

(SP) UNDERSTANDING THE DESTINATION IMAGES-TRAVEL FREQUENCY RELATIONSHIP: EVIDENCE FROM THE SKI INDUSTRY

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Introduction

For Greece, tourism has become an important source of economic activity with a rapidly growing scope that extends into the winter season with various winter sport destinations (i.e., skiing resorts, river activities, mountaineering). The accelerating pace of competition and restructuring occurring in the domestic winter sport destinations necessitates the importance of promotion as a valuable tool for being competitive in the industry. Projecting desirable destination images constitutes one of the most important elements of promoting a place to potential tourists. Crompton (1979, p.18) defined destination image as 'the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination'. Based on an extensive literature review, Baloglu and MacCleary (1999) point out that images about destinations are based on perceptual/cognitive and affective evaluations. Perceptual or cognitive evaluations refer to knowledge or impressions about the objective or physical attributes of a place, while affective evaluations refer to meanings and affective qualities. Researchers have explored destination image in tourism contexts for many years (e.g., Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Jenkins, 1999). Destination image is important because it can explain not only the decisions of tourists concerning destination selection, but also the levels of tourist satisfaction. Extending Fakeye and Crompton's Image Formation Process Model, Gibson and Pennington-Gray (2001) suggested that there is not only a relationship between the benefits sought by tourists and the destination image, but the congruence between these two is related to tourist satisfaction level. In a study of a US skiers and snowboarders on a trip to Italy, they found the organic images (induced by visitation) and benefits realized in the destination had a high degree of congruence which in turn reflected the high level of satisfaction they reported regarding their trip. In tourism we know that level of satisfaction is also related to repeat visitation, thus, while it has been well documented that destination image is important and influences decision-making behaviors, it may be that the relationship between image and satisfaction level is also important in predicting repeat visitation to a destination. Moreover, Williams and Gibson (2004) extending this study found that there were differences in benefits sought, but not in destination image or satisfaction levels between the young adults who had previously visited Europe and first time visitors on a ski trip to Switzerland. The purpose of this present study was to explore the concept of destination image in relation to the ski industry and test the relationship between destination image and past travel experience with a ski destination. More specifically, the research questions investigated were: (1) what are the images of skiing resorts in Greece held by visitors? (2) What components of destination image are related to the ski industry? (3) Do images of ski destinations differ between repeat and first time visitors? (4) Can destination image significantly discriminate between repeat and first time visitors?

Methods

Data were gathered by self-administered questionnaires administered to a sample of visitors to two popular skiing resorts located in central and southwest of Greece (Chelmos and Arachova), during January and February 2005. The questionnaire contained items on demographics, perceptual/cognitive destination images (based on Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991) and frequency of travel to those destinations. Of the 270 respondents, 41.2% were male and 58.8% female, while 80.7% were single of young age (83.6% up to 35 years). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, univariate analysis of variance, factor analysis and classification with discriminant analysis.

Results

The images of the particular winter destinations rated highly by the participants were scenery (M=4.09) and clean environment (M=4.06). The participants rated as above average the facilities for skiing (M=3.95) and diversity of skiing environment (M=3.87), and average ratings for the pricing of the skiing facilities (M=2.81) and the road infrastructure (M=2.90). Historical attractions, friendly people, and skiing opportunities were rated as slightly above average. Principal Component analysis with a varimax rotation was used on the destination images items. Based on the 13 items, four factors were extracted accounting for 62.79% of the variance. The first factor ($\alpha = .79$), '*quality of skiing experience*', represents the visitors' perceptions about the destinations' provisions for skiing; the second factor ($\alpha = .62$), '*value/environment*', reflected the visitors' perceptions concerning the natural environment of the destination. The third factor ($\alpha = .70$), '*people/infrastructure*', grouped together items related to transportation and accommodation infrastructure and the friendliness of locals and the last factor ($\alpha = .55$), '*attractions*', reflected the visitors' perceptions about the historical attractions, the local food, and the nightlife of the destination. To test the third objective, means and standard deviations were computed for the four image factors by past travel experience. Multivariate analysis of variance was used to compare the means of the two sub-samples (i.e., first time visitors, repeat visitors) on the four factors. The results revealed overall significant differences at $p < .05$ ($F = 3.058$; $df = 4$; Wilk's lambda = .954; $p = .017$) between the two groups. The univariate analysis (ANOVA) yielded different mean scores between first time and repeat visitors for only one factor (i.e., '*Attractions*') at $p < .05$, ($F = 6.477$; Wilk's lambda = .975; $p = .012$) (First timers M= 3.31; Repeat visitors M= 3.58). Discriminant analysis was employed to examine whether destination image factors distinguish significantly between repeat and first time ski resort visitors. The initial statistics indicated that the one discriminant function was significant ($X^2 = 11.995$; $df = 4$; Wilks's Lambda = .954; $p < .017$) indicating that the group differences shown by the MANOVA can be explained in terms of the image factors. Fisher's linear discriminant functions show that only one of the four destination images factors (i.e., '*Attractions*') significantly contributed to the extracted discriminant function (correct classification 83.3%). Thus, the attractions factor seems to be a good predictor of the likelihood that first timers will become repeat visitors.

Discussion

In comparing the ski destination images between first time and repeat visitors, the results overall revealed significant differences, although further analysis revealed the two groups of visitors varied on the attractions related images. Indeed, the attractions factor contributed the most to the overall discrimination function and as such should be

considered as the most important variable distinguishing the two tourist segments. Repeat visitors scored significantly higher than first timers on historical attractions, nightlife and entertainment, and local food. Understanding the images tourists hold of particular locations is becoming more important as destinations not only compete for business, but are also becoming more homogenous in their infrastructure and services. Goeldner and Ritchie (2003) suggest that successful destinations need a unique selling proposition to set them apart from their competitors. In winter sport destinations these results show that if the sporting amenities are rated equally among visitors that resorts might want to consider focusing on their unique attractions to attract both first time and repeat visitors. Moreover, Gibson and Pennington-Gray (2001) found the match between the images tourists hold and the extent to which their expectations are met by a destination is also related to satisfaction. In tourism a satisfied customer is also likely to be a repeat customer. The congruence between these results and similar studies provides support for the reliability and validity of these findings, however, the generalizability of these results should be treated with caution due to sample size and method.

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