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# **Assessing Destination Image: an online marketing approach and the case of TripAdvisor**

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## **Abstract**

Destination image is a popular research domain in the tourism literature. Yet, limited studies focus on destination image as reflected through actual tourists' evaluations and reviews on social media. Taken the significance of social media and the relationship between country and destination image, the study embarks upon to assess the three image components (i.e. cognitive, affective, conative) in the case of Istanbul. The study presents the destination image concept from the tourists' point of view, as they review Istanbul on TripAdvisor throughout the summer in 2013. This study, although limited in scope, will be of interest to academic researchers and industry practitioners who are seeking to better understand the behavior of travelers using the Internet.

**Keywords:** destination image, online marketing, social media, TripAdvisor, Istanbul

# Assessing Destination Image: an online marketing approach and the case of TripAdvisor

## Abstract

Destination image is a popular research domain in the tourism literature. Yet, limited studies focus on destination image as reflected through actual tourists' evaluations and reviews on social media. Taken the significance of social media and the relationship between country and destination image, the study embarks upon to assess the three image components (i.e. cognitive, affective, conative) in the case of Istanbul. The study presents the destination image concept from the tourists' point of view, as they review Istanbul on TripAdvisor throughout the summer in 2013. This study, although limited in scope, will be of interest to academic researchers and industry practitioners who are seeking to better understand the behavior of travelers using the Internet.

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## 1. Introduction

Destination image is one of the most studied areas in tourism literature (Gallarza, Saura, & Calderón García, 2002). The concept traditionally contains a cognitive and an affective component, while other researchers argue that there is a third conative dimension which reflects the behavioral aspect (e.g. Gartner, 1993). Social media are used before, during and after holidays for experience sharing and are a significant information source (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In fact, social media content is perceived very often as more trustworthy compared to official tourism websites or mass media advertising (Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides, 2012). Furthermore, the destination image-search keywords link is of critical importance to destination image studies and online marketing (Pan & Li, 2011). However, there is a paucity of research analyzing image as reflected on social media (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014) and revealing the importance of each component for the online user.

A phenomenological study was embarked upon to determine visitors' interpretation of the destination's image, according to a destination image framework. Given that user-generated content influences the customers' decision-making process (Jalilvand et al., 2012), interest focuses on visitors' reviews on the largest online network of travel consumers, i.e. the TripAdvisor (O'Connor, 2010). The study builds upon the case of Istanbul, seeking to shed light to the importance of the destination image dimensions from the actual visitors' perspective. Furthermore, not overlooking the fact the importance of the country brand dimensions (Anholt, 2004) and that destination image should be seen in a country image context (Kladou, Giannopoulos & Assiouras, 2014), the reviews included in the study have been posted on and right after June 2013 and the Gezi Park/ Taksim square incidents (Wikipedia, 2014).

The outcomes offer marketing scholars an overall insight into the destination image dimensions and their distinct significance when an online tool is employed. Furthermore, findings contribute to the place branding literature by analyzing tourists' evaluations during and right after a largely publicized period of 'unrest' at the

destination. Implications for tourism practitioners stem from the dilemma of focusing on several key themes in their mass media marketing efforts, as is suggested to more mainstream markets (e.g. Chen & Uysal, 2002), or capturing the “niche” image held by only a few tourists, as suggested by Pan and Lo (2011) for the case of online marketing. Finally, the research provides guidelines to practitioners so that they develop a better understanding of what tourists consider as significant when evaluating a cultural destination.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 Destination image in a country context and the role of social media**

Recognizing the images that tourists have of a tourist destination is necessary to identify its strengths and weaknesses (Chen & Uysal, 2002), and to position it efficiently in the marketplace (Pike & Ryan, 2004). Thus, destination image is one of the most explored fields in tourism research (Gallarza, Saura, & Calderón García, 2002). Nevertheless, more effort is required in order to explore the multi-dimensional nature of destination image and the importance of each image dimension as recognized by tourists in the digital era.

The various definitions of destination image and frameworks developed for its assessment reveal the importance of the concept for both scholars and practitioners (Gallarza et al., 2002). Different definitions have followed Hunt's (1971) first identification of image as a factor in tourism. Developments in the literature eventually led to the identification of three main components of image, namely cognitive, affective and conative (Gartner, 1993). The cognitive component is connected to awareness and refers to what people know or may think they know about a destination (Baloglu, 1999; Pike & Ryan, 2004). The affective component, on the other hand, goes further than beliefs and knowledge of the characteristics or attributes of a tourist destination, and evolves around people's feelings toward the destination (Chen & Uysal, 2002; Kim & Richardson, 2003). Finally, the conative component is the action step and refers to how people act on the information. Konecnik and Gartner (2007, p. 403) argued that *destinations are evaluated not solely from real or imagined attributes rather than according to the 'brand'*. The conative component and the significance of the ‘brand’ are further emphasized given the nature of tourism and the importance of experience for services such as tourism, which are produced and consumed simultaneously.

