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A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH ON DESTINATION IMAGE CONSTRUCT

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Destination image has a significant theoretical and practical contribution in tourism. Since the last four decades conceptual and empirical studies concerning this topic have been conducted. However, there is still a lack of theoretical framework due to the complex and multiple construct of destination image. This paper presents work in progress towards the development of a destination image model and intends to be a reflective thinking concerning image and destination image research. A review is provided and a way towards a theoretical framework based on an alternative approach is presented. Following the assumption that destination image construct is ambiguous a broader understanding grounded on a multidisciplinary approach is required. Recommendations are made for using this holistic conception on destination image research, aiming to a future development of an integrative model to be applied on the Alqueva Lake, the largest man-made lake of Europe, located in the south of Portugal.
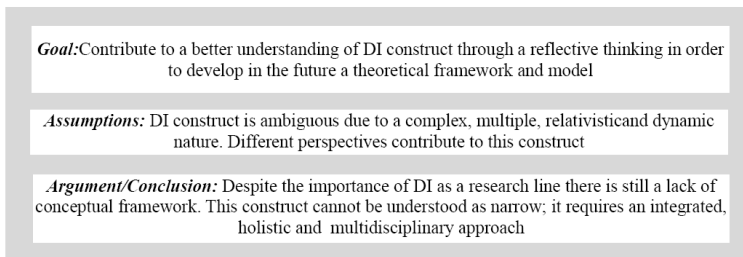
INTRODUCTION

This theoretical paper presents work in progress towards the development of an integrative destination image model to be implemented in a lake area, located in the south of Portugal, the Alqueva Lake. The purpose of this paper is three-fold. Firstly, a reflective thinking for a broader concept of image is conducted. An insight into the multiple nature of the destination image construct, by highlighting different perspectives and perceptions is proposed. Image is a multifaceted construct whose

nature is inextricably linked to other fields of knowledge. In fact, Boulding (1956) proposed `eiconics´ as a new discipline of image theory which draws from a large number of different fields, a similar path as cybernetics. Secondly, particularly related to the topic of this research, a review of destination image literature based on a marketing perspective is presented. Despite the importance of this research line after forty years of work, several authors continuously recognized a lack of conceptual framework (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991, 2003; Gartner 1993; Tasci et al., 2007). Tasci et al.(2007:217) stated that "a close look at image theory in the tourism context reveals that a systematized structure has not been achieved in either conceptualizing or operationalizing the destination image construct." Determining destination image seems, therefore, to be a complex task. As the literature review revealed, destination image construct "is one of those terms that will not go away…a term with vague and shifting meanings" (Pearce, 1988:162). According to the assumption that this is an elusive construct a more broad understanding is required. Thirdly, this paper presents a first attempt towards building a theoretical framework grounded on a multidisciplinary approach of the destination image construct. This is in line with Gallarza et al. (2002) for whom multidisciplinarity is the essential characteristic of destination image. Finally, theoretical and practical recommendations are made for using this alternative approach on destination image(DI) research. For a more clear picture,Figure 1 synthetizes the rationale behind this paper.

Figure 1. Rationale of the paper

*Goal:*Contribute to a better understanding of DI construct through a reflective thinking in order to develop in the future a theoretical framework and model

Assumptions: DI construct is ambiguous due to a complex, multiple, relativisticand dynamic nature. Different perspectives contribute to this construct

Argument/Conclusion: Despite the importance of DI as a research line there is still a lack of conceptual framework. This construct cannot be understood as narrow; it requires an integrated, holistic and multidisciplinary approach

DISCUSSION OF IMAGE

Understanding image

The place of `image´ in society has been the center of an extensive debate worldwide, mainly in the last century. By the mid-1950´s, researchers began to explore the role of image in this context. Boulding´s book is one of the main references related to the role and importance of image in society. According to him the human behavior is totally dominated by what man believes to be true; by his subjective knowledge and not by true knowledge. He states that "it is this Image that largely governs my behavior" (Boulding, 1950:6). Therefore, the world is what man believes to be true and not by truth itself. Boorstin in 1961 also corroborated this perspective in his controversial book. In a rather critical way, he reinforced the strength of `image´ in society, specifically in America, through the notion of `pseudo-events´, a new phenomenon. These types of events are planned to be reportable in order to create illusions, which have become the America's business. Through them the power of image is reinforced, because "We have become so accustomed to our illusions that we mistake them for reality (…). They are the world of our making: the world of the image" (Boorstin, 1992:6). Later on, in 1969, the "La Civilization de l´image"by Fulchignoni (Costa, 1992) also highlighted the influence of `image´ in a world profoundly marked by visual signs.

