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## **Media Discourses and Formation of Destination Images**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper is extracted from my current ongoing PhD research. The title of my research is 'What is in a name? Evoking associations in cultural tourism marketing of Persia and Iran'. The focus of this study is social constructionist and its aim is to investigate the production and consumption aspects of destination images. More specifically this paper intends to discuss the role of media discourses in the formation of destination images. This important factor has been ignored in the previous studies. Reviewing the literature demonstrates that previous studies have mainly looked at this concept from a positivist perspective and therefore did not consider the impact of wider societal and media discourses on the formation of images.

**KEYWORDS:** Destination image, image formation, media images.

# INTRODUCTION

Past research and studies have demonstrated that image is a valuable concept for having a better understanding of the destination selection process of tourists (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). Reviewing the literature demonstrated that there are a large number of studies mainly focused on destination image measurement (Driscoll et al. 1994, Echtner and Ritchie 1993, Echtner and Ritchie 2003, Jenkins 1999), tourists' familiarity with the destination and its impact on destination image (Milman and Pizam 1995, Baloglu 1999, Kozak 2001, Prentice 2004), or destination image and visitation intentions (Goodrich 1987, Hunt 1975, Milman and Pizam 1995, Scott et al. 1978). However, reviewing the literature also demonstrated that little empirical study has focused on how destination images are actually formed, while it is important to consider that the initial image formation stage before actual travel is the most important phase in tourists' destination selection process (Gartner 1994, Baloglu and McCleary 1999).

## FACTORS INVOLVED IN THE FORMATION OF DESTINATION IMAGES

Beerli and Martin (2004) conducted an empirical study to further develop and validate a model (Figure 1) in order to define factors that are determinants of a destination's perceived image.

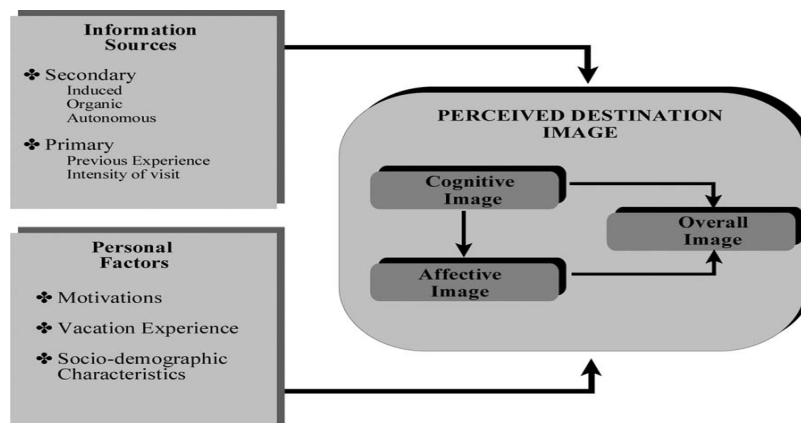


Figure 1. Model of the Formation of Destination Image (adopted from Beerli and Martin 2004: 660)

It can be noticed that Beerli and Martin (2004, Figure 1) categorised the factors involved in image formation into two main categories; personal factors and information sources which will lead to cognitive, affective and at the end to overall image of a destination. This paper however only focuses on the role of information sources and more specifically media discourses in the formation of destination images.

### Information Sources

Information sources are powerful sources which according to Baloglu and McCleary (1999) could influence the formation of cognitive images. Gunn (1972) was one of the first authors to recognise and categorise the different ways that cognitive images are formed. Gunn (1997: 37) suggests that information sources can be described in two ways, *organic* and *induced*.

### ***Organic information sources***

Gunn (1997) suggests that what a person already knows or perceives about a destination can be identified as *organic*. Gunn also suggests that images are gathered over time from newspapers, radio and TV news, documentaries, dramas, novels etc. Moreover, according to this author stories from friends and relatives returning from trips can also have major influence on people's impressions of destinations and organic accumulation of information is the most powerful factor influencing travel decisions. Media can be viewed as an important organic information source and have a significant impact on tourism image development (Gartner 1994, Mercille 2005).

### ***Induced information sources***

Furthermore, Gunn (1997) described as induced those sources which are designed and projected by tourism businesses and agencies to attract travellers to certain target areas. Induced information sources can be different forms of advertising such as the use of television, radio, brochures, billboards and print media advertising by destination promoters in order to form particular images in the minds of potential visitors. It is important to consider that although induced information sources can play an important role in the formation of destination images they have limited capabilities due to their high costs. Therefore, their effectiveness largely depends on the amount of investment that a particular destination is able to afford. Moreover, there are also other issues involved in assessing the effectiveness of induced information sources such as their regularity, through what channels they are distributed and how well they reach the target audiences. Therefore, although induced information sources are valuable source of information in assisting tourists in their initial travel decision making process they may not be as effective and influential as the organic ones.

### **Media discourses and Destination Image Formation**

The mass media play an important role in "shaping the individual and collective consciousness by organising and circulating the knowledge which people have of their own everyday life and of the more remote contexts of their lives" (McQuail 1972, cited in Adoni and Mane 1984: 325). Media, and particularly news, because of their high credibility and market penetration may be the only image formation agents capable of changing an area's image dramatically in a short period of time (Gartner, 1994). It is well recognised that through a huge variety of media people receive information about tourist destinations, gain knowledge about these areas and construct their images, which then form the basis of their destination choices (Mercille 2005).

It is important to consider that knowledge is socially constructed and distributed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) and media is playing a major role in this process. Tasci and Gartner (2007) suggest that media tend to be more influential on image formation because they have higher credibility and have the ability to reach mass audiences compared to the destination-originated information. They have the ability to create general knowledge about a destination, and are out of a destination's immediate control. They also argue that organic information sources and especially news media tend to have even greater impact when they portray a dramatic event occurring at a destination, including human caused disasters such as political upheaval, riots, terrorism, insurgency, crime, and war, and natural disasters (Tasci and Gartner, 2007: 415). However, despite the importance of media in the formation of destination images, this concept has not been thoroughly investigated in the field of tourism

research. It is important to consider that images projected by the media are associated with unique meanings in societies. Over time these meanings are capable of becoming objectified in institutions, their structures and processes. Flow of resources to these institutions can allow them to reproduce themselves, thus resulting in the continuation of those meanings. It is important to consider that a destination with a discourse that is associated with and conjures negative meanings could prevent potential travellers from other societies to visit that particular destination and vice versa. Reviewing the literature demonstrates that this has not been investigated in the previous studies. One of the reasons behind this is that the previous studies have mainly looked at this area from a positivist perspective and therefore have not considered the role of wider societal and media discourses in the formation of destination images.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to critically review some of the previous studies in the area of destination image formation. This paper demonstrates that although, the role of destination images in the process of travel decision making is widely recognised amongst different researchers in the field of tourism, there is a lack of empirical investigation to have a fuller understanding of how destination images are formed and the factors involved in this process. It is also clear from the literature review that the role of societal and media discourses in the formation of destination images have not been investigated while these factors have a major role in the construction of meanings in a society, institutionalisation of these meanings, and therefore how a foreign destination is perceived in that society.

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