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A model of destination image for transformative travel

Introduction

Change underlines transformations. As tourism literature reports such change manifests as learning, improved well-being, and clarifications of existential dilemmas within the travel context (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018; Kirillova, Lehto, & Cai, 2016; Laing & Frost, 2017; Pung, Gnoth, & Del Chiappa, 2020; Pung, Yung, Khoo-Lattimore, & Del Chiappa, 2019; Wolf, Stricker, & Hagenloh, 2015). Accordingly, the concept of transformative travel has evolved to encapsulate travel experiences that result in fundamental changes in travellers. It is acknowledged to be highly individualistic and subjective (Kirillova, Lehto, & Cai, 2017b) with long-term effects that extend beyond a trip (Morgan, 2010; Ross, 2010). Overall, this highly personal and enduring nature that involves more growth-related outcomes (Brown, 2009; Decrop, Del Chiappa, Mallargé, & Zidda, 2018; Pung et al., 2019) than hedonic pleasures characterises transformative travel's uniqueness as a travel context/situation.

Despite the long-established potential of travel to transform individuals, there is an apprehension that transformations are miscommunicated and misrepresented in tourist discourse such as promotional materials (Bruner, 1991; Little, 2012; Sampaio, Simoni, & Isnart, 2014). Adding to this is the limited scholarly literature on marketing and positioning of transformative travel, with extant studies focusing on promotional aspects (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019; Bruner, 1991) and some image attributes that represent the attractiveness of selected transformative programmes (Fordham, 2006), experiences (Morgan, 2010; Robledo & Batle, 2017; Wolf, Ainsworth, & Crowley, 2017), and service centres (Fu, Tanyatanaboon, & Lehto, 2015). Particularly, a nuanced understanding of destinations remains overlooked within this context. This broad focus on destinations is vital because research exploring the place/setting is acknowledged as important to strengthen the understanding of the significance of transformations to tourism (Morgan, 2010; Pope, 2018) and individuals (Kirillova, Lehto, & Cai, 2017a).

Therefore, with a focus on destinations as viewed from a transformative lens, we present the notion of transformative destinations through this paper. This concept is informed by the proposition that some places stimulate traveller mindsets more than others by creating a sense of 'otherness' (i.e., a feeling of difference) (Morgan, 2010) which may trigger disorientations within individuals leading to transformations (Morgan, 2010; Noy, 2004; Pung et al., 2020; Wolf et al., 2017). Interestingly, despite this significant role destinations play, academic work rarely reports destination attributes that are perceived as transformative. Thus, envisioning transformative destinations as places that have the potential to trigger transformations within individuals by creating a sense of otherness, this paper uses a destination image perspective to examine subjective perceptions travellers (both with previous visitation experience and without) have of such destinations. This clarification of the transformative destination image will also facilitate the creation of unique positioning strategies (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993), targeted promotional activities (Hunt, 1975), and marketing messages (Pike & Ryan, 2004) addressing the aforementioned concern regarding the portrayal of transformations in tourist discourse.

Overall, positing that the subjective, enduring, and personal growth-oriented nature of transformations subject destinations to be viewed differently by travellers, we present a model that illustrates the process of transformative destination image highlighting the constituents of transformative destination image, factors that influence such image formation (which is the focus of this paper) and resulting behavioural intentions. This conceptualisation is guided by

Fishbein's theory of attitude-behaviour relations (1963, 1967) and existing destination image models.

Literature review

Transformative travel

One of the earliest definitions of transformative travel defines it as “an enduring growth achieved because of intellectual curiosity, emotional need or physical challenge” (Kottler, 1998, p. 26). Aligning with this early conception, subsequent literature also recognises it to be highly personal (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018), driven by subjective interpretations (Kirillova et al., 2017b), connected to novelty (Kirillova et al., 2016; Robledo & Batle, 2017) and as having long-term value (Morgan, 2010; Ross, 2010). Relevant research agendas broadly focus on individual-level transformations triggered by travel, experience/environmental characteristics that induce such transformations, and to a lesser scale the delivery and marketing of transformative travel.

From a marketing point of view, one apprehension indicated in literature concerns the portrayal of transformations in tourist discourse. Studies claim that such portrayals are often unrealistic (Bruner, 1991), overly positive (Little, 2012) and are a worn-out cliché (Sampaio et al., 2014). These notions suggest that transformative travel is being miscommunicated and misrepresented, even though destinations increasingly portray it in their advertisements (Csikszentmihalyi & Coffey, 2016). A further overlooked void lies in the prevalent focus of academic work on characteristics of transformative travel experiences with little attention to destination attributes despite the role the place/setting plays in triggering transformations and inducing overall behavioural intentions. Therefore, we employ a destination image perspective as it allows the exploration of travellers' perceptions of a destination for specific travel contexts/situations, in this case, transformative travel.