Despite the importance of image in contemporary society, its roots are much deeper. Etymologically speaking, `image´ derives from ikon, a technical term in Greeks poems that refers to an image, figure or representation of something. In that context an image was confined to a visual representation about (physical) things that truly existed in reality. Simply put, it transformed physical stimuli into mental pictures. Since the first appearance in English in the 13th century, the word `image´ has become entangled in multiple and conflicting meanings. Stern et al. (2001) refer to it as an ´elastic referentiality´ accumulated over centuries. According to them, all the definitions listed in Oxford English Dictionary can be grouped in three main conceptions: (1) copy of an object from the external world (image as a figure, aspect, reflection); (2) a symbol of an object from a representational world (image as reproduction, imitation); (3) idea of an object from an internal world (mental image, perception, impression). In this line of thought, Costa (1992) also considered three main types of images: (1) `retinal images´ that are formed by retina; (2) `material images´ produced by man based on an iconic world; (3) `mental

images´ originated through perceptions based on man's experience. As a consequence of the definitional ambiguity,image construct has been used inconsistently. Image is, nowadays, an elusive concept, a single word that represents different ideas. There isn´t one image, but several images. In fact, it might be said that there isn't a single image of image.

Based on the above observations, image seems to be a broad idea/domain that includes a diversity of phenomena and lies on the contribution of several sources. Stern et al. (2001) noted that poetics, semiotics, linguistics, philosophy were responsible for etymological detours since the term first appearance in the 13th century. This line of thought concerning multidisciplinary perspective towards image construct seems to be the driving force behind Boulding´s (1956) rational. He proposed `eiconics´ as a new discipline explaining that "theory of image does provide a basis for the integration of a great deal of intellectual work which previously has seemed rather unrelated" (1956:160). Furthermore, this field (eiconics) would then provide a way to organize a large body of knowledge around the concept of image, following the same path as Cybernetics. A similar point is found in Costa (1992) when the author goes even further arguing that image, as a form of communication, is considered as a `global science´. This rational is underpinned by principles of integration and coordination which informs `image´ as a field of expertise.

Given the research earlier cited and the previous assumptions, a multidisciplinary conception seems to provide the groundwork for image as an emergent discipline. This new body of knowledge will be a result of the integration of various theories and methodologies, and not just a collection of different disciplines. In this sense, philosophy, semiotics, psychology and marketing, among other disciplines, have been focusing on a different dimension of image providing multiple understandings.

Multiple Contributions

Historically, different aspects of image have been the province of different disciplines. Philosophy, in general,has been reflecting on the relationship between reality and man´s perception of it, which is a central discussion in image concept. The long debate between Plato and Aristotle related to world knowledge was just the beginning. Plato argued that knowledge about the world was purely intuitive and emerged from non-sensible forms. Concepts and ideas are innate to man and defined a priori. Aristotle, on the contrary, stated that knowledge was obviously accessible only through man´s perception based on his experiences. In other words,

nothing exists in mind without being first perceived through senses. This profound and interesting debate about reality and how man perceives it gave rise to the development of two well-known philosophical movements (Kastenholz, 2002): (1) positivist approach, where reality is disconnected from human perception; (2) phenomenological approach, where reality is intrinsically linked to human perception. In sum, philosophy contributes to better understand the theoretical foundation of image by bringing a special kind of reflective thinking expertise.

