to increase Egypt’s destination image.

These differentiated developments suggest that due to their complex nature some DI elements are relatively vague in the pre-trip DI and equally difficult to interpret during the visit, which impedes the comparison between expectations and reality. For these elements, the contact with the destination shifts the DI towards holistic, psychological, and potentially unique characteristics. On the other hand, there are certain DI elements for which visitors have much clearer expectations and find it easier to compare them to the reality of the destination. These elements gain mainly in attribute-based, functional, and common characteristics, and are more likely to be perceived as better or worse if they fall short of expectations. However, the occurrence of discrepancies depends very much on the destination and the respective target group, as is shown in the contrasting changes between this study of domestic tourists and previous research in an international context.

5.3 Differences between first-time and repeat visitors:

The third research question examined the differences in changes between first-time and repeat visitors. First-time visitors had a slightly (yet not significantly) higher share of unfulfilled and exceeded expectations, but most of the described changes in DI show no significant differences. There were a few exceptions, comparable to the small differences found by some of the previous studies (Jani & Nguni, 2016; Phelps, 1986):

Firstly, repeat visitors more frequently write *less* about a certain element of DI after the visit than they did before the visit: A plausible explanation might be, that they started out with more knowledge about the destination.

Secondly, first timers more frequently described an element as factually *different* than they imagined it to be pre-visit – which is in accordance with the assumption of Fakeye and Crompton (1991), that most changes occur during the first visitation, when visitors compare the reality of the destination with their expectations formed through external sources. Against this interpretation stand that *different* descriptions are still very rare among first-time visitors, and most other changes occur equally for first-

time and repeat visitors. These observed changes on a content level are also in contrast with the notion of Tan (2017), that DI hardly changes at all after the first visit: Repeat-visitors even more frequently added *more affect* to their post-visit DI than first-time visitors.

Overall, the comparison between groups identifies the exceptions: A few first-time visitors adjusted inaccuracies in their cognitive DI, and a small part of the sample had unexpectedly positive or negative experiences during their visit, and consequently perceived that their DI changed to the better or worse – as described in Fig. 2 and the underlying model of Glückstad et al. (2020). However, this perceived change does not become apparent in any of the other changes analysed. The overall dynamic of the changes shows that, at least for domestic tourists, it is much more common to expand the positive image they have formed about a destination before the trip in a confirmatory way.

6. Conclusions

The understanding of complex DI formation was expanded with an explorative approach that reduced the complexity of image formation by focusing on domestic tourists and examining their changes in DI through visitation in detail. Even though many findings are in line with former research in an international context, new results raise a series of questions and implications for future research.

6.1. Theoretical and methodical contributions

Previous research largely agrees that during visitation, tourists conduct a comparison between their pre-visit DI and the reality of the destination, resulting in a more realistic, complex post-visit DI (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Considering the results of this study, it is questionable if this is unequivocally true for all types of holidays and destinations, and all elements of DI. For domestic tourists, only few of the observed adjustments in DI support this assumption, and what was found far more often was the confirmation of prior beliefs. While the model of Hyangmi Kim and Chen (2016) connects the change of DI to the level of congruity between the experience and the expectations, this study added the insight that visitors are much more likely to perceive incongruity for some elements of DI than for others.

The strong prevalence of the confirmatory tendency in the present study is most likely connected to the specific combination of destination and sample which holds a low potential for big surprises, positive or negative. However, the confirmation of prior beliefs could also play an important role for other types of vacation and destinations: Many people spend a high share of their free budget and free time on their annual holidays and thus have high motivation to avoid cognitive dissonance and in turn keep up congruity with their self-image (Chon, 1992). This hypothesis should be further investigated by comparing the change of DI for different settings.

Furthermore, this study produced new results regarding the differences in change between different cognitive DI elements, most notably two opposed dynamics of change for different DI elements in the categorization of Echtner and Ritchie (1993). These different dynamics seem to be connected to the complexity and ambiguity of the different elements of DI and the perception of potential incongruity. Other differences between cognitive items appear to be related to the type of destination and the specific offering. While this study was designed to detect differences, it was not suitable to fully explain them. Further research is needed to understand these mechanisms better.