Destination image

Destination image captures “the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination” (Crompton, 1979, p. 18). It has been one of the most popular constructs of interest to researchers as it affects visitor satisfaction and decision making (Chon, 1990; Jenkins, 1999), destination choice (Gartner, 1993; Isaac & Eid, 2019) and destination positioning (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Pike & Ryan, 2004). From the tourists' point of view, it is a ‘mental shortcut’ that facilitates their decision making (Josiassen, Assaf, Woo, & Kock, 2016).

Destination image's composition has different conceptualisations of which two manifests as popular. One is the notion presented by Echtner and Ritchie (1993) that destination image consists of perceptions of individual destination attributes and the holistic impression of the destination. The other stems from Fishbein's theory of attitude-behaviour relations (Fishbein, 1963, 1967) where destination image is viewed as having cognitive, affective, and conative components (Akgün, Senturk, Keskin, & Onal, 2020; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Pike & Page, 2014).

With its' roots in psychology, Fishbein's theory of attitude-behaviour relations (Fishbein, 1963, 1967) posits that an individual's general behaviour towards an object is a function of his/her attitudes (Fishbein, 1967). This means that cognitions (beliefs about an object) are a determinant of attitude (affect) which results in conations (behaviour towards an object). This thinking has been applied in many studies to structure the destination image as relevant to specific travel contexts/situations (Akgün et al., 2020; Santana & Gosling, 2018; Tan & Wu, 2016). For example, the study by Santana and Gosling (2018) investigated the destination image of Brazil through a model of antecedents, destination image dimensions (i.e., cognitive,

affective, unique, overall) and behavioural intentions. Given this comprehensive structured process of viewing destination image and its' formation, our model of transformative destination image is also underpinned by this theoretical perspective. Accordingly, we postulate that the transformative destination image consists of a cognitive image specific to the context of transformative travel (i.e., beliefs and knowledge about a destination), an affective image (i.e., the feelings towards the destination) and a conative component (i.e., behaviour towards a destination) represented by attitudinal destination loyalty.

Conceptualisation

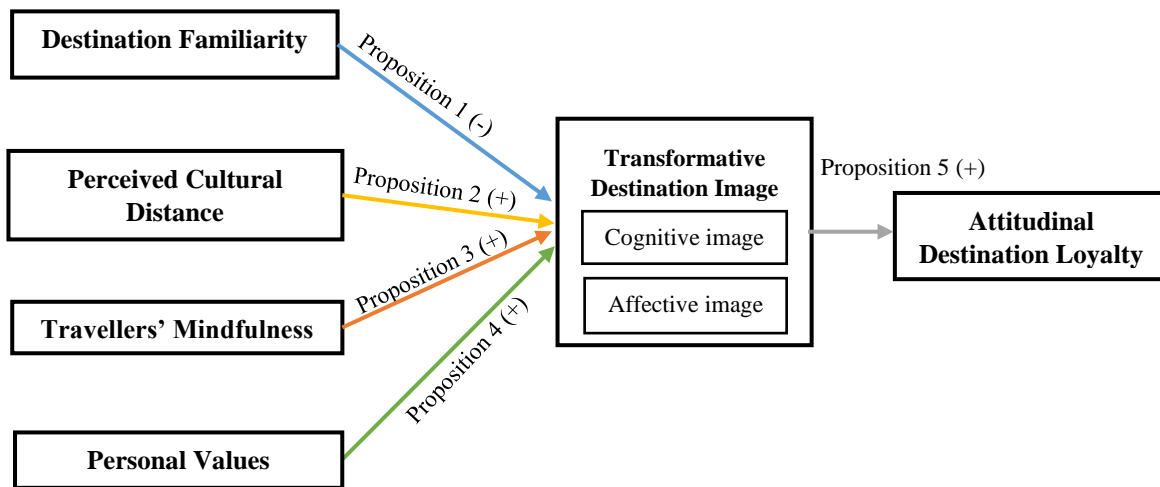
Studies exploring destination image formation are limited possibly due to the challenging nature of the topic (Pike & Page, 2014) accentuated by the complex structure of destination image itself (Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002). Despite this, one early and widely recognised position is that destination image is largely driven by exposure to information (Gartner, 1993; Jenkins, 1999; McCartney, Butler, & Bennett, 2008; Santana & Gosling, 2018; Tan & Wu, 2016). This position remains popular with recent studies extending it to examine destination image change as well (Martín-Santana, Beerli-Palacio, & Nazzareno, 2017; Xu & Ye, 2018). Together, these studies present sources, amount and mix of information and individuals' commitment to information search as shaping destination image formation.