The findings of Psychology as a discipline are also of considerable importance for understanding image concept. This field is particularly expert on analyzing human processing systems resulting in a significant contribution to image theory. In the mid of the 1950´s cognitive psychology emerged as a separate discipline "concerned with the internal processes involved in making sense of the environment, and deciding what action might be appropriate" (Eysenck & Keane, 1990:1). The information-processing approach was the most adopted by researchers arguing that the information made available by the environment is processed by a series of processing systems. Perception is considered to be one of the most important since information is extracted from environmental stimuli mainly through this process. Later evidence in psychology has demonstrated that imagery also assumes an important role in processing systems research. According to MacInnis & Price's (1987) theory, imagery processing is evoked mainly as a sensory perception, based on man´s experience, resulting in mental images. Perceptions and, consequently, images are formed not only through descriptive or discursive information, but also from imagery. Thus, sensory experience assumes a new dimension in imagery processing approach. This was an important contribution to image theory since it marks the beginning of a ´sensory era´. With this new approach, the study of perceptions as a result of man´s experiences and sensations assumes a new dimension in image formation process.
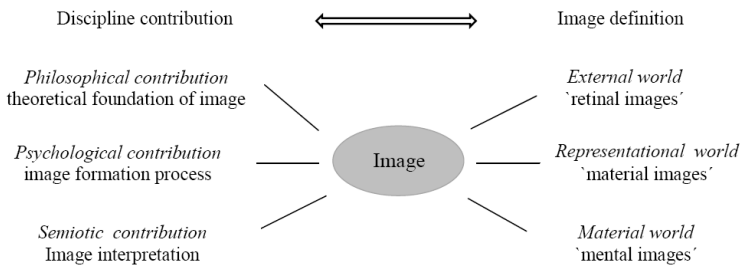
Another example is related to Semiotics point of view. Symbols, signs and communication have been discussed since Plato, Aristotle, Locke and Leibniz.But it was only in the 20th century that semiotics emerged as a discipline through the work of Ferdinand Saussure, Charles Peirce and Roland Barthes. The signs systems or codes that facilitate production and interpretative responses are the semiotician's scope of study (Mick, 1986). Words, images and objects are signs and a sign needs to be transformed into meaningful information. As "we live in a world saturated with screens, images and objects, all demanding that we look at them" (Mirzoeff, 2009:1) images, mainly visual ones, require

interpretation. As a result of a more deeply visual world, a semiotic subfield has emerged – visual semiotics – founded by Roland Barthes, Lindekens, Umberto Eco, among others (Lefebvre, 1999). According to Lindekens, visual perceptions are the basis of men´s language and most of their mental images are conditioned by visual operations. In sum, semiotics is essentially an instrument through which an idea, a notion, a symbol, an impression or a sensation is transformed into meaningful information. This discipline mainly provides instrumental support to image theory. In conclusion, Figure 2 synthetizes the previous discussion, suggesting the interconnection between multiple insights and multiple definitions concerning image.

Finally, as observed before, Boulding (1956) argued that image concept totally influences human behavior. After this assertion, marketers started to be concerned with consumers' images about products, services and companies themselves.

Since this study will focus on an intradisciplinary marketing perspective, particularly related to tourism, a first review of destination image is presented.

Figure 2. Multiple contributions for image definition

| Discipline contribution | ⟷ | Image definition |

Philosophical contribution
theoretical foundation of image

Psychological contribution
image formation process

Semiotic contribution
Image interpretation

Image

External world
`retinal images´

Representational world
`material images´

Material world
`mental images´

DESTINATION IMAGE: A REVIEW

Image is of paramount importance in tourism activity where `primary resources´ (climate, monuments, traditions, ecology) and `secondary resources´ (accommodation, transport, catering, activities) are the basis for the production of services. According to Middleton & Clarke (2004), tourism products are a composite of elements, tangible and intangible, based on an activity at a destination. For them, images are an important component of the tourism product as a result of its generic and particular

characteristics. Understanding these characteristics, mainly the specific ones, helps to explain why images are crucial for this activity (Rodrigues, 2004). Intangibility, heterogeneity, and inseparability are the main characteristics of service products (Holloway, 1995; Seaton, 1996; Cooperet al., 1998). Intangibility means that the tourist travel decision is mostly based on impressions, perceptions and ideas. What consumers really buy are invisible elements of the product or destination and not the product itself. At the same time, inseparability and heterogeneity indicate that there is a great subjectivity in providing tourism services. The producer (service provider) and consumer (tourist) not only determinately participate in the service, as they are the service itself. In sum, the tourism product is underpinned by impressions, interpretations, perceptions, sensations, and meanings. Simply put, tourism product is grounded on images.