Another surprising result was the discrepancy in the answers regarding perceived change of DI. While the participants chose a lot of elements in the standardized task for perceived change, the open-ended questions to describe this change mostly remained unanswered. The few coherent descriptions of the change mostly come down to simply “better” or “worse”. These two perceived changes were found to be closely connected to the fulfilment of expectations, but none of the other analysed changes showed

significant differences between visitors with fulfilled, unfulfilled, and exceeded expectations. In combination, these results raise the questions in how far visitors are aware of changes in their DI, and if surveying perceived change validly captures complex DI formation. This dynamic should be confirmed with other methods of qualitative data collection like personal interviews or focus groups to determine whether visitors are not aware of the changes or simply did not feel like elaborating these changes in an online survey.

Lastly, the found differences in DI changes between first-time and repeat visitors were not as clear as described in previous research in an international context (Tan, 2017). For all participants, post-visit DI is an enhanced version of pre-visit DI: it contains more elements, more detail, and the participants show more emotional and personal connection to the destination. While earlier research on visitors from a very different cultural background found the cognitive changes of DI to be lasting (Smith et al., 2015), the findings suggest that a large part of the change of domestic visitors could rather be a repeatable, temporary effect which is highly connected to the still very fresh memories of the current holiday and subject to a gradual decay after the visit as described for the visitors of sports events by King et al. (2015). Referring to the model presented in Fig. 2, this would mean that the pre-visit DI of a repeat visit might be significantly different from the post-visit DI of the initial visit. This complements the recent findings of Tasci and Moreno-Gil (2024), who found a drop off in ratings between surveys one month, and one year after the trip. This dynamic should be examined further with longitudinal data, tracking the change of visitors' DI over more than one holiday in the same destination.

6.2 Practical implications

The findings also have important practical implications for destination management and marketing: Firstly, if destination managers are interested in monitoring the change of their visitors' DI through visitation, they should be aware that comparing visitors to non-visitors, or surveying visitors for their perceived change might leave them in the dark. To achieve the highest informational value, it is needed to measure visitors' DI pre-, during, and post-visit and/or employ qualitative designs such as travel diaries.

Secondly, the question how much can and should be promised in destination marketing needs a differentiated view: Earlier research on the change of DI through visitation recommended destination marketers to tread lightly and "not promise too much" to avoid disappointment (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). This is supported by a recent study by Li et al. (2023), who find that congruence between the projected and perceived image positively effects tourists' experience evaluations.

However, a study on the related topic of service encounters by Boulding et al. (1999) found that consumers "exhibit an integrative (confirmatory) strategy when evaluating the quality", in which the prior knowledge and expectations influence both the posterior knowledge directly and the way in which new impressions are perceived. Accordingly, they recommend raising "expectations as high as possible, rather than lowering them with the goal of then surpassing them."

Given that the results of this study of domestic to in comparison to previous research, suggest that tourists are more likely to notice discrepancies between their expectations and the reality of the destination for certain DI elements than for others, destination marketers should adopt a differentiated approach. Some DI elements are inherently more complex and, therefore, subject to what Hoch and Deighton (1989) refer to as "high ambiguity," making it difficult for visitors to objectively assess whether the reality of the destination aligns with their expectations. Since destination marketers are not the only image formation agents, they should communicate a positive narrative for these elements to visitors in the planning and booking phase, as visitors are likely to interpret their experiences in the destination according to their prior beliefs and confirm the expectations they came with.

More specifically, the results of this study confirm that visitors' experiences of the local culture, traditions, lifestyle and atmosphere during the visit play a special role in the formation of the complex destination image. The comments analysed show that the associated experiences go beyond visiting cultural attractions and are often linked to contact with the local population and their culture in everyday situations. It should be a key concern of destinations to facilitate organic, unstaged and positive interactions between residents and visitors in their destination development and tourism offer, e.g. by ensuring that leisure activities, cultural events and gastronomic offerings are equally targeted and affordable for visitors and residents.

