A SOCIAL MEDIA APPROACH TO EVALUATING HERITAGE DESTINATION PERCEPTIONS: THE CASE OF ISTANBUL

DESTINATION IMAGE IN THE ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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EVALUATING DESTINATION IMAGE: A SOCIAL MEDIA APPROACH

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1. Introduction

The purpose of the present phenomenological study is to determine visitors' interpretation of Istanbul image so as to strengthen the city's destination branding. Destination branding, as part of place branding, includes a set of activities and methods working towards a desirable image (e.g. Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005; Zenker and Beckmann, 2013). Successful destination branding involves the bridging of three strategic gaps (Govers and Go 2009). These are first, the gap between the projected city image and the product offering as they are aligned with the actual place identity (i.e. identified as 'the strategy gap'); second, the gap between promises that can be delivered, market expectations and the cultural, social and individual background of the receiver (i.e. identified as 'the place brand satisfaction gap'); third, the gap between the promised place experience and the actual performance (i.e. identified as 'the place brand performance gap'). In order to bridge these gaps we constructed a strategic branding guide comprised of three dimensions for analytical purposes: Perceived Place Identity Analysis, Place Brand Essence and Place Brand Implementation (Govers and Go 2009 pp. 122-132). This chapter revisits this model focusing on the importance of social media and the perceived validity of electronic word-of-mouth. In particular, it draws on the largest online network of travel consumers, i.e. the TripAdvisor (O'Connor, 2010) in order to elicit visitors' reviews for evaluation. Our study builds upon the case of Istanbul, seeking to shed light to the importance of its destination image dimensions from the actual visitors' perspective.

The strategic role of destination branding leads to a number of benefits, among which the attraction of visitors and investments is often emphasized (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2015). Heritage and culture, as one of the main dimensions of the place brand (Anholt, 2004), are often used in destination branding strategies. Yet, relevant efforts at heritage destinations are often evaluated in terms of the numbers of visitors and the size of investment funds rather than the impact these strategies have on visitors' perceptions and experience. Although tourists' perceptions, feelings and attitudes towards a destination can be assessed through the operationalization of the destination image concept, are not studied extensively.

Destination image is a popular research domain in tourism literature (Gallarza *et al.*, 2002). The concept contains a cognitive and an affective component, while some researchers argue that there is also a third conative dimension which reflects the behavioral aspect (e.g. Gartner, 1993). Researchers often attempt to evaluate such image traits and offer valuable conceptualizations to tourism stakeholders. The method such studies usually incorporate may refer to bottom-up approaches, such as a questionnaire filled-in by a representative sample. On the other hand, current consumer trends highlight the significance of online marketing and social media (Kasriel-Alexander,

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2014), and heritage destinations also often invest in such tools: most destinations nowadays have their own website and Facebook page, while others have also invested in the development of augmented reality projects (e.g. Dublin). The evaluation tool, which stakeholders use for such efforts, employs, once again, a quantitative (e.g. number of online visitors, 'likes', 'shares' or downloads) rather than a qualitative approach.

Social media content is perceived very often as more trustworthy compared to official tourism websites or mass media advertising (Fotis et al., 2012). Social media are, therefore, used before, during and after holidays for experience sharing and are a significant information source (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Hence, the destination image-search keywords link is of critical importance to destination image studies and online marketing (Pan and Li, 2011). However, there is a paucity of research analysing image as reflected on social media (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014) and revealing the importance of each component for the online user.

A phenomenological study was embarked upon to determine visitors' interpretation of the destination's image, according to a destination image framework. Given that user-generated content influences the customers' decision-making process (Jalilvand *et al.*, 2012), interest focuses on visitors' reviews on the largest online network of travel consumers, i.e. the TripAdvisor (O'Connor, 2010). The study builds upon the case of Istanbul, seeking to shed light to the importance of the destination image dimensions from the actual visitors' perspective. Furthermore, not overseeing the importance of the country brand dimensions (Anholt, 2004) and that destination image should be seen in a country image context (Kladou *et al.*, 2014), the reviews included in the study have been posted on and right after June 2013 and the Gezi Park/ Taksim square incidents (Wikipedia, 2014). At the Gezi Park and Taksim Square, were held huge demonstrations for days with attacks and many injuries for mainly political and environmental reasons against the governmental policy. Given the prioritization of culture and heritage for Istanbul as a tourism destination (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2007a), the importance of these dimensions for tourists posting online about the demonstrations and the riots in the center of Istanbul against the governmental policies puts on the scope as well.

The outcomes offer marketing scholars an overall insight into the destination image dimensions and their distinct significance when an online tool is employed. Assessing destination image components as perceived by tourists, not as part of a research project but as they are actually shared online, offers a double benefit: First of all, bias is eliminated, since online reviewers discuss their perceptions without thinking that their thoughts will be then processed by a research group. Moreover, online reviews are recognized as a significant source of word-of-mouth. Thus, assessing online posts offers stakeholders an unbiased evaluation of their efforts as it is experienced and then presented to potential tourists from other tourists.