Added to these generic features, tourism product has also particular characteristics related to its complex nature. Interdependence of tourism products is the most commonly recognized characteristic, grounded on a combination of several products. Krippendorf (1971) proposed the term ´complementarity´ to highlight the idea of interconnection between the different tourism services suppliers (accommodation, transport, attractions). Schmoll (1977:28) confirmed this argument later, saying that "in isolation, the various product elements are of limited value to the tourist - their combination creates great value and desirability."In this context, Buhalis(2000) uses the metaphor 'dynamic wheel' to demonstratethe potential synergy between the several stakeholders involved in tourism development. Positioning and promotional strategies in order to create an effective destination image is a good example of cooperation among the different stakeholders. An activity profoundly characterized by a fragmentation among the different categories of tourism services requires a strong image to promote the destination as a whole. Therefore, marketing countries as tourism destinations have become an area of a great importance since the 1970´s (Schmoll, 1977; Seaton, 1996; Morgan & Pritchard, 1999; Middleton & Clarke, 2004; Munar, 2009).

At this point it seems appropriate to focus on destination image as a sub-field of destination marketing. This research field has four decades of study, since the definitions of Hunt (1975) and Crompton (1979) were evoked. Since then, several papers have been published in scientific journals (Gallarza et al., 2002; Pike, 2002; Tasci et al., 2007; Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010). Although a substantial number of studies have been conducted for almost four decades, several authors still

recognize a lack of conceptual framework around destination image (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991, 2003; Gartner, 1993). There is still no consensus on how to define it as a result of its ambiguity. As Pearce points out "image is one of those terms that will not go away, a term with vague and shifting meanings" (1988:162). Gallarza et al. (2002), in their conceptual model, clearly demonstrate the complexity of destination image construct concluding that this is a very complex, multiple, relativistic and dynamic concept. They argued that the essential characteristic of destination image research grounds on its multidisciplinarity. Bramwell & Rawding (1996) have also shared this view by broadening the conceptual base of this construct, through valuable insights form three disciplinary perspectives. For them "such different perspectives can usefully be integrated within a more sophisticated, multidisplinary approaches to place images" (Bramwell & Rawding, 1996:203). In this sense, multidisciplinarity seems to be rooted in destination image construct.

As discussed before, tourism generates intangible products characterized by a constant appeal to dream, imagery, emotion and sensations; where the notion of service gave place to a new era, that of experience; where the tourist must travel some distance to consume the tourism product. Therefore, the nature of tourism activity implies that image, from demand or supply perspective, is assumed as a relevant factor for achieving destination success. The most recent destination development models, within the actual paradigm of sustainable development, considered image as a factor that adds value to destinations (Crouch & Ritchie, 2000).

In general terms there is a twofold perspective of image. Firstly, a `supply perspective´, which considers image as a nuclear component of the tourism product (Middleton & Clarke, 2004). As stated by Font (1997), a key element for destination development. Echtner & Richie (1993) also argue that image is a strategic tool for destinations since is responsible for their positioning. Image and brand are, in this case, interrelated concepts (Tasci & Kozak, 2006). Therefore, image is assumed as a highly competitive element for destinations (Ahmed, 1991). Secondly, a `demand perspective´, highlighting the role of image in traveler buying behavior (Hunt, 1975; Crompton, 1979; Chon, 1990; Martin & Bosque, 2008, among others). In sum, destination image is intrinsically linked to image construct.

