Attitudes of Future Professionals in Tourism to Change the Image of Destination Bulgaria

Todor Dyankov - Chief Assist. Prof. Dr.
University of Economics - Varna, Varna, Bulgaria
todordyankov@ue-varna.bg

Abstract

The research of attitudes of future professionals in the field of tourism could be regarded as a main reference point to outline opportunities for changing the image of a particular destination. Human resources who are coming to enrich and replace the current work force in tourism will have the decisive commitment to make marketing transformation shifts according to the pending requirements of geopolitical, social, economic and pandemic crises in 21st century. For that reason the research goal of this paper is to envisage a possible direction of change of the image of tourist destination Bulgaria based on the expressed attitudes of future professional for a new sustainable market position of the country. The author's findings and conclusions on the research topic are empirically based on the opinions of interviewed students enrolled in master and bachelor degree university programs in tourism.

Keywords: destination image; attitude formation; tourism professionals; cognitive; affective; conative;

JEL Code: M310

Introduction

The post-Covid transformation process in Bulgarian tourism led to the posing of many questions and tasks to the the supply side of the industry. In order to find out the right path of development, the business needs to clarify for itself the desired tourist image of destination Bulgaria that is expected in turn to lead the country to an enhanced competitive position. Considering the fact of the inevitable generation shifts in human resources, it has become vital to understand the attitudes of oncoming professionals in the field of tourism about the possible change of image of destination Bulgaria. The actual reveal of this process is the main reason for writing this paper along with the research goal to envisage a possible direction of change of the image of tourist destination Bulgaria based on the expressed attitudes for a new sustainable market position. The formation or change of attitudes of future professionals about the image of destination Bulgaria is presumed to determine the eventual shifts or affirmations of beliefs and values of the same people within the research scope of this paper. The interpretation of results about this presumption may help all types of stakeholders to look into the possibilities for realizing the potential of tourist destination Bulgaria in future.

1. Tourist destination image and attitudes

There are different conceptual points about the image of a tourist destination which are exclusively focused on the demand side of the market. In this way of thinking image is defined as a mental or attitudinal concept developed by an individual - current or potential visitor of a tourist destination on the basis of a few selected impressions (Choong-Ki Lee et al., 2012). Destination image is also regarded as a kind of mental representation of knowledge, beliefs, feelings and an overall perception of a particular destination (Crompton, 1979) or in terms of interpretations of representations, projections and perceptions of a certain place (Gallarza et al., 2002; Hunter, 2008). Destination image is generally divided by researchers (Gartner, 1993; Baloglu and McClearly, 1999; Kim and Pardue, 2011) into 3 major components which stand for *cognitive, affective* and *conative (behavioral)* elements.

The cognitive aspect of image relates to the beliefs and knowledge about the physical attributes of a tourist destination and the way people evaluate places (Crompton, 1979). The affective aspect of image is based on the emotional feelings about the destination attributes and its surrounding environment (Baloglu and McClearly, 1999) while in turn the conative aspect of image

