

# Revisiting the destination image construct through a conceptual model.

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## Resumo

Num sector complexo e dinâmico como o Turismo, a presente realidade económica, conduz não só a desafios como oportunidades para os gestores dos destinos. A imagem dos destinos constitui uma dessas oportunidades, visto que a promoção do destino no mercado, é um factor crítico de sucesso durante o processo de escolha por parte do turista do seu próximo destino turístico. O presente artigo visa rever e explorar o constructo da imagem dos destinos e suas implicações para o destino, bem como apresentar um modelo aglutinador da formação da imagem dos destinos com base na pesquisa bibliográfica. As implicações para o desenvolvimento, aperfeiçoamento e implementação de programas de marketing mais eficientes para os destinos serão fornecidos.

**Palavras-chave:** imagem dos destinos; formação da imagem dos destinos; modelo conceptual da imagem dos destinos.

## Abstract

In a highly complex and dynamic sector like tourism, the current economic crisis brings to destination managers not only challenges but also opportunities. The image destinations promote to the market is a key element in the tourist decision-making process when choosing a tourism destination. This paper's purpose is, therefore, to review and explore the destination image construct and its implications for the destination, and also to present a model of destination image based on previous studies. Implications for creating, enhancing and implementing the correct marketing programs for tourism destinations are provided.

**Keywords:** destination image; image formation; conceptual model of destination image.

## 1. Introduction

Tourism is presently a prevailing factor of socio-economic development (Crompton & Fakeye, 1991; Gartner, 2005). Consequently as more and more areas of the world are being developed, the tourism destination choices available

to consumers continue to expand (Gunn, 1988; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Bornhorst, et al., 2010; Assaker et al., 2011).

According to several authors, the increasing number of new destinations around the world, along with tourists' rising income and leisure time, together with the technological advances in the transportation networks, have led to a greater level of competition (O'Leary & Deegan, 2003; Jang & Feng, 2007; Bornhorst et al., 2010) for the tourists' attention, since destinations are becoming each day more replaceable (Pike & Ryan, 2004; Assaker et al., 2011).

Thus, the tourists' decision-making process has become more complicated and complex (Gunn, 1988; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003: 37; Bornhorst et al., 2010), since their profiles are changing (O'Leary & Deegan, 2003:214), and changes are extremely important for marketing management decisions (Molina et al., 2010). As Jang & Feng (2007) suggest, the motivations behind the tourists' decisions during the selection or decision process concerning their next holiday destination needs to be evaluated. In this context, Reynolds (1965) noted that millions of dollars are spent promoting product attributes which are inconsistent with the consumers' expectations, motivations and beliefs. As Bornhorst et al. (2010) reiterate, the stakeholders must understand that the critical fight is for space in the consumer's mind, for the reason the images which are perceived by the tourists of the destinations influence their behavior, attitudes, and predispositions as consumers (Ahmed et al., 2006).

Thus, destination marketers must "cut through the noise of competing and substitute products" (Pike & Ryan, 2004:333), and create an effective destination positioning strategy, so that the destination can be favorably differentiated from its competition in the minds of the consumers (Alhemoud & Armstrong, 1996; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; O'Leary & Deegan, 2003; Beerli & Martin, 2004). Moreover, Sonmez & Sirakaya (2002) repeat that for successful marketing strategies to be developed it is essential to have a clear understanding of the tourists' destination image (DI), because image is based on the tourist expected benefits, psychological characteristics, and meanings, which as a result influence the destination positioning (Govers, 2005). Promotion, through tourism imagery

and representation plays a vital role, because images serve many functions, such as expressing ideas, sending messages (Molina et al., 2010).

Particularly in tourism, which is an intangible service which cannot be experienced prior to purchase, this is extremely important (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). Image is, for that reason, a significant variable in the success of a region, comparable to other factors such as access routes, population concentrations, physical facilities, and so forth (Hunt, 1975).