TOWARDS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Although a substantial number of destination image studies have been conducted, several researchers still recognize a lack of conceptual framework around destination image construct. There is still no consensus on how to define it. Whereas, some authors have argued the need for a broader approach for destination image, only few have considered it in the amount of studies produced over the last decades. It is evident that more research is needed within the framework of an holistic conception on destination image construct, as this paper proposes.

It was demonstrated in previous chapters that destination image construct is the crux of the discussion. Two different views can be distinguished, as depicted in Figure 3. A `unidisciplinary approach´ (UA), which explores the construct based on a single viewpoint from a single discipline, and a `multidisciplinary approach´ (MA), with a more broad understanding, where different perspectives, standpoints and theoretical predilections from several disciplines are considered (Rodrigues et al. 2010). This study will adopt the latter, considering the multidimensionality of destination image construct discussed in the last chapters. As a result of theoretical complexity and limitations of this construct (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991, 2003;Gartner, 1993; Gallarza et al., 2002), a more broad approach argues that a multidisciplinary perspective will enrich a more marketing-oriented perspective (unidisciplinary approach).

Figure 3. MA and UA on destination image construct

101
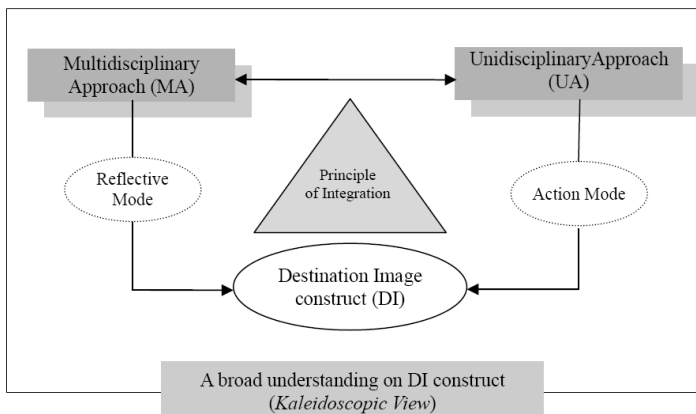
In sum, the two approaches (MA and UA) are related to one another as part of a whole, following the Principle of Integration (PI). The PI consists of two dimensions, namely the dimension of reflective mode and the action mode, to borrow Tribe´s nomenclature used in another context (2002). The study of one dimension will be influenced by findings from the study of the other dimension. The former refers to a mindful understanding of image construct, considering different viewpoints from fields such as philosophy, psychology, semiology, among others. This dimension promotes a kind of a reflective thinking when image conceptualization takes place. The researcher becomes more self-aware of the complex and ambiguous nature of destination image construct through the valuable contribution of different insights. The latter approach represents a more practical view of this construct after understanding its nature (a marketing perspective). The different domains of image are related to one another as part of a whole; therefore the study of an aspect of image will be influenced by findings from the study of another aspect.

In a review of literature, Gallarza et al.(2002) presented a list of topics which have been discussed in destination image research (e.g. image formation process, assessment, influence of distance and time, role of residents, image policies). These topics represent a more unidisciplinary approach, in this case a marketing-oriented approach. In fact, the overriding aim of UA/marketing is defined by an action mode, which represents the operationalization of destination image construct. In conclusion, the PI suggests that both dimensions, the reflective and action mode, are important for a more broad understanding of the DI construct which Gallarza et al. (2002:73) named as ` kaleidoscopic view´.

According to the previous assumption that a multidisciplinary approach (MA) is required, Figure 4 provides a two-dimensional theoretical framework based on this alternative approach. A pretheoretic specification of the domain under study is the aim of the proposed framework. A key notion lies on the premise that a unidisciplinary research (as a disciplinary marketing study) will enrich destination image field, if a broader conception (multidisciplinary approach) is adopted. Two dimensions are considered in this model: (i) MA, in which contributions of several disciplines are identified (Philosophy, Psychology and Semiotic, etc.), and (ii) UA, where three main topics covered by destination image field are presented (concept, formation process and assessment). The interconnection between the two approaches/dimensions (MA and UA) can be characteristically summarized by a permanent interaction and integration of both, conceiving destination image construct as a whole. A more detailed

explanation of the framework will be presented, emphasizing the two approaches.