A careful approach is advised for the marketing of "low ambiguity" DI elements, for which discrepancies with prior beliefs become more easily apparent – e.g., promising snow in winter destinations. This study confirmed previous findings, that this is particularly the case for the elements of price, safety and hygiene, as well as hotels and accommodation. For these aspects, visitors can easily determine whether their expectations were met and readily adjust their image. In relation to these aspects, destinations should communicate transparently and monitor their performance closely through visitor surveys. If destinations have a good pre-visit image regarding these elements, they need to ensure that they live up to it. Conversely, these elements of low ambiguity should be of highest priority for destination managers and business owners in a destination with a less favourable image and present an opportunity to focus their efforts in order to change visitors' DI for the better.

Finally, as the boost in DI seems to decay after the visit, it would be advisable for destination marketers to regularly refresh the pleasant memories of the primary stimulus of the visit through secondary stimuli (Glückstad et al., 2020) with the help of their customer management system and communication that refers to the season and activities that the visitors showed an interest in, independently of the current season or booking phase.

6.3 Limitations and future research

As DI is a subjective and complex construct, it is necessarily simplified through aggregation and generalization when measured for a group of people to exemplify differences and commonalities. This study examined the changes in DI for two rural destinations and two domestic European source markets. The findings in DI must be understood within this setting and are not necessarily transferable for other types of destinations. However, some of the observed changes are likely to play a role for many destinations, especially concerning domestic tourism. Moreover, the study was a qualitative exploration based on a sample of 90 visitors, with only 24 first-time visitors, and potentially further differences between first-time and repeat visitors would have become apparent with a sample containing more first-time visitors. While differences between the two nationalities of the sample were checked to exclude possible pitfalls, the analysis did not include a specific focus on cultural differences or the comparison between the two destinations. While the study took measures to avoid a strong distortion through tourism promotion, the influence of other secondary stimuli cannot be ruled out. Another limitation concerns the data collection tool: The use of an online survey did not allow to pose follow-up questions like interviews or focus groups would have. Following up could have gained further insights, especially regarding the perceived changes, where participants mostly gave short and partially inconclusive answers. Additionally, the use of a 5-point scale to measure affective image might have limited the ability to capture subtle changes. Furthermore, this study was limited on the comparison of pre- and post-visit DI and thus might be affected by recall bias. Future studies should include an additional survey during the visit.

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Appendices

A: Wording of questionnaires (translated, original survey in German and Italian)

Expectations intro (pre-visit)	The following questions relate to your expectations for the upcoming vacation. This part is one of the main concerns of the study. Therefore, please take the time to think about the questions and answer them as fully as possible. Approximately 15 minutes have been calculated for answering the following two questions.
Expectations holiday (pre-visit)	Please describe in a few sentences what you expect from the vacation you have booked in (Allgäu / South Tyrol). Tell us as you would tell a friend over a cup of coffee or tea.
Expectations destination (pre-visit)	What expectations do you have of your vacation destination? What is special about it? What should the vacation destination be like to enable you to enjoy the experiences you have planned?
Comparison Experiences & Expectations (post-visit)	In this question, we would like to ask you to compare your vacation experience with the expectations you had formulated for your vacation in the first part of the study. (Participant is shown his own answers regarding expectations from the pre-visit survey)
DI Intro text (pre- visit, post-visit slightly adapted)	Did the vacation and the destination meet your expectations? Which were fulfilled and which were less so? What do you think could have been the reason for this? The following questions relate to the image you have of (Allgäu / South Tyrol) as a vacation destination. The impressions, imagery and ideas that you associate with it. To make this internalized image accessible to you, we would like to ask you to close your eyes for a moment and imagine (Allgäu / South Tyrol) before answering the following questions.
DI – selection of items (pre- and post-visit)	What aspects of your personal image came to mind when you imagined (Allgäu / South Tyrol)? Please tick the categories on the following list for which you had an image of the characteristics or offers of (Allgäu / South Tyrol) in your mind's eye. (randomly sorted): nature and landscape regional cuisine and gastronomy atmosphere and lifestyle climate and weather hotels and accommodations sports and activities safety and hygiene culture and traditions spa, wellness, health events and entertainment traffic, public transport, accessibility local price level (none of these elements)
DI describe items (pre- and post-visit)	<i>For each item that was selected in previous task:</i> Please describe your personal ideas and impressions about (selected item) in detail (positive and negative).