According to Mayo (1975) tourists do not have a lot of knowledge about destinations which they have not visited, but despite this fact, they are able to create an image in their minds not only of the ideal destination, but also of alternative destinations. Tasci, Gartner, and Cavusgil (2007) go further, by suggesting that the essence of DI is to find how tourism destinations are seen and felt by the tourists' eyes. Thus, the tourists' images are vital for marketing strategies to be successful.

Regardless of the importance given to DI by previous researchers in the past 35 years (Gunn, 1972; Hunt, 1975; Mayo, 1975, Crompton, 1979; Gartner, 1989; 1993; Chon, 1991; 1992; Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Pike & Ryan, 2004; Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007; Molina et al., 2010) the lack of useful practical applications and conceptual framework (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002), especially in the area of destination management, has also been questioned due to the fact that the construct remains incomplete. In this context, Echtner and Ritchie (2003) recall that in most studies there is not a concrete indication if the authors are considering attribute-based or the holistic components of image, or even both. Therefore, as the DI constructs advances, it is imperative understand the current state of knowledge about the construct, e.g. to examine past work. In addition, the duplication of efforts can be avoided and new research that provides cutting-edge knowledge can be added to assist stakeholders and researchers to extent their comprehension of the DI construct. Thus, the aim of this paper is to review and explore the DI construct and its implications for the destination, and to propose a model that may contribute to

provide new insights to a better understanding and operationalization of the construct by the destination stakeholders, marketers and researchers. First, the methodology guiding the research is described. Second, the importance and influence of the DI is reviewed. Third, the formation process of the DI is described. Fourth, the concept and dimensions of the construct are identified and discussed. Fifth, the conceptual model proposed is presented and explained. Sixth, the conclusions and implications are discussed.

## 2. Methodology

**Table 1: List of academic journals searched and articles collected**

<b>Journal</b>	<b>Articles collected</b>
<i>Tourism Management</i>	<b>13</b>
<i>Journal of Travel Research</i>	<b>12</b>
<i>Annals of Tourism Research</i>	<b>5</b>
<i>Journal of Travel Studies</i>	<b>2</b>
<i>International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>Journal of Hospitality Marketing &amp; Management</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>California Management Review</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>Journal of Vacation Marketing</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>European Journal of Marketing</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>African Journal of Business Management</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>International Journal of Tourism Research</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>Journal of Regional Analysis &amp; Policy,</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>Journal of the International Academy of Hospitality Research</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>Journal of tourism Management</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>Journal of Vacation Marketing</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>Tourist Review</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>Tourist Studies</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>European Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Recreation</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>Services Marketing Quarterly</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>Cuadernos de Economía y Dirección de la Empresa</i>	<b>1</b>

The methodology for the data collection of the articles was based on qualitative research centered on tourism and non-tourism (to broaden the

perspectives of the study) academic journals which provided full-length articles (50), books (5) and conference proceedings (1). The timeframe of the articles ranged from 1965 to 2011. The main search tools used were computer databases: Web of Science, B-on, Scimedirect and EBSCO. The search terms included the following keywords: “tourism”, “destination”, “tourism destination”, “image”, “destination image” and other combinations. In the end, a convenience sample of 50 articles was collected, of which 13 were published in *Tourism Management*, 12 in the *Journal of Travel Research*, 5 in the *Annals of Tourism Research*, and the remaining 20 in several other academic journals, as table 1 shows.

### **3. Literature review**

#### **3.1. The importance and influence of destination image**

The influence of the previously held image on the choice of tourism destinations has been considered by several authors of decision-making models (Moutinho, 1987; Goodall, 1988; Gartner, 1989; Stabler, 1990; Crompton & Ankomah, 1993), mainly because the holiday destination is considered a high involvement purchase, and a great amount of time and money is invested by the potential tourist into identifying suitable places to visit (Goodrich, 1978; Laws, 1995).

