8 Shedding light upon the shadows:
Exploring the link between country destination image and dark tourism

Kladou Stella, Psimouli Maria, Skourtis Georgios, Giannopoulos Antonios and Eskitark Nilgün Handan

Abstract

Dark tourism is one of those tourism types that currently attracts growing interest and varying interpretations. The present study aims to determine the importance of specific dark tourism motives (namely those relevant to war and terrorism) for dark tourism development, taking destination and country image into consideration. The research was carried out in the context of Turkey, a developing country, which exhibits dark tourism potential in relation to the motives explored. An explanatory quantitative approach was followed. The results reveal the importance of motivations, previous experience, intention to visit and the significance of different tourism types according to destination image in a tourism context. The findings shed light on aspects that can drive dark tourism development, without falling into the fallacy of prioritizing a "better mousetrap (dark tourism site) that nobody will want".

Keywords:

Dark tourism, war, terrorism, culture, destination image, country image

Introduction

In the last decade and on the path to sustainable development, UNWTO (2012, 2021) has updated its definition of tourism types to embrace more sustainable and diversified types. Along these lines, dark tourism emerges as a niche market. It is connected to various definitions, subcategories of the topic and tourist motivations for visiting dark tourism sites (Mitchell et al., 2020). Villamediana-Pedrosa et al.'s study (2020) as well as the country destination image and tourism type match/mismatch framework (Kladou et al., 2014), highlights the importance of investigating travel motives together with the destination profile. Tourism is an image-driven industry (Lindblom et al., 2018) as destination images and beliefs affect choice and travel intention (De Nisco et al., 2015), and so are part of the overall destination branding strategy (Giannopoulos et al., 2020).

Among the various dark tourism places, sites associated with war (i.e. battlefields) comprise the largest category of tourist attractions globally (Smith, 1998) and their importance has been repeatedly emphasized (Chronis, 2005; Slade, 2003; Stone, 2012; Thompson, 2004). Next to this, commemorating victims of terrorism, and seeking to develop dark tourism primarily initiated from this motive, may not be adequate for all countries (Seraphin, 2017), highlighting the need to investigate the dark tourism potential in line with its match to destination image in a country context (Kladou et al., 2014).

Addressing this research gap, the present explanatory study focuses on the case of Turkey. The country is home to Gallipoli, one of the most popular dark tourism sites for international tourists. The site is particularly important for international travellers (mostly Australian and New Zealanders), who visited it in herds prior to the COVID-19 outbreak (Çakar, 2018; Slade, 2003), and is in close proximity to the putative site of Homer's Troy (Boz, 2020). Prior image studies (e.g. Tasci et al., 2007), the intensity of terorrism in Turkey and the publicity many attacks may, from time to time, see in international media suggest the possibility of commemorating victims of terrorism in a constructed site similar to that of Ground Zero in New York. An online questionnaire and subsequent analysis helped us frame the limitations of developing dark tourism initiatives when considering the importance of factors such as the country and destination image as well as potential visitors' cultural context and motivation.

Literature review

Exploring destination image in a country context

Both country and destination image are multidimensional concepts that reflect individuals' assessments of different features of places and embrace cognitive, affective, conative, or overall perceptions (Gallarza et al., 2002). The cognitive dimension mirrors people's knowledge and beliefs on a given place, whereas affective image includes emotions and feelings (Maher & Carter, 2011). The conative component then seeks to reflect the behavior, which may result from the individual's evaluation of the place (e.g., Choi et al., 2007). Studies have found that cognitive and affective country images are usually aligned, without though identifying whether one of the two antecedes the other, while both image dimensions seem to positively relate to destination beliefs (Lindblom et al., 2018; De Nisco et al., 2015). In sum, there are some common characteristics in the assessment of destination and country image. Thus, Alvarez and Campo (2014) as an alternative suggest summarizing the negative or positive cognitive and affective assessment into overall image.

Studies on country and destination image also reveal potential differences among the two, in terms of their definition and content. Country image is more generic and inclusive, whereas destination image refers specifically to those country associations that relate to the tourism perspective of the place (Mossberg & Kleppe, 2007). More importantly, individuals may hold a positive image for a given country as a destination, yet negatively comment on economic or political aspects (Alvarez & Campo, 2014). The latter can particularly be the case in developing countries (e.g., Campo & Alvarez, 2010, Alvarez & Campo 2014; Nadeau et al., 2008). Even on such occasions, however, Alvarez and Campo (2014) suggest that boosting tourism image can improve country image in relation to non-tourism characteristics (e.g., economic, political) as well.

On the other hand, Kladou et al. (2014), found that the perception of destination image in a country context tends to vary across different types of tourism. This means that specific primary travel motives affect willingness to visit a given country based on the match/mismatch of country destination image with the type of tourism. Thus, place stakeholders that decide to boost destination image in a country context, should explore the match/ mismatch framework and evaluate travel motives for the tourism type put in question.

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