Multidisciplinary Approach/MA

Philosophy will be an important contribution for this study, particularly phenomenology as a sub-field, since it represents the interpretative study of human experience. It carefully describes things as they become conscious (Morant, 2000; Li, 2000). The central issue lies in how people exist in relation to their world. Therefore, place (e.g. destination) becomes one important dimension in phenomenological studies (Casey, 1996 cited by Cresswell, 2004). The phenomenology insight allows us to focus on destination image based on the nature of tourist experience. This experience needs to be interpreted and brought into the tourist consciousness. Access to that experience, which is responsible for conceiving a mental image of the destination, is always dependent on what tourists describe about it.

Concerning the *psychology* perspective, emphasis is given to cognitive psychology, which is concerned with the internal process of making sense with the environment, and deciding what action will be appropriate. From this field, constructs such as perceptions, visual perceptions, emotions, feelings, affects have been analyzed in destination image research. Lastly, *visual semiotics* as a sub-field of *semiotics* is basically an instrument which will help to interpret visual images (Echtner, 1999; Pennington & Thomsen, 2010). As pictorial destination images will be one of the domains covered by this study, a semiotic contribution will be strongly considered, within a multidisciplinary perspective.

Unidisciplinary Approach/UA

This approach is related to the scope of this study - a marketing perspective of destination image. The topics which have been most frequently researched in the study of destination image were described through an extensive research conducted since the 1970´s (Chon, 1990; Pike, 2002; Gallarza et al., 2002; **Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010**). Three main areas of study are considered in this framework – conceptualization of destination image (image attributes), image formation process (types of images) and image assessment (multivariate methods and techniques). All these three subdomains make explicit the bases for providing pretheoretic assumptions, basic empirical research questions and

methodological premises related to destination image field within a marketing-oriented perspective.

Figure 4. Towards an integrative theoretical framework
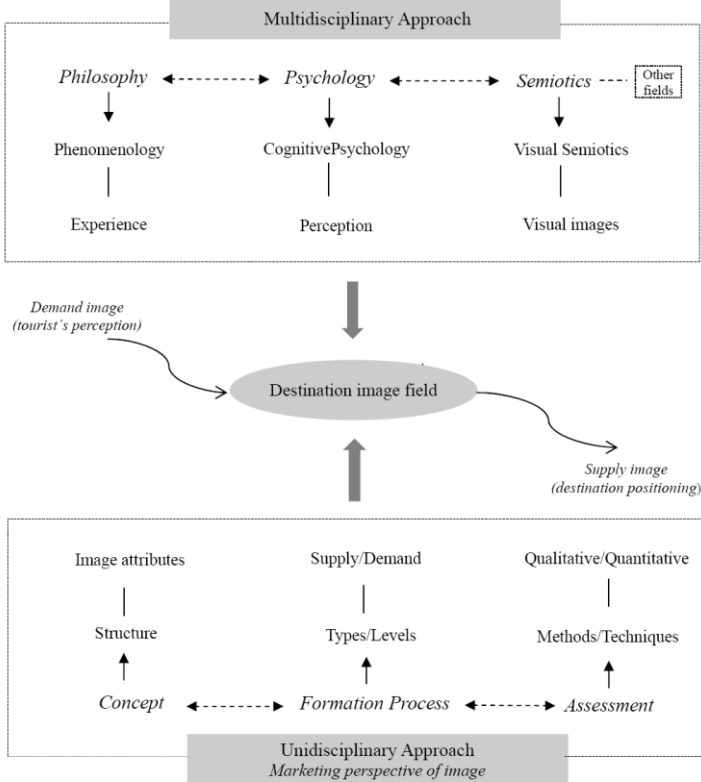
Finally, the interior of the theoretical framework draws attention to demand (tourist´s perception) and supply (destinationpositioning) images.The proposal is to overcome the extensive literature focused mainly on supply attributes, ignoring the fact that emotional responses and awareness, rather than the real characteristics of the destination, are the basis for most tourists' perceptions (Silvestre & Correia, 2005). One of the assumptions of this framework is that an effective positioning strategy of destination is determined firstly by image assessments of tourist´s perception. As Pike & Ryan (2004:333) stated, "the positioning