Nevertheless, the influence of DI is not limited to the choice-of-destination phase, but affects the tourist’s behavior at all stages (Ashworth and Goodall, 1988; Mansfeld, 1992). Thus, DI turns out to be a basic factor in the analysis of tourists’ behavior, before, during, and after the vacation experience (Bigné et al., 2001), e.g. tourists’ behavior can be divided into pre-visit decision-making, on-site experience, impressions of their experience, and post-visit intentions (Gunn, 1988; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991), making it harder to assess.

Indeed, the DI plays an important role in tourists' behavior during the different moments which involve their experience: in the 1<sup>st</sup> phase, the decision process before the trip to the destination (*a priori* image); in the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase, the evaluation process between the experience at the destination versus the expectations met (image in loco); in the 3<sup>rd</sup> phase, variables regarding the tourists' experiences and the future behavior, e.g. the process of revisiting and recommending the destination to friends and family (*a posteriori* image) (Hunt, 1975; Selby & Morgan, 1996; Galí & Donaire, 2005; Tasci & Gartner, 2007; Bosque et al., 2009). Although important and influential, the formation process of this construct is not simple, nor is it the product of a single moment in time.

### **3.2. Destination Image formation process**

The destination image is formed by a complex process, in which tourists develop a mental construct based upon a few selected impressions recollected from a flood of impressions (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). These impressions have their origin in information assimilated from non-tourist, non-commercial sources which contribute to the formation of the organic image, such as - media (news reports, magazines, books, movies), education (school courses) and the opinion of family or friends (Gunn, 1988).

However, should the information derive from a conscious effort from and by the travel /businesses agents to provide tourists' with images of places (e.g. advertising literature, magazine articles, guidebooks, television promotion, travel tour packages), they are considered to be an induced image (Gunn, 1988; Molina et al., 2010). Reynolds (1965:69) described this creative process as the moment in which "impressions are selected, elaborated, embellished and ordered by the individual". In this context, promotion plays an essential role in the formation of the tourist's destination-induced image, but while the organic image is beyond the control of the destination area, the induced image is directed by the destination's marketing efforts (Ahmed et al., 2006), carrying with it great

responsibility, in order to prevent descriptions from travel agents, travel brochures or guidebooks that might collapse the imagery of the destination into several sensational categories (Adams, 2004), as a consequence of aggressive marketing campaigns with short term profit goals.

On the other hand, if the tourists have never been exposed to any form of commercial information, or if they have never visited the destination, they can still have an image (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003), because there is a link between the tourist image of a country and its national image (Kotler, 1987). This means that the information gleaned from non-commercial sources comprising various historical, political, economic and social factors is incorporated into the destination image (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003).

Furthermore, Baloglu and McCleary (1999) agree that image is mainly caused or formed by two major forces: stimulus factors and personal factors. The former are those that stem from the external stimulus and physical object as well as previous experience; the latter are the social and psychological characteristics of the perceiver. Beerli and Martin (2004) agree with these authors, stating that personal factors along with the different information sources impact on the perceived destination image.

In turn, Gartner (1993) believed that the image-forming process can be regarded as a continuum of different agents or information sources which act independently to form one single image in the mind of the individual. Whereas Hunt (1975) and Gartner (1993), showed that the formation of destination image is also influenced by the geographical distance from the destination, since tourists are more likely to visit destinations and also to have been exposed to the different information sources closer to their homes, and as a consequence the image is stronger and more realistic. Moreover, tourists tend to have more favorable images (Baloglu, 2001; Crompton, 1979), despite the DI changing over the time (Chon, 1991). Besides the influence of time and space (e.g. geographic distance), the DI can also change as a result of the holiday experience, e.g. the tourists' decision regarding the holiday destination results also the greatest benefit package expected, which means the "benefit package comes from the

tourist's experience and expectations that result from image formation" (Ahmed et al., 2006:63). Hence, tourism involves interactions between the local population or residents and the visitors (Agapito, Mendes & Valle, 2010), meaning that the residents end up actively and passively participating in the tourists' DI formation process (Gallarza et al., 2002). Yet, some of this imagery residents perceive from the tourist activity and its promotion efforts is not the result of their (passive or active) participation but rather, the local stakeholders' deeds (Adams, 2004), meaning they end by taking for themselves an induced image. The subjective nature (e.g. changes from person to person) and dynamics (e.g. influence of the different information sources, experience at the destination, tourist personal values, motivation) of the construct here presented, have led to multiple definitions, as explained in the next section.