Furthermore, findings contribute to the place branding literature by analysing tourists' evaluations during and right after a largely publicized period of 'unrest' at the destination. Implications for tourism practitioners stem from the dilemma of focusing on several key themes in their mass media marketing efforts, as is suggested to more mainstream markets (e.g. Chen and Uysal, 2002), or capturing the "niche" image held by only a few tourists, as suggested by Pan and Li (2011) for the case of online marketing.

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Finally, the research provides guidelines to practitioners so that they develop a better understanding of what tourists consider as significant when evaluating a cultural and heritage destination.

2.1 Destination image in a country context and the role of social media

Given that *countries are tourism 'products' from the perspective of foreign and domestic travelers* (Heslop and Papadopoulos, 1993, p.30), overlaps between destination and country image emerge. Anholt (2004) discusses tourism as one of the six dimensions of the place and country brand hexagon. As such, *tourism* and tourism practices are developed together and in interaction with the other five dimensions, namely *culture & heritage, people, governance, export brands, investment & immigration* (Anholt, 2004). Tourism plays a crucial role in the field of country image since *it allows personal interaction with locals and the host country culture* (Dinnie, 2011, p.80). Within these lines, destinations often strive to proliferate from a place branding strategy that builds a competitive advantage upon their cultural and heritage assets. To be specific, Ashworth (2009) discusses three techniques used in various combinations in such strategies: 'event hallmarking', 'personality association', and 'flagship building and signature district'. The first technique includes festivals and events of local or international scale (e.g. the European City of Culture). The second technique refers to the forging of an association between a place and a named individual in the expectation that the necessarily unique qualities of the individual are transferred to the place (e.g. Ashworth, 2010; Giovanardi, 2011). Finally, the third technique is seen when the local governments use the physical appearance and visual qualities of the local environment for place branding purposes. The success of stakeholders' efforts, however, lies upon the interaction of such strategies with all place branding dimensions (Anholt, 2004).

Nadeau and his colleagues (2008) elaborated on the conceptualization of destination image in a country image context adopting a nested framework (i.e. the level of a destination conceived at the country level which encompasses all tourism characteristics available to visitors). Kladou *et al.* (2014) assessed destination in a country image context differentiating among the forms of tourism offered in the country (tourism types such as educational, business, leisure tourism etc.). Furthermore, the favorable/ unfavorable match/ mismatch between country destination image and forms of tourism have been investigated with significant implications for practitioners. Hitherto, incidents and events which have an impact on country image are expected to influence destination image and willingness to visit. Specifically in the case of unfavorable country image, Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) and other stakeholders may consider focusing on tourism benefits rather than country image characteristics or, depending on the tourism type, focus on other factors (Kladou *et al.*, 2014). The outcome of such efforts, however, may not lie completely at the hands of tourism providers and decision makers but is reflected on tourists' evaluation of the destination image.

Recognizing the images that tourists have of a tourist destination is necessary to identify its strengths and weaknesses (Chen and Uysal, 2002), and to position it efficiently in the marketplace (Pike and Ryan, 2004). Thus, destination image is one of the most explored fields in tourism research (Gallarza *et al.*, 2002). Nevertheless, more effort is required in

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order to explore the multi-dimensional nature of destination image and the importance of each image dimension as recognized by tourists in the digital era.

The various definitions of destination image and the frameworks developed for its assessment reveal the importance of the concept for both scholars and practitioners (Gallarza *et al.*, 2002). Developments in the literature eventually led to the identification of three main components of image, namely cognitive, affective and conative (Gartner, 1993). The cognitive component is connected to awareness and refers to what people know or may think they know about a destination (Baloglu, 1999; Pike and Ryan, 2004). The affective component, on the other hand, goes further than beliefs and knowledge of the characteristics or attributes of a tourist destination, and evolves around people's feelings toward the destination (Chen and Uysal, 2002; Kim and Richardson, 2003). Finally, the conative component is the action step and refers to how people act on the information. Konecnik and Gartner (2007, p. 403) argued that *destinations are evaluated not solely from real or imagined attributes rather than according to the 'brand'*. The conative component and the significance of the 'brand' are further emphasized given the nature of tourism and the importance of experience for services such as tourism, which are produced and consumed simultaneously.

The necessity that arises here is to unravel the design of the place brand essence, fundamentally to establish an understanding of Istanbul's brand identity. Place brand essence (1) 'incorporates the brand roots, values, visions, scope, name, visual identity, behavior, and the narrative of place'; (2) 'should be built on a value match between place identity and the target audience, also referred to as brand positioning', (3) involves 'a reference to the quality and service characteristics of the economic offering' (Govers and Go 2009, p. 125). According to San Martin and Rodriguez del Bosque (2008), factors such as 'natural environment', 'cultural heritage', 'tourist infrastructures' or 'atmosphere' underlie in the cognitive structure of destination image. As they argue, the cognitive component of destination image derives from tourists' beliefs about the place and, as such, is related to the destination's attributes. The attributes of the place can be classified into three sub-categories and include functional/ tangible attributes (e.g. landscape, cultural attractions, infrastructure) and psychological/ abstract attributes (e.g. hospitality, atmosphere). However, destination image, being a multi-dimensional phenomenon, goes beyond beliefs and knowledge of the destination (cognitive image) and includes feelings and emotions that the destination may evoke (e.g. pleasure, excitement).