reflects the intent of the individual to visit a tourist destination within a certain time period (Pike and Ryan 2004). Cognitive, affective and conative aspects of image could be also researched through the eyes of professionals in tourism business regarded as specific internal stakeholders - "visitors" and "customers" within the tourist destination. On vice versa the willingness of professionals to help for the intentional change of the destination image typically relies on their attitudes based on the singular or mutual influence of the cognitive, affective and conative components. In this regard the "Hierarchy-of-effects" model (Barry, T. 2002) explains in a linear way the psychological formation and / or change of attitudes of people in terms of consecutive deployment of several mental stages. Unlike the "Hierarchy-of-effects" model which dominated marketing communications theories for nearly a century ago, the contemporary understanding of attitude formation and / or change is envisaged in a non-linear form where attitude components (cognitive, affective, conative) are presumed to have a joint / mutual influence about the destination image instead of implementing the role of consecutive mental stages (fig. 1).
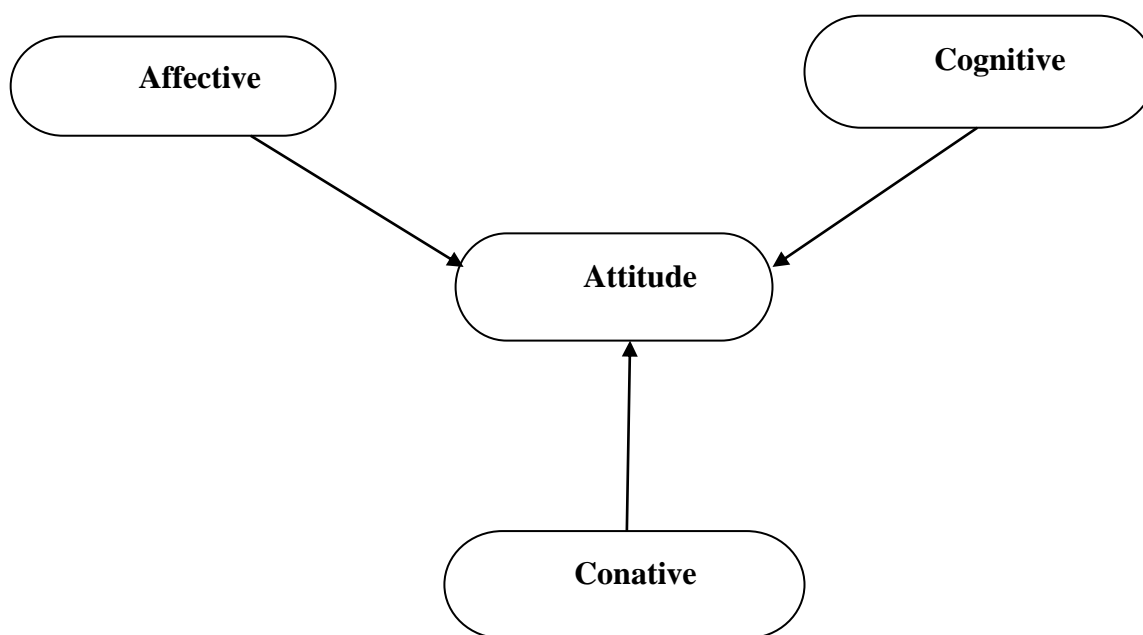
Fig. 1 Attitude components

Source: Bamossy, S. and Hogg, A. (2007)

In this way of thinking attitude is determined as an individual's overall evaluation of an object, a product, a person, an organization, an advertisement, an idea, etc. (Pelsmacker, 2013) and a tourist destination as well. For that purpose an attitude towards a particular tourist destination can be regarded as a measure of how much an individual likes or dislikes the destination in consideration or of the extent to which he or she holds a favourable (positive) or unfavourable (negative) view of it. In this relation it could be presumed that the more favourable the destination attitude is, the more likely a visit of the destination is expected to be. Although destination attitudes are considered as relatively stable, they can be changed over time.

Involvement of the individual may also have an indirect influence on the formation or change of attitude. Involvement could be explained by the importance people attach to the particular destination, the extent to which one has to think it over and the level of the perceived risk associated with an inadequate destination choice (Baumgartner, 2002). Considering the level of willingness to change the image of the tourist destination it has become important to be detected the possible presence of a state of "learned helplessness" in the respondents' attitudes. For the completion of this task the conceptual theory of "learned helplessness" (Seligman, 1972; Mayer and

Seligman, 1976) provides a relevant reference base in methods and tools for studying such attitudinal aspects of the researched future professionals in tourism. The eventual presence of a state of learned helplessness amongst researched future professionals would serve as a complementary criterium for proper determination of their attitudes about the image of the tourist destination. At last but not least the respondents' attitudes about the image of the tourist destination could be additionally researched in the view of the socio-political concept of the so called possible deployment of an Overton window (Kahmann, C. and Heyer, G., 2019).

All the above stated characteristics relating attitudes with destination image could be empirically researched in order to answer the main question: what is the prevailing attitude (positive / optimistic or negative / pessimistic) of future professionals in tourism about the possible change of image of destination Bulgaria. The general research presumption here is that the revealed attitudes of future professionals in tourism may serve as a reasonable reference base for a consecutive opportunity to change these attitudes in order to achieve a relevant change of the destination image.