## **2.3 The concept and dimensions of destination image**

### **2.3.1 The concept of DI**

The definition of destination image is rather problematic (Jenkins, 1999), and often avoided (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003), since no consensus on how to define a destination's image has been reached (Gallarza et al., 2002; Grosspietsch, 2006). Thus, many definitions are quite vague, and, in several cases, are not even explicitly stated (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991, 2003; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Pike & Ryan, 2004), as table 2 shows:

As mentioned above, the concept *image* remains complex and ill-defined in its nature, since it has been described as: representation, object, impressions, thoughts, ideas, beliefs, feelings or identity. As Alhemoud and Amstrong (1996:76) have pointed out, DI is comprised of "ideas or conceptions held individually or collectively of the destination". Even when its intangible component is forgotten, the researchers conceptualize DI in terms of the



destination attributes and not in term of the holistic impressions (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003:41).

**Table 2: Definitions of destination image used by researchers**

Reference	Definition
Reynolds (1965:69)	the concept of image is a complex and selective mental processes carried out by individuals from a flood of selected impressions.
Hunt (1975: 1)	Perceptions held by potential visitors about an area.
Crompton (1979: 18)	Sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination.
Calantone, et al. (1989: 25)	Perceptions of potential tourist destinations.
Font (1997:124).	set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that the public holds of the named product, and to some extent it is part of the product.
Ahmed et al. (2006: 59)	defined as what tourists think or perceive about a state as a destination, its tourism resources, its tourist services, the hospitality of its host, its social and cultural norms, and its rules and regulations which influence their consumer behaviour.
Bigné, Sánchez and Sanz, (2009)	it consists of all that the destination evokes in the individual; any idea, belief, feeling or attitude that tourists associate with the place.

A definition encompassing both of these components, tangible and intangible, should be established; therefore the following definition is presented:

*Image is a set of complex mental impressions and total feelings that a potential tourists hold of a product, place or tourism destination.*

Although most studies agree that the DI is a multidimensional global impression, there is no consensus on the dimensions that make up this same holistic impression (Bigné, Sánchez & Sanz, 2009). It is acknowledged and appreciated that the power of image representation and interpretation creates or reinforces gazes, and there is a critical cultural interpretation and definition of what image is, means and does (Croy, 2004). In this context, an attempt to find a consensus of the dimension of the destination image construct will be presented in the following section.

### 2.3.2 The dimensions of DI

To this end, the DI consists of two main components—those that are attribute-based and those that are holistic and each of these DI components contains functional, or more tangible, and psychological, or more abstract, characteristics (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). However for Gartner (1993) and White (2004), the DI is hierarchically formed by cognitive, affective, and conative/behavioral components. The cognitive or perceptual component refers to the beliefs or knowledge about a destination's attributes evaluations (Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010). The use of the cognitive component provides easily-interpreted information to destination managers' in order to develop positioning strategies (Chen, 2001).

Whereas affective images refer to the feelings aroused by a place, people with different motives may assess a destination in similar ways (Ahmed et al., 2006). For Gartner (1993), the affective component is the value that individuals attach to destinations based on motivations. Apart from the two previous perspectives, several studies have also associated a behavioral component, which relates to the actions of individuals, in this case, the probability of visiting/revisiting the destination and recommending it (Pike & Ryan, 2004; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Bigné et al., 2009; Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010). As a result of both cognitive and affective evaluations an overall image of a place is formed (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010). However, this image changes with time and from person to person (Gallarza et al., 2002).