Tourists evaluate destinations based on the aforementioned dimensions and then decide on their behavior towards the destination (e.g. whether they would visit the destination again or recommend it to others). Since the power of word-of-mouth very often is based upon people's stories as they experience a destination, it gains a new meaning with the development of social media. The internet has reshaped the way tourism-related information is distributed and the way people plan for and consume travel (Buhalis and Law, 2008). In line with technological advances, tourism scholars have gradually started focusing on online destination image (Choi *et al.*, 2007) and the role of social media in online travel information search (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). However, such recent studies tend to concentrate on website material, thus approach online destination image from the supplier's point-of-view. Alternatively, some relevant studies may focus on social media and visitors' blogs (e.g. Cakmak and Isaac, 2012), yet research on social media in tourism

is still in its infancy (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). In fact, Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) particularly point out that *social media sources must be strategically included for research data collection and analysis* (p. 33).

Social media include a variety of websites and online platforms on which people share their experiences in different ways (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). In detail, consumers are free to use social media to post their stories, comments and evaluations, or even their pictures and movie clips. Social media appear on the first few search results pages in Google, hence social media sites are easily assessed by potential travellers, quite substantial in terms of the size of their sites, the up-to-date nature and relevance of their contents, and the level of connectivity with other sites on the Internet. Focusing specifically on destinations, travellers share their evaluations and perceptions on destination image using social media, and these evaluations are likely to influence the destination choice not only of friends and family but of other potential travellers around the globe as well. Besides, social media are used before, during and after holidays for experience sharing and are a significant information source (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). In fact, the validity of electronic word-of-mouth is particularly emphasized, since social media content is perceived very often as more trustworthy compared to official tourism websites or mass media advertising (Fotis *et al.*, 2012).

The power of social media has repeatedly troubled stakeholders involved not only in the field of tourism but also in governance and other fields of the place brand hexagon (Anholt, 2004). Although Facebook is the leading social media icon (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014), Xiang and Gretzel (2010) recognize TripAdvisor as the most 'popular' social-media website that contains travel-related content. As a result, the image reflected on TripAdvisor by actual tourists may influence the image created in the perception of potential tourists. Particularly in the case of heritage destinations, actual visitors' image reflections offer significant input, given the challenges stakeholders have to successfully deal with in their effort to balance their past and sense of authenticity with the trends of the future and the challenges they are currently facing as 'living' cities. Hence, TripAdvisor reviews can be used to evaluate local and national stakeholders' efforts to support a specific destination image despite possible unfavorable country image traits. Analysing the comments posted on TripAdvisor will, finally, offer an insight into the weighted importance of each destination image component (i.e. cognitive, affective, and conative) for those individuals choosing to share their experience and evaluation on an online platform.

2.2 The case of Turkey: Istanbul as a destination for culture and heritage The case of Istanbul perceived as a heritage destination through electronic eyes

Destinations attempt to build upon their heritage and culture for a number of reasons. For instance, Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2014), among others, mention the following: culture provides a consumable and saleable experience; it acts as a resource of economic activity; it attracts tourists and, at the same time, it expresses the locality. Turkey is argued to be one of the countries particularly focusing on the value of culture and heritage for the development of its place brands. In the Turkish Strategic Plan for 2023, building city brands in the tourism sector is a parameter explicitly stressed out (Ministry of Culture and

Tourism, 2007a). Istanbul, in specific, is recognized as a 'strong card' for tourism development in Turkey (Sahin and Baloglu, 2011). The value of Istanbul as a destination is also portrayed by international arrivals in 2012 (Istanbul Culture and Tourism Directorate, 2014), along with the fact that arrivals outscored those of traditionally popular destinations, such as Rome (Euromonitor International, 2014). The importance of culture and heritage for the Istanbul brand becomes obvious through various examples which highlight the use of the aforementioned techniques (i.e. 'event hallmarking', and 'flagship building and signature district'): The city hosts large numbers of festivals and events (e.g. IKSV; http://www.iksv.org/en); Istanbul has recently served as the European City of Culture (in 2010) and bid for the 2020 Olympic Games (and may also be a candidate for the 2024 Olympics); the Golden Horn (i.e. the district of Sultanahmet and its whereabouts) serve as the most important signature district for the city's historical heritage; various districts, such as Istiklal or Eyüp, also serve as signature districts for the city's more contemporary, multicultural personality and mostly for its religious culture respectively.