2. Methodology of the empirical research

The empirical research in this paper is based on the use of a questionnaire survey amongst students who are currently enrolled in full or part-time education programs in the Department of Tourism / University of Economics - Varna. Students are intentionally selected in their fourth and fifth years of study respectively undergoing through bachelor and master degree courses in the field of tourism. The general purpose of the proceeded convenience sample of the research study is to obtain the respondents' opinions in view of almost fulfilled professionals in the field of tourism. The research sample consists of 63 interviewed students – 19 master degree and 43 bachelor degree students and their total number may be considered as sufficiently enough in quantity for obtaining a reliable picture on the research problem. The sex ratio of respondent students is of 20 males and 43 females which reflects the relative sex ratio of the enrolled students in bachelor and master degree courses in Department of Tourism / University of Economics - Varna. The age interval of bachelor degree students is between 21 and 25 years, while that of master degree students is between 21 and 46 years. The median age of the interviewed respondents is 23,8 years and almost 80% of them have provided information about a registered work experience in the field of tourism.

The questionnaire design is created on the principle of decomposition of the respondents' attitude into 3 main pillars which are researched in terms of "affective", "cognitive" and "conative" attitude components.

The "affective" attitude component reveals the respondents' feelings experienced when connecting destination Bulgaria with: tourist service; variety of tourist products; product quality; security; safety; hospitality; authenticity; comfort of stay; adequate price levels. The same destination elements are used for the research of:

- the "cognitive" attitude component which reveals the expressed vision for the future development of tourist destination Bulgaria
- the "conative" attitude component which reveals the degree of readiness to transform tourism into destination Bulgaria

In order to reveal some more nuances of the research problem, an additional set of attitude components is also used in the research study including "affective-cognitive" and "cognitive-conative" destination characteristics.

The "affective – cognitive" attitude component reveals the given importance by respondents about Bulgaria in terms of: homeland / fatherland; history; cultural heritage; civilization; nature; values; spirituality; freedom; uniqueness; personal development; opportunities for professional career.

The "cognitive-conative" attitude component reveals the respondents' opinion about the degree of readiness of certain subjects to exert responsibility for the development of tourism in

destination Bulgaria. Such types of researched subjects about their responsibility in tourism are: the government; local authorities; non-government organizations; private business; the citizens of Republic of Bulgaria and the personalities of respondent students.

3. Empirical results and discussion

Considering the "affective component" of their attitude, the respondent students look almost highly emotionally positive about the feeling they experience when particularly connecting destination Bulgaria with the characteristics of: "authenticity", "hospitality" and "comfort of stay". On the other hand respondents seem to be neutral in feelings about the levels of "adequate prices of products and services" (modal value = 3) and "security". Master degree students seem to be more optimistic than bachelor degree students except in the experience of positive feelings about the provided "tourist service", the level of "destination safety" and the "quality of destination products". (Table 1).

Table 1.Affective attitude component about Bulgaria in terms of destination characteristics

Destination elements	All respondent students			Master degree students			Bachelor degree students		
	Mean	**st dev**	**mode**	**мean**	**st dev**	**mode**	**mean**	**st dev**	**mode**
Tourist Service	3.574603	1.042124	4	3.315789	1.028675	4	3.686364	1.027926	3
Variety of products	3.8	1.127999	5	3.894737	1.118963	5	3.759091	1.129424	5
Product quality	3.406349	0.92905	3	3.263158	0.848659	3	3.468182	0.955076	4
Security	3.377778	0.96879	4	3.421053	0.877544	4	3.359091	1.00506	4
Safety	3.507937	0.95324	4	3.473684	0.818755	4	3.522727	1.005409	3
Hospitality	3.939683	1.169841	4	3.947368	0.886963	4	3.936364	1.141588	4
Authenticity	4.022222	1.04311	5	4.052632	0.759063	4	4.009091	1.14392	5
Comfort of stay	3.914286	0.874844	4	3.947368	0.759063	4	3.9	0.91998	4
Adequate price levels	3.234921	1.208063	3	3.263158	1.207089	4	3.222727	1.208279	3

Source: the author

The formation of respondents' attitude in cognitive manner is researched through their vision about the future development of tourist destination Bulgaria (Table 2). Within this set of destination characteristics the highest positive rank order is about: "comfort of stay" confirmed by modal value of 5, followed by "hospitality" and "product quality". In almost every single cognitive value from table 2 master degree students seem to be more positive than bachelor degree students except for the element "variety of products" provided in tourist destination Bulgaria. Disregarding the fact that the lowest mean value in table 2 stands for the "adequacy of price levels" it could be suggested that in cognitive term the attitude of respondent students is mostly positive about the image of tourist destination Bulgaria. There is no explicit neutrality revealed in the formation of the respondents' cognitive attitude component about the image of tourist destination Bulgaria.

