Tourism destination image (TDI): The case of Pertouli, Greece

Panagiota Kokkali, Agricultural University of Athens
Alexandros Koutsouris, Agricultural University of Athens
Polymeros Chrysochou

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P. Kokkali, A. Koutsouris and P. Chrysochou

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the intense competition among tourism destinations makes the identification of the destination image (TDI) held by actual and potential tourists extremely important (Ahmed, 1991; Buhalis, 2000). This is so since TDI has been found to exercise a decisive influence on tourists’ behaviour (Cooper et al., 1993; Beerli and Martin, 2004b). In the first place, there is a general consensus that TDI plays a significant role in the process of decision-making/choice (Gartner, 1989; Chen and Hsu, 2000); in this respect, it is maintained that destinations with stronger positive images have a higher probability of being considered and chosen (Hunt, 1975; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Beerli and Martin, 2004b). Moreover, TDI affects tourists’ evaluation of the vacation experience and their future intentions (Cooper et al., 1993; Bigne et al., 2001). It has thus, for example, been argued that the image of a destination affects both repeat visitation and the intention to recommend it (Bigne et al., 2001; Cai et al., 2003; Beerli & Martin 2004b; Lucio et al., 2006; Castro et al., 2007).

Thus, considerable research has been carried out on the subject during the last three decades (Xiao and Smith, 2006; Ballantyne et al., 2009). However, the definition of TDI is problematic and a variety of different interpretations has been advanced since its emergence through Hunt’s work (1975) (Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; Pike, 2002; Gallarza et al., 2002; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Beerli and Martin 2004a; Grosspietsch, 2006; Martin and Bosque, 2008; Alcaniz et al., 2009). Hunt (1975), for example, states that image is the impression that people hold about a state (place) in which they do not reside. According to Baloglu and McCleary (1999a) image is defined as an individual’s mental representation of knowledge, feelings, and global impressions about a destination. A commonly cited, loose definition of a destination’s image refers to “the sum of beliefs, ideas, or impressions that a person has of a destination” (Crompton, 1979). Finally, Gartner (1989) described destination image as a function of brand and the tourists’ and sellers’ perceptions of the attributes of activities or attractions available within a destination area. Such diversity, according to Gallarza et al. (2002) owes to the features of the image construct: “this nature is complex … multiple … relativistic … and dynamic”.

Despite such difficulties, nowadays there is consensus on the importance of image for a destination’s viability and success, forming the axis of the respective marketing strategy (Chon, 1991; Gallarza et al., 2002; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Grosspietsch, 2006; Alcaniz et al., 2009). Calantone et al. (1989) have pointed out that it is important to understand the perceptions of tourists, as this helps to target appropriate markets for tourism promotion. It may also assist in improving or correcting the image of the destination; the development of an appropriate image may further enhance tourism development in the destination. Therefore, according to Tasci and Gartner (2007) proper TDI development is important to the overall success of a destination.

Today, there is agreement that TDI is a multidimensional overall impression. Additionally, an increasing number of researchers support the view that TDI is formed by two distinctly different but interrelated components: a cognitive/perceptual/designative component and an affective/evaluative one. The first concerns beliefs and knowledge about the perceived attributes of the destination while the second concerns the individual’s feelings towards the destination. Furthermore, the combination of these two components produces a third, compound or overall component of the image, i.e. tourist’s overall image of the destination (Hunt, 1975; Lawson and Band-Bovy, 1977; Holbrook, 1978; Phelps, 1986; Calantone et al., 1989; Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; Gartner, 1993; Walmsley and Jenkins, 1993; Dann, 1996; Baloglu and Brinberg, 1997; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999a; Beerli;
From a theoretical point of view, there is a general agreement that the combination of cognitive and affective components produces an overall, or compound, image relating to the positive, or negative, evaluation of the product or brand. In the context of tourism, Baloglu and McCleary (1999a, 1999b) and Stern and Krakover (1993) have empirically shown that such cognitive and affective evaluations have a direct influence on the overall TDI. It should also be mentioned that the two dimensions are hierarchically interrelated: the perceptual/cognitive and affective evaluations have a direct influence on the overall image, and also the former, through the latter, have an indirect influence on that image (Beerli and Martin, 2004b).