As it is clear from the aforementioned events, Turkish stakeholders explicitly emphasize on projects and programmes that will minimize the effect of negative events and create a positive image (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2007b). The emphasis on image does not come as a surprise, considering the importance of re-positioning for the country, as it derives from the reflection of negative news in the mass media concerning Turkey or her neighbors (Tasci *et al.,* 2007). Such news include: (1) military coups of 1960, 1970, and 1980; (2) Turkish-Greek conflict in Cyprus in 1970s; (3) hashish farming problem in the 1970s, which give way to the Midnight Express film in 1978; (4) terrorist attacks of PKK, a Kurdish guerrilla movement; (5) the Gulf Crisis in 1991; (6) the earthquakes and safety of buildings; (7) the NATO-Serb conflict in Serbia/ Kosovo in 1999 and (8) the US operation in Iraq in 2002 (Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Sezer and Harrison, 1994; Sonmez and Sirakaya, 2002). More recently, protests occasionally spread throughout the country. The first massive expression of public unease with some national developments was expressed in Turkey in June 2013, at the peak of the tourism season. As a result, Taksim square in Istanbul was turned from a popular tourism hub into an arena for debate, drawing the attention of international media and highlighting the power of social media.

Despite the challenges regarding its image traits, Istanbul is a destination attracting visitors of different nationalities. According to official figures, in 2013, regardless their travel motive or the duration of their stay, more than 1,1 million arrivals come from Germany, while around 573.500, 503.000, 478.200, 456.100 and 437.500 visitors are Russian, US, French, UK and Italian nationals respectively (Istanbul Culture and Tourism Directorate, 2014). During 2013, around 386.300, 261.400, 241.200, 228.600, and 223.100 arrivals are realized by Iranian, Libyan, Iraqi, Azerbaijani, and Saudi Arabian nationals respectively.

When focusing on destination branding in a country context, it is worth mentioning that Turkey is more positively evaluated as a destination and more negatively as a country (Martínez and Alvarez, 2010). Besides, the research of Tasci *et al*. (2007) revealed that Turkey lacks a clear image. Therefore, the study focuses on Istanbul as the case to weigh the importance of destination image components for actual visitors. Moreover, assessing tourists' evaluations of Istanbul during the protests will help understanding the extent to which

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marketing efforts geared at creating positive image for a heritage destination may also be effective in changing the more general country image (Martínez and Alvarez, 2010).

3. Methodology

A phenomenological study is embarked upon to determine visitors' interpretation of the destination's image, according to a destination image framework. Moreover, the study seeks to assess the importance that travellers attribute to each destination image component and, as a result, decide to share their comments on social media. Given that user-generated content influences the customers' decision-making process (Jalilvand *et al.*, 2012), interest focuses on visitors' reviews on the largest online network of travel consumers, i.e. the TripAdvisor (O'Connor, 2010).

The main objective of the study is to determine visitors' interpretation of the destination image components, according to a destination image framework, as recognized by visitors' comments on TripAdvisor. The selected framework has previously being tested by San Martin and Rodriguez del Bosque (2008) using a conventional quantitative method. Alternatively, the present study is built upon a qualitative approach. The study analyses the comments already posted, thus strategically includes a social media source for research data collection and analysis (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). To be specific, destination image-search keywords link is of critical importance to destination image studies and online marketing (Pan and Li, 2011). Therefore, a content analysis of TripAdvisor posts on the "Historic Areas of Istanbul", "Taksim Square", "Istiklal" and "Beyoglu" pages was carried out using specific keywords. In June 2014, the "Historic Areas of Istanbul" with more than 3,500 reviews, is ranked first among the 640 pages referring to attractions in Istanbul and has received the 2014 Certificate of Excellence on the Historic Sites certificate type. Furthermore, the other three pages are the most popular TripAdvisor pages of those discussing Istanbul districts with significant tourism and cultural infrastructure (Aksoy and Enlil, 2011). Therefore, a study focusing on the destination image of Istanbul is developed based upon the content analysis of respective postings on Tripadvisor and comments on the Historic Areas of Istanbul and the Tripadvisor pages around the centre of the city such as Taksim, Istiklal and Beyoglu.

In 2013, a high number of international arrivals in Istanbul occur in the summer months (Istanbul Culture and Tourism Directorate, 2014). Consequently, analysis includes the 302 reviews posted between June and September 2013. The reviews are collected and content-analysed using thematic content analysis (i.e. cognitive, affective, and conative). In order to maintain consistency, the two authors conduct the coding process separately. Then, each author conducts an inter-rater reliability check. The inter-rater reliability check and the content analysis reveal that San Martin and Rodriguez del Bosque's framework (2008) can be applied. Furthermore, distinguishing between negative and positive image traits is essential in order to provide significant input for the heritage destination brand, and particularly its strengths and weaknesses (Baloglu, & McClearly, 1999; Jenkins, 1999).