From "conative" standpoint respondent students predominantly express their attitude for transformation of tourism in destination Bulgaria about the characteristics of "authenticity", "hospitality" (mode = 5), "comfort of stay" (mode = 5), "safety". In table 3 five out of nine mean values of attitudinal characteristics exceed the level of 4, supported by small values of the relevant standard deviations. Additionally in conative terms bachelor degree students seem to be more optimistic compared to master degree students except for the destination characteristics

"hospitality" and "comfort of stay". About this attitude component respondents' neutrality is not evident nevertheless that the highest mean value of destination characteristics "authenticity" does not reach the level of 4,3. It means that even the existence of considerably positive results in the conative attitude component of respondent students there is still a lot to reach the level of "full agreement" on the research topic. The lack of neutrality about the conative attitude destination characteristics shows that there is not any evidence for a current state of learned helplessness expressed in the respondents' opinions.

Table 2. Cognitive attitude component about Bulgaria in terms of destination characteristics

Destination elements	All respondent students			Master degree students			Bachelor degree students		
	mean	st dev	mode	mean	st dev	mode	mean	st dev	mode
Tourist Service	3.892063	0.958554	4	4	0.794719	4	3.845455	1.017674	4
Variety of products	3.95873	0.977304	4	3.789474	1.05526	4	4.031818	0.932195	4
Product quality	3.977778	0.844674	4	4.052632	0.686232	4	3.945455	0.902636	4
Security	3.853968	0.829769	4	3.894737	0.787717	4	3.836364	0.846676	4
Safety	3.936508	0.919334	4	3.789474	0.893188	4	4	0.923186	5
Hospitality	4.050794	0.944134	4	4.210526	0.766327	4	3.981818	1.003465	5
Authenticity	3.974603	0.88317	4	4.105263	0.640291	4	3.918182	0.963958	4
Comfort of stay	4.247619	0.798979	5	4.315789	0.566859	4	4.218182	0.878861	5
Adequate price levels	3.663492	1.053234	4	3.684211	1.126365	4	3.654545	1.019905	4

Source: the author

Table 3. Conative attitude component about Bulgaria in terms of destination characteristics

Destination elements	All respondent students			Master degree students			Bachelor degree students		
	mean	st dev	mode	mean	st dev	mode	mean	st dev	mode
Tourist Service	3.971429	0.759789	4	3.894737	0.787717	4	4.004545	0.744969	4
Variety of products	4.022222	0.958246	5	3.947368	0.998614	5	4.054545	0.938435	5
Product quality	3.977778	0.848424	4	3.842105	0.932634	4	4.036364	0.802295	4
Security	3.996825	0.91651	4	3.947368	0.94444	5	4.018182	0.903345	4
Safety	4.047619	0.857804	4	3.894737	0.911606	4	4.113636	0.824784	4
Hospitality	4.225397	0.785982	5	4.263158	0.784193	5	4.209091	0.786193	4
Authenticity	4.228571	0.729085	4	4.157895	0.669891	4	4.259091	0.751156	4
Comfort of stay	4.136508	0.962025	5	4.263158	0.848659	5	4.081818	1.002105	4
Adequate price levels	3.679365	1.059673	4	3.526316	1.213352	4	3.745455	0.992805	4

Source: the author

The mixed "affective – cognitive" attitude component is based on mutual characteristics that may produce simultaneously emotions, feelings, affections along with awareness and knowledge of certain features of Bulgaria as a tourist destination (Table 4). In this relation respondent students produce the highest mean and mode values of their opinion in the research study by giving very high importance of destination Bulgaria about its "nature", "history", "cultural heritage", a place of "homeland / fatherland", "uniqueness", "values" and sense of "freedom". The lowest values of importance are given for "spirituality" of the destination and opportunities for "personal

development" within the country. The respondents' attitudes about future professional development in destination Bulgaria are mostly neutral. In affective-cognitive manner master degree students seem to be consistently more positive in their attitudes about destination Bulgaria compared to bachelor degree students.