According to Jenkins (1999), one problem of DI is that researchers continue to overlook the holistic representations of destinations, by measuring only fragments. In fact, Echtner and Ritchie (2003) posit the existence of a continuum that plays a key role in shaping the image from the common functional attributes (directly observable/measurable) to the unique functional attributes (icons and special events that form part of the destination), and from common psychological attributes (abstract attributes) to unique psychological attributes (feelings associated with places). Furthermore, the overall image has been considered an

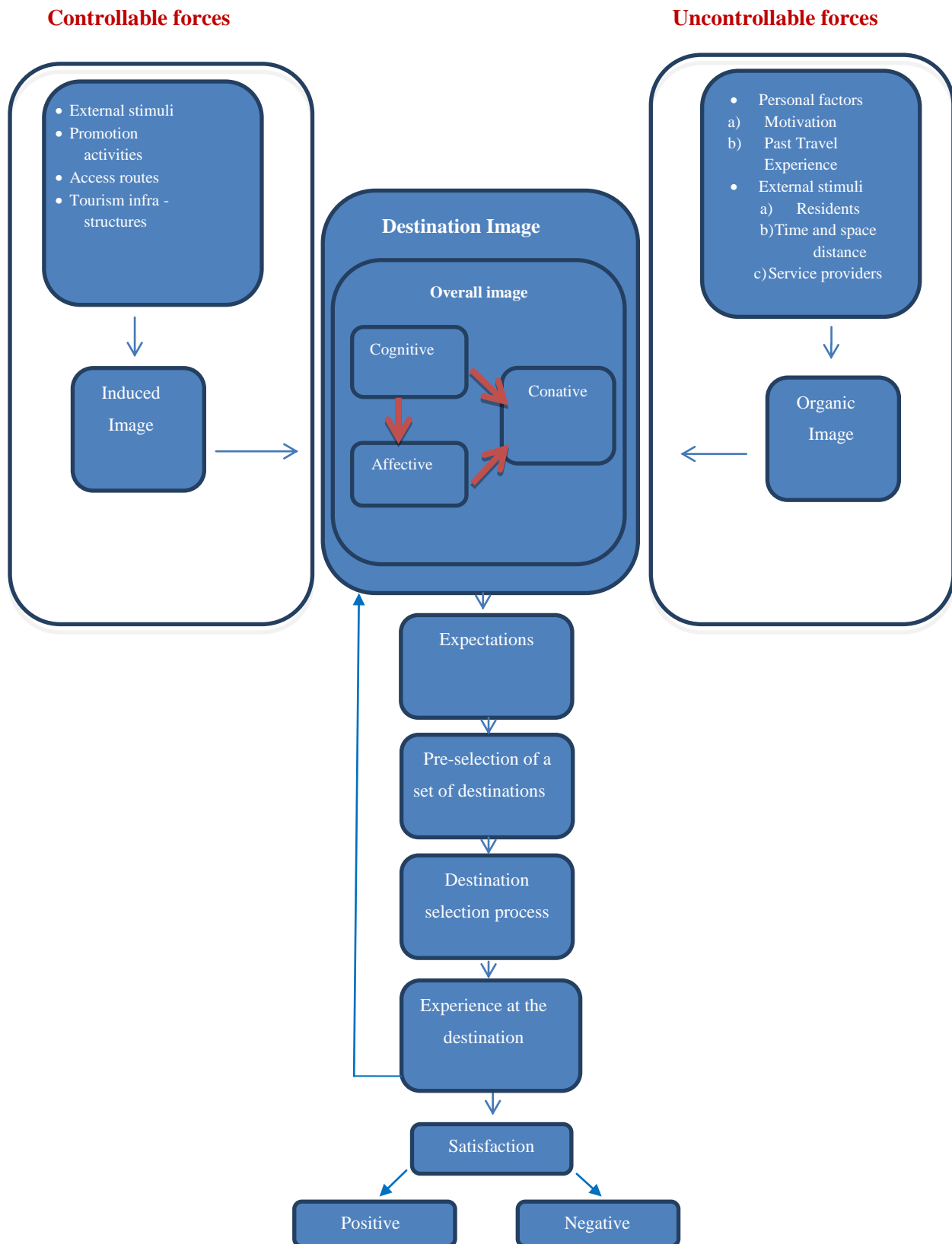
independent dimension of image, greater than the sum of the cognitive and affective components (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999).