In order to perform the content analysis in more detail, each review on the cognitive image is assessed separately and classified according to its interpretation. To be specific, some words (e.g. *"busy", "crowded")* are categorized according to the meaning of the

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respective sentence. In some cases, for instance, such words refer to the urban area and in others to specific monuments/ heritage sites. Thus, in the analysis the former is included as a review on the natural environment and the latter on the cultural environment. Given the current status of research, next to the content analysis, a descriptive analysis is also considered necessary.

4. Istanbul reflections on TripAdvisor: Findings TripAdvisor Study Findings

People posting on TripAdvisor have the option to share or omit their personal details. The demographic characteristics usually posted refer to the nationality and the gender, while reviewers do not refer to other characteristics, such as age, occupational status, or household income. In fact, in the 302 reviews put in the scope, 137 of the reviewers do not state their gender either. Out of the 54.63% of the reviewers who state their gender, 108 are men and 57 women. On the other hand, the vast majority of the reviewers (i.e. 83.44%) share information on their country-of-origin. In sum, there are 252 reviewers who mention their country of origin. Almost one in three reviewers comes from North America, since 55 reviewers state being US and 25 Canadian nationals. Moreover, 34 reviewers come from European countries, with an additional number of 45 reviewers coming specifically from the UK. Finally, 55 reviewers come from Asian countries, 22 from Australia, 13 from Africa and 3 from South American countries.

Preliminary analysis of the 302 reviews reveals 684 references to destination image components. However, as depicted in Table 1, this does not mean that reviewers comment on all three components. In fact, 63.74% of the references focus on cognitive destination image, while no more than 13.74% of the references are about the conative component.

Table 1: Summary of number of references per destination image component

Destination Image component	Frequencies (N=684)	Percentage (%)
Cognitive	436	63.74
Affective	154	22.52
Conative	94	13.74

The next step includes an attempt to reveal whether reviewers tend to share their positive or negative experiences and beliefs about the destination. Analysis points out that 84.5% of the references (i.e. 578 out of 684 references in total) positively evaluate the destination. In detail, 351 of the positive comments refer to cognitive, 146 to affective and 81 to conative destination image. The negative comments were 13 for the conative, eight for the affective and 85 for the cognitive components. The comments about the protests around Taksim Square were only 17, with 11 reviewers commenting positively about the riots and six negatively (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Negative and positive comments about the three image components (N=684)

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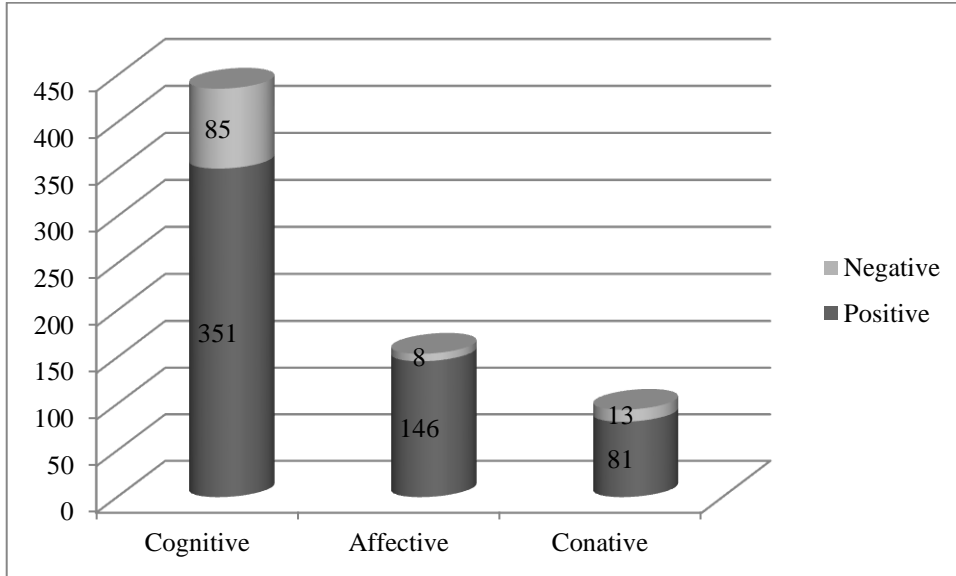
When focusing on those reviewers who have provided information about their gender, Table 2 below indicates that 69.44% of the male reviewers (i.e. 75 out of 108) tend to post only positive reviews. On the other hand, the respective percentage for female reviewers is 63.16% (i.e. 36 out of 57). In fact, women is twice more likely to post both negative and positive comments than men, since 31.58% of the female reviewers recognized both negative and positive aspects of the destination in their comments, as opposed to 22.22% of the male reviewers (i.e. 18 out of 57 and 24 out of 108 respectively). Finally, only 12 tourists post strictly negative comments. The negative comments, posted by both male and female reviewers, mostly refer to pickpockets and alert potential visitors to be aware and cautious.