DI affective	What feelings do you have when you think of (Allgäu / South Tyrol)? Move the blue pointer for the following four pairs of terms to the value that applies to you. (randomly sorted) unpleasant – pleasant gloomy – exciting distressing – relaxing sleepy – arousing
Change of DI: Selection of items (post-visit)	For which of these aspects do you feel that your image has changed through your personal experience in the destinations? <i>Selection of the same 12 DI Items as before (randomly sorted)</i>
Change of DI: describe change (post-visit)	<i>For each item that was selected in previous task:</i> What was better, worse or simply different about these aspects than you imagined before your vacation? Please describe how your image of this aspect has changed.

B: Extended Version of Table 5: Change in comments from pre- to post-visit, adapting categories of Echtner and Ritchie (1993).

		Coding in % of provided comments and change in % from pre-to post-visit					
		Attribute-based			Holistic		
		pre	post	change	pre	post	change
cluster 1	local price level	70%	86%	16%	0%	0%	0%
	climate and weather	64%	84%	20%	12%	3%	-9%
	safety and hygiene	48%	82%	34%	33%	13%	-20%
	hotels and accommodations	52%	72%	20%	52%	28%	-24%
	events and entertainment	64%	74%	10%	0%	11%	11%
cluster 2	atmosphere and lifestyle	14%	22%	8%	50%	74%	24%
	spa, wellness, health	27%	35%	8%	13%	42%	29%
	nature and landscape	44%	43%	-1%	36%	60%	24%
	culture and traditions	20%	31%	11%	27%	62%	35%
cluster 3	sports and activities	48%	29%	-19%	29%	63%	34%
	traffic, public transport, accessibility	30%	4%	-26%	70%	78%	8%
	regional cuisine and gastronomy	38%	41%	3%	36%	21%	-14%
		Functional			Psychological		
		pre	post	change	pre	post	change
cluster 1	local price level	70%	86%	16%	0%	0%	0%
	climate and weather	76%	84%	8%	8%	11%	3%
	safety and hygiene	67%	92%	25%	29%	11%	-18%
	hotels and accommodations	52%	43%	36%	22%	21%	-1%
	events and entertainment	64%	85%	21%	0%	0%	0%
cluster 2	atmosphere and lifestyle	6%	17%	11%	47%	64%	17%
	spa, wellness, health	40%	46%	6%	20%	27%	7%
	nature and landscape	7%	15%	8%	34%	64%	30%
	culture and traditions	33%	17%	-16%	7%	28%	21%
cluster 3	sports and activities	67%	63%	-4%	5%	12%	7%
	traffic, public transport, accessibility	90%	70%	-20%	0%	9%	9%
	regional cuisine and gastronomy	60%	73%	13%	16%	18%	2%

		Common			Unique		
		pre	post	change	pre	post	change
cluster 1	local price level	70%	86%	16%	0%	0%	0%
	climate and weather	72%	82%	10%	4%	5%	1%
	safety and hygiene	67%	92%	25%	0%	0%	0%
	hotels and accommodations	70%	84%	14%	9%	7%	-2%
	events and entertainment	46%	79%	33%	18%	5%	-13%
cluster 2	atmosphere and lifestyle	47%	62%	15%	11%	5%	-6%
	spa, wellness, health	33%	42%	9%	0%	0%	0%
	nature and landscape	53%	40%	-13%	3%	3%	0%
	culture and traditions	33%	52%	18%	0%	24%	24%
	sports and activities	71%	54%	-17%	0%	0%	0%
cluster 3	traffic, public transport,	70%	74%	4%	20%	4%	-16%
	accessibility						
	regional cuisine and gastronomy	46%	23%	-23%	16%	17%	1%

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