It should also be mentioned that the study of the cognitive dimension of image predominates (Hunt, 1975; Phelps, 1986; Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; Chaudhary, 2000; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Grosspietsch, 2006) with the affective component been addressed since the late 1990s (Sirakaya et al., 2001; Beerli and Martin 2004a, 2004b; Ryan and Cave, 2005; Son and Pearce, 2005; Hong et al., 2006).

Nevertheless, as in the case of TDI definitions, literature reveals a lack of homogeneity with respect to the attributes relevant to measuring TDI. One of the most influential studies on image scale development was published by Echtner and Ritchie (2003) who suggested a conceptual framework for the operationalisation of all specified components of destination image, and showed that: a) place image should be envisioned as having two main components: attribute-based and holistic; b) each of the components contains functional (or more tangible) and psychological (or more abstract) characteristics; and c) images of destinations can include “common” functional and psychological traits (components) or more distinctive or even unique features and feelings. Kim (1998) presented a comprehensive review of destination attractiveness studies while Beerli and Martin (2004a), based on a review of the attractions and attributes, classified all factors influencing the image assessments into nine dimensions: natural resources; general infrastructure; tourist infrastructure; tourist leisure and recreation; culture, history and art; political and economic factors; natural environment; social environment; and, atmosphere of the place.

More specifically, from a cognitive point of view, TDIs are assessed on a set of attributes that correspond to the resources or attractions that a destination has at its disposal (Stabler, 1995). Alhemoud and Armstrong’s (1996) classification of tourist attractions includes: natural attractions; historic attractions; cultural attractions; and artificial attractions. Gallarza et al. (2002) have presented a selection of empirical TDI research that measure attributed-based image. Beerli and Martin (2004b) developed and empirically validated a model which explains the different factors forming the post-visit image of a destination and delineate TDI in terms of natural/cultural resources, infrastructures, atmosphere, social setting/environment, and tourist leisure/recreation. Such attractions provide the motivations and the magnetism necessary to persuade an individual on visiting a specific place (Alhemoud and Armstrong, 1996).

The aim of the present paper is to shed more light on the study of rural tourism which, according to Fronchot (2005: 345) has been “heavily studied from the supply outlook but remains to be further analysed from the consumer’s perspective”. Our objective is threefold, i.e. to explore tourists’ characteristics as well as their cognitive and affective components of rural TDI. The paper is based on research carried out at Municipality of Aithikon, a Mountainous Area (LFA) in Central Greece, one of the most rapidly developing (rural) tourism destinations in Greece.

THE RESEARCH AREA

The Aithikon Municipality (known as the Pertouli area) is located on the Pindos mountains in the
NW part of the Trikala prefecture, Central Greece and covers a total area of 279,825 hectares. The 47.4% of its area is covered by forests, mostly spruce. It consists of eleven communities and four smaller settlements. The permanent population of the municipality is 2,744 inhabitants (2001) and according to Censuses data for the period 1971 – 2001, the area’s population has increased by 28.4%.

It is an area characterized by amazing mountain scenery and superbly preserved flora and fauna; it is an area of great natural beauty and a heritage to be preserved and carefully utilized. The area is particularly interesting in geomorphological terms as well as due to its beautiful, traditional villages.

During the summer months, the Aspropotamos river is ideal for fishing (trout and briana), canoe-kayak and swimming in crystal clear waters. In the controlled hunting area of Koziakas, hunters can hunt pheasants, hares, partridges, deer and other wild animals and birds. On top of "Astrapi" (height 1,738m.) the shelter Chatzipetros has a capacity of 20 beds. There are many forest roads and trails suitable for hiking, biking, horseback riding, and sightseeing by car and motorcycle. The European path E4 route, arriving from Meteora in the villages of the municipality enables fans of trekking to discover the beautiful and unspoilt nature of the mountains.