Table 2: Distribution of positive and negative comments

	Male (N=108)	Female (N=57)	Total (N=165)
Only positive comments	69.44%	63.15%	67.27%
Only negative comments	8.33%	5.26%	7.27%
Positive & negative comments	22.22%	31.58%	23.03%

At this point, a more in-depth approach to the comments is considered necessary. Particularly in the case of the cognitive destination image, the pattern seems in line with the framework developed by San Martin and Rodriguez del Bosque (2008), as portrayed in Figure 2.

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Figure 2: An insight into destination image components
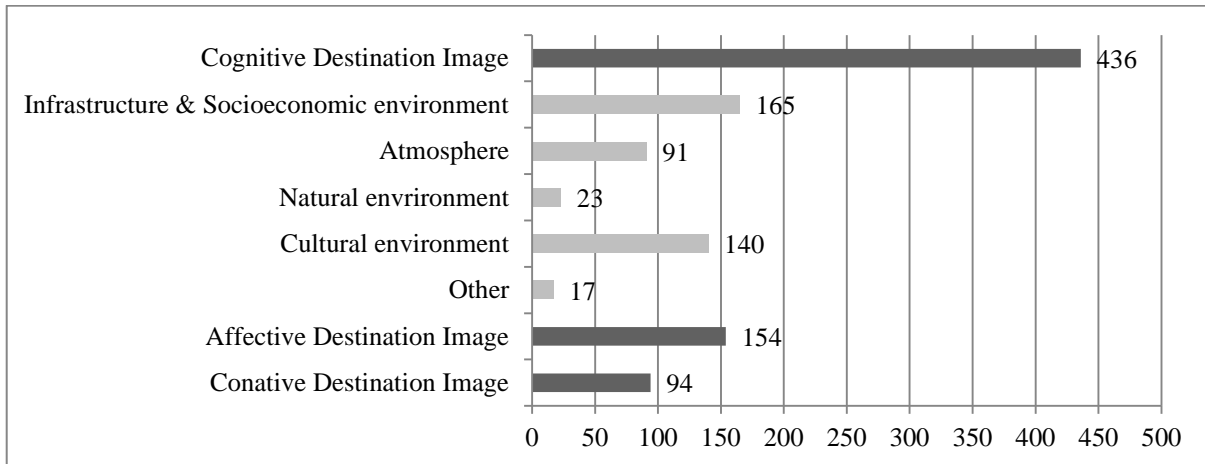
Most reviewers post comments on cognitive image, leading to a total of 436 references to relevant aspects. In further detail, there are 106 positive references regarding infrastructure and the socioeconomic environment. These references mention the *location*, the *safe* and *'walkable' area*, the *friendly people*, and the *good shopping* and *transportation* alternatives. On the other hand, 59 negative comments are recognized. Negative reviews mainly mention the *busy traffic*, the *long waiting queues* as well as street sellers *('pushy sellers')* and *taxi drivers*.

Additionally, 85 positive comments refer to the atmosphere, and repeatedly use adjectives such as *cosmopolitan, restful, calming, peaceful,* and *romantic*. Istanbul, in short, is identified as *"a beautiful city [where one can] walk and feel the authentic features"*. There are six negative comments focusing on atmosphere; these refer to the fact that the area is *very noisy and crowded*. Additionally, 13 positive comments describe the natural environment (fauna/flora, landscapes, and parks) and refer mostly to the *parks* of Istanbul (i.e. both on the European and Anatolian side of the city), the *tree-line country yard*, and the *sunsets*. Travellers also point out the importance of *"choosing the right season"* to visit Istanbul, because of the hot weather in the summer months. The negative comments are only 10 and refer to the *crowded urban environment* and to the *busy* landscapes. Negative comments include suggestions to avoid the hot months as well.

As also depicted in Figure 2, 140 comments refer to the cultural environment. To be exact, these comments include 136 references to the cultural environment (e.g. cultural attractions, cultural activities, and customs), with 132 of them coming from the *Historic Areas of Istanbul* page. Most references are about the cultural aspects of the Golden Horn area, such as Aghia Sofia, the mosques, other heritage sites and museums. For instance, visitors, among others, mention: *"[the] historic areas are fantastic"* (Australia, female)*;"history worth to see"* (Belgium, male)*; "A glimpse of two millennia history!"* (USA, male). In addition, nine positive comments referred to the *food* and five to the Turkish baths (*hammam*). On the other hand, the negative comments are only four. In detail, a male tourist from South Africa who does not share any positive comments only

post: *"Terrible state of neglect"*. The other two comments come from tourists who also share some positive attitude. To be exact, a male tourist from Brazil comments that *"women must be aware of [the] dress code"* but underlines positive comments on the atmosphere, the cultural environment and the affective destination image and adds his impression that Istanbul is a *"fascinating city"*. Finally, a male reviewer from the UK likes the *Blue Mosque* and the *TopKapi Palace*, yet refers to *Aghia Sophia* as an experience that provides *"poor value for money"*.

