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The influence of images in shaping the consumer experience

Aims and objectives

In this chapter we describe the influence of images in shaping the consumer/tourist experience. Images and media sources have a strong impact on tourist choices, and influence others in both overt and subtle ways. This chapter will emphasize the importance of images and films as a tool to promote tourism in a destination. The formation and the influence of the destination image will be described through the following themes: 1) the definition of the concept of destination image through a multidisciplinary and a marketing literature review, 2) the destination image formation process, 3) the impact of media and film experiences on the image of a tourism destination, and 4) the measurement of tourism destination images. The chapter will deal with illustrative examples of two cases of the image of Paris as a tourism destination in two films: *The Da Vinci Code* and *Amelie*. The aim of the analysis of these two examples is to identify the way the city of Paris has been displayed, and to examine the film as a marketing tool for promoting and improving the image of a tourism destination.

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Define the concept of destination image and explain its construction process.
- Know the characteristics and the components of a destination image in the tourism sector.
- Understand the influence of sources such as media and films on the image of a tourism destination and how the influence of these sources relates to persuasion.
- Understand the importance of media sources for consumer/tourist preferences and choices of a tourism destination.
- Know the marketing implication related to the use of media and film-induced tourism to promote and improve the image of a destination.

Academic interest in the concept of image has developed from several fields and disciplines. The early works proposed that human behaviour is dependent upon image rather than objective reality. Refinement and enhancement of this foundational base and adoption of the image concept have led to image theory, which suggests that the world is a psychological or distorted representation of objective reality existing in the individual's mind. For the image theorist, differentiation refers to the degree to which one object (or brand) is psychologically different in meaning or image from another (Myers, 1968). Authors in the experimental psychology field such as Osgood *et al.*, (1957) explained this paradigm by emphasizing the symbolic process and the semantic differentiation of objects. Thus, Osgood's model of representational mediation is an effort to explain how learning takes place. According to Blumer (1969), objects are given importance by people, not through fixed biological patterns, but according to what importance others decide to assign to them. The meaning of an object may change for the individual, not because the intrinsic nature of the object changes, but because people change its definition. The appeal of image theory, as it relates to physical destinations, is that it provides a means of representing at one point in time all external and internal stimuli that influence the perception of a destination and have some common aggregate meaning.

■ **The concept of destination image in the multidisciplinary literature**

It is well accepted that destination image is a crucial marketing concept in understanding the destination selection of vacation (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). Growing evidence has demonstrated that destination image plays a key role in the tourist perception and consequent tourist experience and decision-making process (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991; Gartner, 1993). Therefore, the studies related to the destination image have received extensive attention in the academic literature. Following the inspiring works of Hunt (1975), numerous studies with varied approaches have been conducted on the tourist destination image. The topics focusing on destination image have been further developed through different fields and human science disciplines such as anthropology (Selwyn, 1996a), sociology (Meethan, 1996), geography (Draper and Minca, 1997), semiotics (Sternberg, 1997), and marketing (Gunn, 1972).

In the multidisciplinary literature on destination image, the scope of research covered a wide range of interests. The prevalent topics can be classified into several broad categories: the conceptualization of the destination image (Hunt, 1971; Crompton, 1979a); the dimensions and measurement of the destination image (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Gartner, 1993); the destination image formation

process and its determinants (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999); and the destination image management policies (Ryan and Montgomery, 1994).

In tourism, research on the concept of destination image can be traced back to the early 1970s. In this era, images signify a pre-testing of the destination, which can be referred to as transposing a representation of the destination into the potential tourist's mind (Fakeye and Crompton, 1991). Natural environment or beautiful beaches are among the images that are likely to play an important role in tourism development, and this became the concern of Hunt's study in 1971 and 1975 (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991). His influential work on the image factor in tourism has been the foundation for later research, and several studies highlighted this aspect of image and travel behaviour. These include Gunn's (1972) work on destination image concepts and Mayo's (1973) research on regional images and travel destination. Since then destination image has remained one of the prevalent topics among researchers (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993).

Tourism as an industry requires a diverse range of information and lends itself well to the support offered by developing multimedia, communication technologies and information systems. As a result, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have been changing the global tourism industry rapidly. The implications of the Internet and other growing interactive multimedia platforms for tourism promotion are far reaching and alter the structure of the industry (Buhalis and Deimezi, 2004). One of the factors widely considered as a potential influence on the formation of pre-visit destination image is the information consulted and the information sources used by the tourist. Gunn (1972) presents a stage theory of destination image that is dependent on the information source and encounters differences in image perception according to the type of information source. The model proposed by Stern and Krakover (1993) also reveals the existence of a range of factors that influence image formation. One of these is the information obtained from a variety of sources. In recent years, the Internet has become one of the most important sources of tourism information (Buhalis and Law, 2008) that has an influence in shaping tourist experiences as well as tourist's perception of the destination image.

■ The definition and construction of the destination image

□ Destination image in marketing and consumer studies

In the marketing and consumer field, studies show that marketers seek to establish, reinforce, or change the image of a destination. Their goal is to match to the greatest extent possible the promoted and perceived image (Kotler *et al.*, 1993).

Usually, the differences in interpretation of visuals can be attributed to differences in the pictures being evaluated, differences in the persons doing the evaluating, or some interaction between these (Lyons, 1983). This issue has been addressed mainly from the perspectives of landscape preference (Zube *et al.*, 1982), and anthropology (Albers and James, 1988); however, a limited number of studies in tourism advertising are starting to surface (Olson *et al.*, 1986). Findings from these studies suggest that both personal variables, such as demographics, culture, and familiarity, as well as attributes of the visual, such as physical features, are relevant to image assessment.

Furthermore, an imagery perspective is valuable to understanding the impact of advertising messages (MacInnis and Price, 1987). Pictures not only present the product (destination) but can also communicate attributes, characteristics, concepts, values, and ideas. In marketing, image is generally defined as a mental construct developed by the consumer on the basis of a few selected impressions. Consumers develop images of every experience at a destination they have visited. However, consumers also form selective impressions, in that they consider the information that is most closely tied to their own personal interests. It is not what consumers know as objective fact, but what they think or feel subjectively about a vacation destination, i.e. its consumer resources, its services, the hospitality of its host, and its socio-cultural norms, which affects their consumer behaviour. In this sense, studies in marketing indicate that the image of a destination influences consumer behaviour. For instance, Dimanche (2003) points out in his works that: the stronger the relationship between the image of the destination and customer needs and desires, the more likely they are to have purchase intentions for that destination.

□ **Destination image definitions in tourism studies**

Although it started in the early 1970s (Hunt, 1971; Gunn, 1972), the concept of image has not been understood in a unified way (Kim and Richardson, 2003). Many studies frequently used the concept 'destination image' without conceptualizing the term precisely. Researchers pointed out that while the concept is widely used in the empirical context, it is loosely defined and lacks a solid conceptual structure (Fakeye and Crompton, 1991). Hunt defines image as 'the perception held by potential visitors about an area' (1971, p.1). A more integrative definition was given by Crompton who defined destination image as 'the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination' (1979b, p.18).

Although authors in the human science disciplines have been unable to accept a common definition, they do share a common opinion, namely that a tourism destination image plays an extremely important role in tourists' destination evaluation and selection process (Gallarza and Calderon, 2002; Chen and Tsai,