#### 4. Conceptual Model of DI

Based on the above, and on the literature review research which states that DI at different time points differs, the model proposed (figure 1), shows the formation of the DI results of a continuum mental process, in which two different major forces, a *Controllable force* and an *Uncontrollable force* act. The former refers to promotion efforts, access routes and tourism infrastructures, built and prepared by stakeholders and marketers to stimulate tourists to visit their destination. The latter refers to those forces beyond the control of any stakeholder or marketer, such as those that stem from social and psychological characteristics of the tourist (such as past travel experience, motivation), the residents and service providers' attitudes towards tourism activity and interaction between tourists at a foreign destination. Both these forces affect the information sources that allow tourists to develop the mental construct leading to the formation of induced and organic image. These images let the tourists create and structure the stimulus perceived. The DI is then formed as a result of the knowledge the tourist acquired about the destination (cognitive component), the feelings or attachment he develops towards the destination (affective) and his intention or behavior in the future (conative). After that, an overall image comprehending functional and psychological characteristics of destination is created by tourists.

The overall image of the destination created allows the tourist to narrow the potential holiday options to one or more pre-selected destinations, so that in a subsequent moment, the decision process is made based on *a priori* image (which depending on the time and space distance may suffer future adjustments).

**Figure 1: A conceptual model of DI**



This DI also influences the expectations generated and awaited by the tourists before, during the experience at the destination (*image in loco*), and after the return home (*a posteriori* image), when the holiday experience is revisited and evaluated by the tourist and, a new DI may also be carved. Moreover, should the evaluation be positive (satisfaction) it may lead to the intention of revisiting the destination or recommending it to friends and family. But, should the evaluation be negative (dissatisfaction), it may lead to negative “word-of-mouth” and no intention of revisiting.

## 5. Conclusion and implications

Among the several strategic marketing implications which can be drawn from the DI construct, is that it impacts and influences the tourists’ perception and expectations, before, during and after the experience at the destination, as well as satisfaction. In this context, as Laws (1995) points out, a key factor in managing tourism is to understand and anticipate tourist satisfaction with their holiday purchase. Therefore researchers, stakeholders and marketers must be aware of the following issues:

- Promotion activities by themselves should not be considered the only solution for a stronger and more realistic image to be achieved; marketers should look instead at the needs and characteristics of their target market (uncontrollable factors) such as tourists’ motivation and personality or the country’s image abroad;
- The holistic representations of the destination, must not be overlooked since an overall image will be created by tourists, such as the aura and feelings transmitted by the destination stakeholders;
- Residents, service providers and other tourists on holidays, will all interact and play a role in the tourists’ perception of the DI, which implies that

specific strategies are needed to accommodate, and restrain possible causes of conflict;

- The promotional programs should not be over-promising of the destinations attributes to avoid tourist dissatisfaction;
- Misleading or distorted images of the destination must be avoided despite of short term profit;
- The tourists' DIs start being formed much earlier than the actual visit to the destination and end well after the return home.

Thus, the existing intense competition among tourism destinations makes it even more important to identify the image held by actual and potential tourists (Buhalis, 2000). Furthermore, for destination stakeholders it also constitutes an important factor for achieving the success of destination attractiveness.

This paper has reviewed the developments and implications of the concept of destination image, and has presented a conceptual model, so that researchers, marketers and stakeholders may have a clear understanding of the construct and may develop and adapt the correct strategies for their particular destinations. The understanding of DI and its assessment has high practical relevance since the destination image construct is complex and a diagnosis of destination strengths and weaknesses on relevant tourism attributes can be helpful in making improvements to the core product and marketing-mix.

Further studies should investigate the impact of tourism experiences on the tourists' DI, since it is critical for destinations to be aware of how they are experienced, because selecting a destination is related to what it delivers.

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