During June 2013 the Taksim Square/ Gezi Park Protests in the European center of Istanbul were taking place, not very far from the Historic Areas of the Golden Horn. However, in total, only 17 comments, categorized as unspecified cognitive comments, refer to the protests. Most of the comments mention that there is no problem with protests and riots (*"We didn't notice the protests"*) and add positive comments regarding affective destination image (*"amazing city"*). There are six negative comments for the riots especially for the Taksim area ("*riots caused chaos in the city*").

Seeking to analyse the affective component, 146 positive comments are identified. Comments include the use of adjectives such as *"magnificent"* or *"nice"*. Furthermore, eight reviewers mention the word *"experience"*, and seven more refer to Istanbul as an *"interesting"* city. Moreover, 13 reviewers describe Istanbul as a *"beautiful"* city and 17 more characterize it as *"great"*. There are comments including the verb *"enjoy",* and the verb "like". Some stronger affective image components (e.g. *heart touching, surprise, wonderful, outstanding, excellent, WOW, awesome, inspiring, astonished, unique, fun, breath-taking*) are recorded as well. The word "love" is used from 20 reviewers, while 11 more evaluate Istanbul as an *"amazing"* destination. Finally, a US female tourist characteristically writes*: "I fell in love"*.

On the other hand, the affective component includes eight negative comments. In detail, a British female tourist negatively comments on the street-sellers and states she *"disliked"* the city. Furthermore, a male tourist writes; *"It will not be a transformative experience"*, but adds that *"the top three attractions are conveniently located and you must see them"*. Additionally, a Canadian tourist characterizes the city as *clean* and *busy* and the people as *friendly,* yet adds that the city *"isn't anything of special interest"*. Finally, an Australian female tourist posts mostly negative comments referring to the people and service and writes *"[there were] people constantly wanting our money, bad taxi service and food"*. In general, she comments that the experience is *"quite disheartened"*, but is impressed by the rich *culture* and *history*.

Proceeding to the conative component, 81 positive references can be recognized. Different levels of excitement can be detected, as reflected with the intention to revisit or recommend in the following examples: *"…and off you go!", "[it is a destination] to experience and visit!", "[Istanbul is] not to be missed, recommended and…will return", "[Istanbul is] worth to see, must see", "[I will] definitely go back!", "[Istanbul is] worth seeing", "[I] can't wait to go back", "[one] must see [the city]", "[Istanbul is a city] to discover and observe…"*. Particularly tourists in 17 comments say that *"[one] must visit [Istanbul]"* and 14 more times they comment that *"[Istanbul is] worth to see"*. The most of the 13 negative comments connected to conative destination image advise potential travellers to *"Be careful!"*.

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5. Lessons learnt Implementing Results to Strengthen the Istanbul Brand

According to Anholt (2004), tourism is only one of the six dimensions of the place/ country brand hexagon and, as such, it interacts with the other five dimensions (i.e. culture & heritage, people, governance, export brands, investment & immigration). Culture & heritage consist a dimension particular popular among tourism stakeholders, in their effort to add richness to their destination brands (e.g. Anholt, 2002). As a result, the study is embarked upon previous studies that investigate overlaps between destination and country image (e.g. Heslop and Papadopoulos, 1993, Nadeau *et al.*, 2008, Kladou *et al.*, 2014), as portrayed in the descriptions reviewing a particular heritage destination. In an attempt to evaluate the destination of Istanbul in a country context, some facts emerge:

(1) The vast majority of TripAdvisor reviews which refer to Istanbul districts are posted on the page named 'Historical Areas of Istanbul'.

(2) Findings further reveal that only 18 reviews posted on the Historical Areas of Istanbul, Taksim, Beyoglu and Istiklal TripAdvisor webpages between June-September 2013 mention the protests and events centered around Taksim square. On the other hand, more reviews refer to negative attributes with a more long-lasting effect on the urban environment and visiting experience (e.g. heavy traffic, sellers' and taxi drivers' behavior).

(3) Reviewers, especially men, tend to share their positive comments more than the negative ones. Additionally, reviews that explicitly refer to conative destination image include only one negative post.

These can be recognized as a quantitative tool that underlines the success of the effort to create signature districts in Istanbul. In combination, these criteria can be used as a quantitative metric to assess whether or not the efforts to create signature districts in Istanbul were successful. Yet, such an interpretation may underestimate a series of important factors. First of all, the focus on techniques, such as the creation of signature districts, is, on its own, related to a superficial understanding of culture and leads to a disconnection between place brands and local culture (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2015). Besides, monuments and heritage sites are not necessarily an asset that, on its own, may enhance return visits and recommendation (e.g. Kladou and Kehagias, 2014). Additionally, another important dimension of the place brand hexagon refers to People and it is *people who make a place* (Fouts, 2010: 117).