104

is underpinned by the philosophy of understanding and meeting unique consumer needs." Therefore, studies on tourist satisfaction (Kozak, 2001, 2003; Kozak & Rimmington, 2000) and perceptions evaluation are of paramount importance in image research. The tourist´s perceptions and destination positioning are interrelated concepts. The former leads to the latter.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The meaning, nature and formation of destination image are extremely important for both academics and practitioners in tourism. Researchers have demonstrated its high practical importance for destination management, marketing, and branding. Nevertheless, the emergence of destination image field has been non-linear over the last four decades of research. Although the associated theoretical development is characterized as being ambiguous and inconsistent, this construct seems to have a great potential for crossing different insights and contributions from several disciplines. Having this in mind, this paper has established the basis for future work in two ways: (1) by reflecting on image and destination image establishing a pretheoretic specification of the domain under study; and (2) by proposing a theoretical framework grounded on multidisciplinarity, as an alternative approach.

From the review of image and destination image concepts a basic assumption has emerged, indicating that the `elastic referentiality´ of image construct and, consequently, destination image demands for a multidisciplinary approach. The image construct field is essentially multidisciplinary in nature, where different aspects are covered by different disciplines. Even in the case of a particularly more discipline-oriented research program concerning image (e.g. marketing), several insights can contribute to its execution. As an example, philosophical perspective helps to understand theoretical foundation of image; psychology concentrates on image formation; and semiotics focuses on image interpretation. The different domains of image are related to one another as part of a whole.

With regard to the proposed theoretical framework, this paper argues that a research related to image destination cannot be conducted without relying on an holistic conception of knowledge. Therefore, any research program on image must rely on an interlaced contribution of several disciplines, and not just a collection of conclusions from individual fields of research (Eckardt, 2001). One of the most important challenges with this alternative approach is to integrate findings and theories into a

recognizable specific *destination image field* beyond disciplines boundaries. This integrative theoretical framework will be improved in future work, within the context of a destination image research applied to the largest man-made lake in Europe, Alqueva Lake in Portugal.

Finally, several implications of this multidisciplinary approach should be addressed at this stage of the research. Firstly,from a theoretical perspective, despite conceptual deviations, it is clear that destination image construct has been of great significance in tourism. This alternative approach will highlight the potential of this construct since it crosses the boundaries of several disciplines. An holistic perspective of destination image – in contrast to the unidisciplinary perspective will allow to established a kind of `intellectual linkages´ among otherwise isolated researchers, enriching the body of knowledge. It is assumed that the researchers interested in image domain will be looking for linkages to the work of others, providing a forum to exchange ideas. Furthermore, this approach recognizes destination image as an *umbrella concept*, providing a way to organize a large body of knowledge (Hirsch & Levin, 1999). Individually these theories, concepts and methodologies remain piece meals.

Secondly, practical implications are related to a more global perspective on how tourists perceive the destination. Marketers not only evaluate the perceptions according to a marketing point of view, aiming to promote the destination efficiently, but also consider other insights. It is a way to get out of the rational 4Ps box (product, price, place, and promotion) which is constrained by conventional economic theories of rationality. The practices and academic inquiries into destination image are mainly framed by conventional unidisciplinary understandings of destinations. A multidisciplinary assessment of a destination image will not only follow a conventional and business-oriented line of thought, but will also take into account a sociocultural perspective. Tourist´s perceptions are measured based on meaningful experiences and not only on linear and narrow evaluations. Most of the image studies hold a strong preference for quantitative techniques. Further study will combine quantitative and qualitative methods. It is expected that the integrative theoretical framework grounded on the multidisciplinary approach proposed may contribute to an `intellectual dialogue´ among different disciplines, bringing the destination image construct outside of the conventional marketing constraints.

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