Agricultural land is small sized (average of 0.18 ha. per parcel). Fallow lands and grasslands account for almost half of the agricultural land and productivity is low. Livestock farming has always been of a ‘traditional’ character, i.e. labour intensive with low rates of capital investment and heavily dependent on pasturelands for around 6 months per year.

The secondary sector is not well developed in the area. In most of the villages, small-scale family based activities relating to traditional distillation, weaving, carpentry and smithy are found; watermills are still present in a couple of villages. One can also find traditional cafes and taverns (or mixed family businesses) in every village; in some cases the same places serve as small groceries.

The region's economy relies mainly on rural tourism, the latter being complementary to farming and logging. Especially last year, organized alternative activities (ski, canoe-kayak, rafting, climbing, hiking, horseback riding, etc.) but also the high quality dining and accommodation choices have resulted in attracting large numbers of visitors. Specifically, the Pertouli Meadows, a verdant plateau at an altitude of 1,150 m., presents the visitor with its own particular attractions; for lovers of winter sports there exist a ski center as well as three chalets for those who are wish to enjoy the scenery. A further unique tourism attraction relates to the aforementioned controlled hunting area of 476,000 hectares which attracts not only Greeks but foreign hunters as well.

Tourism in the area has been developing since the 1960s. In the area there have been continuous efforts to develop the ski-naturalist – hiking activities as well as forms of other alternative activities such as mountain bikes, riding, archery, etc.

**METHODOLOGY**

Data were collected through personal, questionnaire-based, interviews with visitors in the period November 2010 to April 2011. The random sample of tourists was drawn among those who visited Pertouli area and stayed in any of the lodgings in the area for at least one night. The total number of questionnaires collected was 268.

Given that evaluvative attributes are rather abstract and far less applicable (Chen 2001), the survey focused on the cognitive and affective components of TDI. In this respect, a multi-attribute approach was taken. Particularly cognitive TDI was assessed through a battery of attributes corresponding to the attractions of the locale. Consequently, the first two sections of the
questionnaire, aiming at measuring the cognitive component of TDI, comprised a 36 item scale with a different position in the cognitive components, addressing both area (25 items) and accommodation -food attributes (11 items). The scale was developed based on both a review of other measurement scales (Kim, 1998; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999a; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Beerli and Martin, 2004b), the specific attractions of the destination and discussion of an initial compilation of cognitive and affective image attributes with experts and focus groups. Tourists were asked to indicate their level of agreement on each item on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

On the other hand, a semantic-differential scale consisting of four affective image attributes (sleepy/arousing, distressing/relaxing, gloomy/exciting, unpleasant/pleasant) was used to capture the affective image that individuals have of the place before visiting it. In tourism research, these types of scales are usually used to rate the image attributes (Jenkins, 1999).

The third section of the questionnaire comprised questions on tourists' socio-economic characteristics (e.g. age, gender, annual family income, marital status, education, etc.). Many models have shown that such characteristics influence tourists' perceptions of places (Beerli and Martin, 2004; Martin and Bosque, 2008); furthermore, according to Crompton (1979) and Obenour et al. (2005) TDI is not only an individual perception but can also correspond to the perception held by a segment of tourists. Finally, this section also contained questions concerning the characteristics of travel such as the number and duration of both previous and the current visit, companion, means of transport, etc.

In this piece of work data from the first two sections (re: cognitive and affective TDI) and partially from section three (re: socioeconomic data) were utilized. Besides frequencies, in order to explore the structure of cognitive and affective TDIs an explanatory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted. Data analysis was performed with SPSS/PC 19. Our results are preliminary in nature and further analysis will take place.

DATA ANALYSIS
Tourists’ socio-demographic characteristics are shown on Table 1. Most of the respondents were females (53.7%); between 25-44 years old (65.3%); married; with higher education (70.5%); and diversified income levels (31% did not respond). Additionally, 42.5% visited the area for the first time while 15.3% had visited the area many times; the majority had very or extremely positive image for the area.