Some studies also use a more process-based approach of antecedents, components of destination image and behavioural intentions presenting a holistic view of destination image formation. One pioneering study in this regard by Baloglu and McCleary (1999) presents factors such as information sources, motivations, and tourists' demographic characteristics as influencing destination image before the visit. Subsequently, Beerli and Martín (2004) added vacation experience to account for repeat visitors' perceptions. Most recently, Santana and Gosling (2018) tested a similar idea indicating that the conceptualisation of destination image formation in general tourism contexts remained static throughout. However, similar models applied to specific tourism contexts/situations such as cultural tourism (Hernández-Mogollón, Duarte, & Folgado-Fernández, 2018) and rural tourism (Royo-Vela, 2009) provide signs of contextual intricacies when examining destination image formation. For example, Hernández-Mogollón et al. (2018) provided a case for using cultural events to promote destinations as they influence destination image formation.

Inspired by these context-specific examinations, we considered the subjective, enduring, and personal growth-oriented nature of transformations when developing the model of transformative destination image (see Figure 1). Further, the notions that novelty of experiences/environments (Kirillova et al., 2016; Morgan, 2010; Reisinger, 2013), a willing and open mindset (Kotler, 1998; Morgan, 2010; Wolf et al., 2017) and individual characteristics (Pala & Cetin, 2018; Pung et al., 2019; Walker & Moscardo, 2016; Wolf et al., 2017) influence transformations were considered in the design. Accordingly, after careful consideration of various concepts, we present destination familiarity, perceived cultural distance, travellers' mindfulness, and personal values as factors that influence transformative destination image.

Figure 1

A model of transformative destination image



**Note:* we initially hypothesise linear relationships as informed by extant destination image models (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Santana & Gosling, 2018).

Proposition 1: Destination familiarity negatively influences transformative destination image

Transformative travel literature indicates that transformations happen in unfamiliar destinations (Morgan, 2010; Reisinger, 2013) making novelty a key determinant of whether a travel experience is transformative (Kirillova et al., 2016). Besides, individuals would not typically prefer to go through the same transformation multiple times (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). This makes it essential to consider destination familiarity as a possible factor that influences the transformative destination image. Destination familiarity refers to “a combination of the amount of information and previous experience, including multiple visits” of individuals (Baloglu, 2001, p. 128). Reportedly it leads to a positive destination image (Baloglu, 2001; Chen & Lin, 2011; Milman & Pizam, 1995; Prentice, 2004; Sun, Geng-Qing Chi, & Xu, 2013; Tan & Wu, 2016). However, given the role novelty plays in transformations, our conceptualisation posits that destination familiarity negatively influences transformative destination image.

Proposition 2: Perceived cultural distance positively influences transformative destination image

Culture serves as a filter for individuals’ perceptions (San Martín & Rodríguez Del Bosque, 2008) influencing destination image (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). However, culture’s effect on destination image remains to be an underexplored phenomenon. One study reports that destination image is more favourable when cultures of travellers and the host destination are similar (San Martín & Rodríguez Del Bosque, 2008), while another posits that it is those travellers who are in the mid category (i.e., neither closest nor most distant) that has the most positive image of the destination (Kastenholz, 2010), thus presenting inconclusive findings.

A more specific concept that is used to understand culture’s impact on destination image is cultural distance which captures “the degree of similarity between the tourists’ cultural values and the culture of a tourist destination” (San Martín & Rodríguez Del Bosque, 2008, p. 267). To operationalise this concept, tourism studies use many sub-concepts such as perceived cultural distance, national culture, and geographic distance. Among these, perceived cultural distance appears to be the most appropriate for the context of transformative destination image

as it captures perceptions individuals have about the cultural difference between their country and another country (Ng, Lee, & Soutar, 2007), becoming a predictor of tourist's intentions (Ng et al., 2007) and tourist attitude (Fan, Qiu, Jenkins, & Lau, 2020). Overall, given the importance of newness of cultures for transformations (Fordham, 2006; Kirillova et al., 2016; Mezirow, 1978; Pala & Cetin, 2018; Walter, 2016) and the argument that culture affects destination image (Kastenholz, 2010; Tasci & Gartner, 2007), perceived cultural distance is considered here as a factor that influences transformative destination image.