Given reviewers' comments on TripAdvisor, the need for effective, long-term place branding strategies is identified in the case of Istanbul as a cultural and heritage destination. Such strategies will aim to bridge three gaps, as they have been identified by Govers and Go (2009): first, the gap between the projected city image and the product offering as they are aligned with the actual place identity (i.e. identified as *'the strategy gap'*); second, the gap between promises that can be delivered, market expectations and the cultural, social and individual background of the receiver (i.e. identified as *'the place brand satisfaction gap'*); third, the gap between the promised place experience and the actual performance (i.e. identified as *'the place brand performance gap'*). The growing importance of social media and the perceived validity of electronic word-of-mouth

further support the need for planned and coordinated conventional and digital branding efforts. But let's attempt a more in-depth approach.

Previous studies on the role of social media in online travel information search have pointed out that certain keywords (e.g. nightlife and restaurants) are clearly more likely to enhancesocial media search results as compared to others (e.g. attractions) (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). On the other hand, analysis of the TripAdvisor posts of Istanbul reveals that attractions, activities and other elements of the cognitive component are considered significant to be mentioned from a destination image point-of-view. In fact, characteristics of the cultural environment constitute the component which received the largest number of references. As a conclusion, Istanbul is, undoubtedly, a destination for culture and heritage.

Particularly for the case of online marketing, previous studies have also mentioned the significance of capturing the "niche" image held by only a few tourists (Pan and Li, 2011). On the other hand, tourists' comments on TripAdvisor support the significance of more generic destination products and overall atmosphere. More specifically,, tourists may comment more on cognitive aspects, yet in their comments they refer to aspects covering a large variety of characteristics (e.g. culture, people, atmosphere). Thus, *destinations are evaluated […]according to the 'brand'* (Konecnik and Gartner, 2007, p. 43), and a positive attitude towards a destination seems to be connected to more than one attribute. Our study reveals that reviewers, even when sharing their experiences on a page as explicitly related to culture and heritage, such as the 'Historic Areas of Istanbul' one, they acknowledge the importance of other place brand dimensions as well. The majority of additional comments are, in fact, particularly connected to the dimensions of *People* and *Governance*, which further highlights the significance of place branding and management.   To build a competitive and sustainable brand the authorities should therefore actively engage in a proactive way with social media users which, in turn, would give them an integrated frame for the effective Governance of the Istanbul brand.

To go one step further, it appears that actively responsive businesses are viewed favorably by users - regardless of whether they are dealing with positive or negative feedback, as they appear to care about their customers' experiences (Travel Daily News, 2012). Then again, the case of Istanbul and negative reviews regarding basic tourism and urban management practices reveals limited attempt or intention to address the reviews made, although the tourism strategic plan explicitly focuses on marketing tools. Thus, practitioners should reconsider the aforementioned gaps and particularly the role of social media and adjust their marketing approach by effectively addressing reviews and actively revealing their customer orientation. Besides, one of the most important challenges in the promotion of a tourist destination is to recognize one's strengths and weaknesses in the individual's mind (San Martin, and Rodriguez del Bosque, 2008). Thus, DMOs should develop different actions to maintain the strengths of the tourist destination, elaborate on the positive comments, and improve the attributes where main weaknesses are identified.

In corporate marketing literature, affective associations, as expressed with emotional evaluations, are referred to as attitudes toward products (Shimp, 1989). Moreover, the various attitudes which the consumer develops of the product features are compensatory, meaning that a negative attitude on one attribute can offset positive feelings on others and vice versa (Gross and Peterson, 1987). Thus, a consumer forms an overall attitude toward

a product by balancing one's attitude combinations (Leisen, 2001). Similarly, a given tourism destination might consist of natural attractions, cultural attractions, and other features (e.g. San Martin and Rodriguez del Bosque, 2008). Given that the overall attitude toward a destination depends on the 'balanced' outcome of perceived experience with the perceived importance of the destination characteristics, one may conclude that online reviewers tend to be positively inclined toward their visiting experience in Istanbul. Still, only a limited number of reviewers actually proceed to conative image reflections, although many more share positive cognitive and affective image traits. Therefore, it can be argued that systematic effort is necessary in order to bridge expectations, experiences and satisfaction.

Despite the importance of recognizing the images tourists have of a destination (e.g. (Chen and Uysal, 2002; Pike and Ryan, 2004) and the increasing significance of online information sources and social media (e.g. Buhalis and Law, 2008), there is a paucity of studies investigating destination image in an online context. The present study contributes to the literature by assessing the three image components as presented on TripAdvisor by tourists who chose to share their opinion with potential travelers and reveals the central importance of cognitive image. Despite the crucial significance of culture and heritage for a destination such as Istanbul, findings suggest that more coordinated efforts are necessary in order to successfully balance between the challenges and dimensions each living city faces. However, the data reflect only a snapshot of reviews on TripAdvisor. Therefore, assessing destination image in a more collective manner by including TripAdvisor reviews on other Istanbul pages could add to the complete reflection of Istanbul as a destination. Additionally, including tourist evaluations related to all country/ place brand dimensions can further enrich the study.

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