Additionally, all respondents were Greeks, mainly residents of the two major Greek urban centres, Athens and Thessaloniki (55.4%); visitors coming from the region account for 20% (Trikala 5.6%; Larisa 8.6%; Volos 4.6%). Most stayed at most for two nights (57.1%), mainly with friends (56%) or else with family (22.4%) or their partners (37.3%). The main reasons for visiting the area were: i) the fame of the area (23.5%), ii) recommendation by friends (23.5%) and iii) previous visit (31.7%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>Primary (6 yrs)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>Gymnasium (9 yrs)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High School (12 yrs)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income (in Euros)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Higher (&gt; 12 yrs)</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>70.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;10,000</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-15,000</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-20,000</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Following, an EFA was conducted with the 25 items used in this study to address the cognitive component of TDI relating to area’s attractions. The extraction method used was Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation. A satisfactory solution was found to be a five-factor solution using 20 items of the initial scale. The factor solution explained 61.8% of the total variance, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure score was 0.866 and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity 2185.36 (df=190; p=0.000). Factors retained in the solution were those with eigenvalues above 1 since the scree plot analysis revealed that the sixth factor should be kept in the interpretation (Hair et al., 1995; Malhotra, 1996; Andy Field, 2005). Results and reliability scores are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. EFA on cognitive TDIs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F1: Environmental-friendly activities</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized group tours</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Educational Centre</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation of wild life and birds</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation of agricultural activities</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>waterfalls</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative athletic activities</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F2: Culture and scenery</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of area</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural heritage</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenic sights</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monasteries</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F3: Local products and entertainment</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visits to local food stores</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visits to local craft stores</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Night life</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visits to local museum</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ski center</td>
<td>0.496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Cuisine</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F4: Weather and Environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather and climate of the area</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural environment</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F5: Facilities</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The area is clear of debris</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking is available in the village center</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The five factors were labelled as “Environmental-friendly activities” (Factor 1; 16.995% of the variance), “Culture and scenery” (Factor 2; 14.976%), “Local products and entertainment” (Factor 3; 13.873%), “Weather and environment” (Factor 4; 8.999%), “Facilities” (Factor 5; 6.991%).

A second EFA was conducted with the four affective image attributes. The extraction method used was Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation. A satisfactory solution was found to be a two-factor solution. The factor solution explained 82.12% of the total variance, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure score was 0.500 and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity 283.959 (df=6; p=0.000). Factors retained in the solution were those with eigenvalues above 1 (Hair et al., 1995; Malhotra, 1996; Andy Field, 2005). Results and reliability scores are shown in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Factor Analysis of Affective Image Variables</th>
<th>Loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gloomy - exciting</td>
<td>0.906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distressing - relaxing</td>
<td>0.906</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% variance explained 82.12
KMO 0.500
Bartlett 283.959
Significance 0.000

Finally, a third EFA was conducted with the 11 items used in this study to address the cognitive component of TDI relating to accommodation’s attractions and food. The extraction method used was Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation. A satisfactory solution was found only one-factor solution using 10 items. The factor solution explained 53.48% of the variance of the original variables, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure score was 0.883 and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity 2724.51 (df=45; p=0.000). Factor retained in the solution was that with eigenvalues above 1 (Hair et al., 1995; Malhotra, 1996; Andy Field, 2005). Results and reliability scores are shown in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4: EFA on accommodation and food cognitive TDI Variables</th>
<th>Loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality accommodation</td>
<td>0.818</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decorating accommodation</td>
<td>0.807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasant atmosphere of the accommodation</td>
<td>0.780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of services</td>
<td>0.760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordable room rates</td>
<td>0.730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordable food price</td>
<td>0.701</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff friendliness</td>
<td>0.699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional architecture</td>
<td>0.974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wide range of accommodation</td>
<td>0.665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food quality</td>
<td>0.655</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The current paper aims at a first attempt to explore the main characteristics of tourists visiting the Pertouli area, a mountainous destination in Central Greece, as well as the cognitive and affective components of their TDIs.
As aforementioned, TDI should be considered a multi-dimensional phenomenon integrating several cognitive and affective dimensions. Tourists use these image dimensions to form their impressions and evaluate the considered destinations in their choice processes; according to Martin and Rodriguez del Bosque (2008) the individual's preferences derived from these evaluations, as well as contextual variables such as political or social factors may be the main forces determining which tourist destination to visit. Furthermore, the images tourists hold, especially the affective ones, will influence the messages they spread particularly by word of mouth. It is thus necessary that the image projected by the destinations through their advertising possess integrity, since that image forms the customer's expectations of the destination. Failure to do otherwise ‘disconfirms’ the gap between expectation and evaluation of place.