Table 4. Affective-cognitive attitude component about Bulgaria in terms of destination characteristic

Destination elements	All students			Master degree students			Bachelor degree students		
	mean	st dev	mode	mean	st dev	mode	mean	st dev	mode
Homeland	4.574603	0.995381	5	4.947368	0.223297	5	4.413636	1.145067	5
History	4.673016	0.734027	5	4.894737	0.306892	5	4.577273	0.836895	5
Cultural heritage	4.612698	0.757291	5	4.842105	0.364642	5	4.513636	0.855089	5
Civilization	4.250794	0.909888	5	4.368421	0.871208	5	4.2	0.921461	5
Nature	4.714286	0.694161	5	4.842105	0.488085	5	4.659091	0.759581	5
Values	4.352381	1.032005	5	4.473684	0.880695	5	4.3	1.086696	5
Spirituality	3.879365	1.293839	5	3.947368	1.316842	5	3.85	1.282664	5
Freedom	4.231746	1.116233	5	4.421053	1.042052	5	4.15	1.137082	5
Uniqueness	4.361905	1.001337	5	4.578947	0.815365	5	4.268182	1.058037	5
Personal development	3.415873	1.089081	3	3.578947	0.990257	4	3.345455	1.121779	3
Future for professional career	3.193968	1.063193	3	3.315789	0.97617	3	3.141364	1.094458	3

Source: the author

The "cognitive-conative" attribute component revealed by the respondent students is mainly focused on the level of "personal responsibility", followed by the desired responsibilities of "private business", "NGOs", "citizens" and "local authorities" (Table 5). The respondents' opinion about the obligatory level of responsibility of the government is in neutral mean value (3,2) disregarding its relevant high modal value of 5.

Table 5. Cognitive-conative attitude component about Bulgaria in terms of destination characteristic

Destination elements	All students			Master degree students			Bachelor degree students		
	mean	st dev	mode	mean	st dev	mode	mean	st dev	mode
Responsibility of government	3.209524	1.440096	5	3.315789	1.488646	5	3.163636	1.416155	4
Responsibility of local authorities	3.387302	1.281305	5	3.736842	1.291352	5	3.236364	1.247013	4
Responsibility of NGO	3.628571	1.035011	4	3.684211	1.216234	5	3.604545	0.945072	4
Responsibility of private business	3.869841	0.994051	4	3.631579	1.152172	5	3.972727	0.882755	4
Responsibility of citizens	3.52381	1.242209	3	3.263158	1.408325	5	3.636364	1.144967	3
Personal responsibility	4.114286	0.924938	5	4.315789	0.920677	5	4.027273	0.913127	4

Source: the author

Considering the last part of the researched topic, student respondents are asked to determine the possibility of change in Bulgarian tourism for attaining sustainable development. The mean value of their responses is 3,9 differentiated by the modal value of 3 which makes this estimate relatively unstable. In this regard only with master degree students there is an evidence of overlapping of mean and mode values of their estimates which equal the levels of 4. In other words the obtained estimates from respondent students correspond to the fourth consecutive stage of deployment of the so called Overton window which is revealed so far by the categories of "acceptability" and "sensibility" of policies for change. For that reason it could be presumed that there are no obvious conditions yet for an Overton window to unfold from the state of "popularity" of desired policies into the state of "normally applicable" policies.

Conclusion

In general, the attitudes of future professionals in tourism seem to be mostly positive regarding the possible change of the image of Bulgaria as a tourist destination on the way of its sustainable development. The "affective-cognitive" component about destination Bulgaria is obviously the most influential constituent characteristic of the respondents' attitude. Future professionals are more prone to become active on the way of transforming Bulgarian tourism than keeping on feelings, emotions and thinking about the destination development. The respondents' attitude about the image of destination Bulgaria is predominantly positively constructed on the premises of authenticity and hospitality of the destination supported by the feeling and awareness of comfort of visitor's stay. Safety and comfort of stay are also regarded as key image constructs especially in the post-covid period. Bulgaria is also considered as a secure place for holidays through the eyes of the future professionals. They prefer to feel themselves utmost responsible for the development of Bulgarian tourism compared to the responsibility levels of other researched stakeholders. In this regard there is no indication for the existence of a state of learned helplessness in the respondents' attitudes. Nevertheless the future professionals are commonly persuaded that time for a positive change of the image of destination Bulgaria is still to come. Master degree respondents as more mature individuals seem to be more optimistic in their attitudes for the future development of destination Bulgaria. Considering all the above stated it sounds reasonably the conative attitude component along with the affective-cognitive component to be primarily stimulated in Bulgarian future professionals in tourism. Anyway from a a potential human resource perspective the future of Bulgarian tourism development in terms of destination image looks well optimistic. Bulgarian tourist entrepreneurs and management staff should focus their efforts to reinforce this optimism backed by the attitudes of Bulgarian future professionals.

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