Proposition 3: Travellers' mindfulness positively influences transformative destination image

Many researchers posit that customer readiness and engagement (Morgan, 2010; Pine & Gilmore, 1999) and an open mind (Kotler, 1998; Wolf et al., 2017) facilitates transformations. This is because transformations are essentially driven by the individuals' will to change (Mezirow, 1978). One concept that captures this idea comprehensively is the concept of mindfulness which refers to a state of mind in which a person draws from novelty and is open to new perspectives (Langer, 1989, 1992; Langer & Piper, 1987). In one of the few studies that examine the effect mindfulness has on destination image, Loureiro, Stylos, and Miranda (2020) conclude that the more mindful a traveller is, the better their destination image, particularly their affective image. This is because mindful travellers are more receptive to a destination's offers than others. Therefore, the inclusion of travellers' mindfulness in this model is firstly supported by transformative travel literature which suggests that an open and willing mindset is required for transformations and secondly by destination image studies that show preliminary evidence that mindfulness affects destination image.

Proposition 4: Personal values positively influence transformative destination image

One underlying factor that guides individuals' actions is personal values as they are "concepts or beliefs pertaining to desirable end states or behaviour" (Schwartz and Bilsky, 1987, 1990 as cited in Schwartz 1992). From a marketing stance, they indicate the nature of an individual's lifestyle including their interests and consumption patterns and the product attributes they seek (Muller, 1991). As transformations are highly personal (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018) and are subject to individual interpretations (Kirillova et al., 2017b), personal values are posited to be a possible driver of travellers' expectations and behaviour. Besides, terminal values including wisdom, an exciting life, happiness and inner harmony that represent individuals' end states of existence (Rokeach, 1973) were found to be guiding travellers' selection of destination attributes when considering transformative travel (reference forthcoming). Alternately, destination image studies also recognise values as an individual characteristic that influence destination image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004) even though the specifics of the effect remain unexplained. Considering these views and positing that the more representative travellers are of those personal values identified as relevant to transformative travel, the more positive their transformative destination image is, we consider personal values as a factor that drives the process of transformative destination image.

Proposition 5: Transformative destination image positively influences attitudinal destination loyalty

Destination image's influence on traveller behaviour and behavioural intentions such as satisfaction and loyalty is well established (Akgün et al., 2020; Bigné, Sánchez, & Sánchez, 2001; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Kotsi, Pike, & Gottlieb, 2018; Prayag, Hosany, Muskat, & Del Chiappa, 2017; Santana & Gosling, 2018). One such specific behaviour reported is attitudinal destination loyalty which refers to "a psychological commitment to a destination, such as an intention to recommend it to others that is largely affected by a holistic evaluation" (Jeong & Kim, 2019, p. 1360). More specifically, empirical evidence establishes that destination image

has a positive influence on attitudinal destination loyalty (Jeong & Kim, 2019; Kotsi et al., 2018) leading to the fifth proposition of the proposed model.

Discussion and conclusion

Overall, in this conceptualisation, we present a model of transformative destination image with an emphasis on factors that influence such image formation. Accordingly, we propose that destination familiarity, perceived cultural distance, travellers' mindfulness, and personal values drive the transformative destination image formation. We also suggest five propositions that describe the possible relationships between those drivers, the transformative destination image and resulting behavioural intentions (i.e., attitudinal destination loyalty). This model also assumes that transformative travel is triggered by novelty, requires a willing and open mindset and is highly personal.

Theoretical and practical implications

Transformative travel is subjective, has enduring impacts, and is driven by personal growth-oriented needs, demarcating itself from general tourism contexts. Despite this uniqueness and calls for research to explore the place/setting using a transformative lens, a destination focus remains devoid within transformative travel literature. Heightening this is the apprehension that transformations are often misrepresented and miscommunicated in travel discourse. Considering this scope for contribution, the model of transformative destination image presented herein conceptualises travellers' perceptions of transformative destinations and factors that influence those perceptions using a destination image perspective. With this, it presents a structured approach to viewing the destination image of highly personal and subjective travel contexts/situations, contributing to both transformative travel and destination image literature.

Practically, in a context where transformative travel is recognised as an emerging travel trend (UNWTO, 2019), this model highlights the distinctiveness of transformative travel facilitating the design of unique positioning strategies. Specifically, this clarification will aid Destination Marketing Organisations to make informed decisions on whether transformations are a suitable value proposition for their destinations, and if so, what attributes they can use to correctly portray it in tourist discourse. This model also presents insights into the nature of travellers who can be targeted through those positioning strategies where the analysis of perceived cultural distance and personal values through empirical testing could provide validation of new bases of segmenting capturing the highly individualistic nature of transformative travel. Overall, this inquiry into transformative travel from a destination marketing perspective will help make a case for it as a lucrative value proposition and positioning opportunity rather than mere jargon.

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