In the first place, our results indicate that, in the study period, tourists are mostly repeated ones with higher education, relatively young and with rather high to higher incomes. Additionally, according to our (preliminary) analysis of the cognitive and affective components of tourists’ TDI, the Pertouli area attracts tourists as a place characterized by a wide range of opportunities for environmental-friendly/alternative activities, its natural environment and history as well as its local products, cuisine and accommodation. Results also clearly indicate that tourists appreciate the research area as an ideal place to relax and engage in exciting activities.

Our findings are thus considered important for destination-marketers since in the first place, recognising the images tourists have of a destination is necessary to identify its strengths and weaknesses. This, in turn, allows for the creation and management of positive expectations based on the construction of distinctive and appealing images as well as, tentatively, the creation of a differentiated offering than that of competitor-destinations. It finally facilitates the design of an efficient strategy concerning the area’s placement within the tourist market, notably through the segmentation of the market and the development of specific communication for each group based on different components of TDIs (see, for example: Ahmed, 1991; Calantone and Mazanec, 1991; Buhalis, 2000; Bigne et al, 2001; Martin and Bosque, 2008). The Pertouli area seems to be and has the potential to develop further as an important (rural) tourism destination in Greece. This is so as it offers diverse accommodation options, a wide range of activities as well as important environmental assets and lovely sights. However, it has to be stressed that its marketing, due to its environmental and socioeconomic peculiarities and, thus, restrictions, should not have as its exclusive target the increase of tourists’ inflows to the area (see, for example: Koutsouris, 2009).

Our findings also point towards the need for further research concerning the investigation of TDIs tourists hold before visitation in the area, the complex processes of their formation and the sources contributing to it (Gartner, 1993; Gallarza et al., 2002; Pike, 2002; Govers et al., 2007), as well as the evaluation of tourists’ satisfaction and loyalty (see: Kaplanidou and Vogt, 2007).

The contribution of this piece of work concerns the fact that although TDI has been extensively investigated, it advances this line of research by exploring the cognitive and affective component of image in a rural, mountainous area. From a conceptual point of view, due to the fact that this paper only begins to analyse the topic, it is limited since other factors which are known to exist and overall - conative TDI were not included. Further analysis of the existing data is therefore deemed necessary; moreover it would be interesting to undertake further research that includes those types of variables not included in the survey (i.e., overall TDI component, potential tourists, etc.). These are also expected to improve the obtained results (see also: Alcaniz et al., 2009). Finally, the generalisation of the results is another constraint; our results may not be generalised beyond this population and the Pertouli area. Hence, it is advisable to replicate such research and analyse factors that influence TDI in other rural destinations (see, for example: Kokkali et al., 2009).
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Panagiota Kokkali (pankokali@yahoo.co.uk) is a PhD candidate at Agricultural University of Athens,
Department of Agricultural Economics & Rural Developemnt, Iera Odos 75, GR-11855, Athens, Greece.

Alex Koutsouris (koutsouris@aua.gr) is an Assistant Professor at Agricultural University of Athens,
Department of Agricultural Economics & Rural Developemnt, Iera Odos 75, GR-11855, Athens, Greece.

Polymeros Chrysochou (Polymeros.Chrysochou@unisa.edu.au) is Lecturer at Ehrenberg Bass Institute for
Marketing Science, School of Marketing, University of South Australia, Australia.