According to San Martín & Rodríguez del Bosque (2008), factors such as ‘natural environment’, ‘cultural heritage’, ‘tourist infrastructures’ or ‘atmosphere’ underlie in the cognitive structure of destination image. As they argue, the cognitive component of destination image derives from tourists’ beliefs about the place and, as such, is related to the destination’s attributes. The attributes of the place can be classified into three sub-categories and include functional/ tangible attributes (e.g. landscape, cultural attractions, infrastructure) and psychological/ abstract attributes (e.g. hospitality, atmosphere). However, destination image, being a multi-dimensional phenomenon, goes beyond beliefs and knowledge of the destination (cognitive image) and includes feelings and emotions that the destination may evoke (e.g. pleasure, excitement). Tourists evaluate destinations based on the aforementioned dimensions and then decide on their behavior towards the destination (e.g. whether they would visit the destination again or recommend it to others).

Given that *countries are tourism 'products' from the perspective of foreign and domestic travelers* (Heslop & Papadopoulos, 1993, p.30), overlaps between destination and country image emerge. Besides, tourism plays a crucial role in the field of country image since *it allows personal interaction with locals and the host country culture* (Dinnie, 2011, p.80). Nadeau and his colleagues (2008) elaborated on the conceptualization of destination image in a country image context adopting a nested framework (i.e. the level of a destination conceived at the country level which encompasses all tourism characteristics available to visitors). Kladou, Giannopoulos & Assiouras (2014) assessed destination in a country image context differentiating among the forms of tourism offered in the country (tourism types such as educational, business, leisure tourism etc.). Furthermore, the favorable/ unfavorable match/ mismatch between country destination image and forms of tourism have been investigated with significant implications for practitioners. Hitherto, incidents and events which have an impact on country image are expected to influence destination image and willingness to visit. Specifically in the case of unfavorable country image, Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) and other stakeholders may consider focusing on tourism benefits rather than country image characteristics or, depending on the tourism type, focus on other factors (Kladou et al., 2014). The outcome of such efforts, however, may not lie completely at the hands of tourism providers and decision makers but is reflected on tourists' evaluation of the destination image.

The internet has reshaped the way tourism-related information is distributed and the way people plan for and consume travel (Buhalis & Law, 2008). In line with technological advances, tourism scholars have gradually started focusing on online destination image (Choi, Lehto, & Morisson, 2007) and the role of social media in online travel information search (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). However, such recent studies tend to concentrate on web-page material, thus approach online destination image from the supplier's point-of-view. Alternatively, some relevant studies may focus on social media and visitors' blogs (e.g. Cakmak & Isaac, 2012), yet research on social media in tourism is still in its infancy (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). In fact, Zeng & Gerritsen (2014) particularly point out that *social media sources must be strategically included for research data collection and analysis* (p. 33).

Social media include a variety of websites and online platforms on which people share their experiences in different ways (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In detail, consumers are free to use social media to post their stories, comments and evaluations, or even their pictures and movie clips. Social media appear on the first few search results pages in Google, thus social media sites are easily assessed by potential travellers, quite substantial in terms of the size of their sites, the up-to-date nature and relevance of their contents, and the level of connectivity with other sites on the Internet. Focusing specifically on destinations, travellers share their evaluations and perceptions on destination image using social media, and these evaluations are likely to influence the destination choice not only of friends and family but of other potential travellers around the globe as well. Social media are used before, during and after holidays for experience sharing and are a significant information source (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In fact, the validity of electronic word-of-mouth is particularly emphasised, since social media content is perceived very often as more trustworthy compared to official tourism websites or mass media advertising (Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides, 2012).

The power of social media has repeatedly troubled stakeholders involved not only in the field of tourism but also in governance and other fields of the place brand hexagon

(Anholt, 2004). Although Facebook is the leading social media icon (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014), Xiang & Gretzel (2010) recognize TripAdvisor as the most 'popular' social-media website that contains travel-related content. As a result, the image reflected on TripAdvisor by actual tourists may influence the image created in the perception of potential tourists. Moreover, it can be used to evaluate local and national stakeholders' efforts to support a specific destination image despite possible unfavorable country image traits. Analyzing the comments posted on TripAdvisor will, finally, offer an insight into the weighted importance of each destination image component (i.e. cognitive, affective, and conative) for those individuals choosing to share their experience and evaluation on an online platform.

## **2.2 The case of Turkey and Istanbul**

In the Turkish Strategic Plan for 2023, building city brands in the tourism sector is a parameter explicitly stressed out (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2007a). Istanbul, in specific, is recognized as a 'strong card' for tourism development in Turkey. This is also portrayed by international arrivals in 2012 (Culture and Tourism Directorate of Istanbul, 2014), along with the fact that arrivals outscored those of traditionally popular destinations, such as Rome (Euromonitor, 2014). Turkish stakeholders explicitly emphasize on projects and programs which will minimize the effect of negative events and create a positive image (Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2007b). The emphasis on image does not come as a surprise, considering the importance of re-positioning for the country, as it derives from the reflection of negative news in the mass media concerning Turkey or her neighbors (Tasci et al., 2007). Such news include: (1) military coups of 1960, 1970, and 1980; (2) Turkish-Greek conflict in Cyprus in 1970s; (3) hashish farming problem in the 1970s, which give way to the *Midnight Express* film in 1978; (4) terrorist attacks of PKK, a Kurdish guerrilla movement; (5) the Gulf Crisis in 1991; (6) the earthquakes and safety of buildings; (7) the NATO-Serb conflict in Serbia/ Kosovo in 1999 and (8) the US operation in Iraq in 2002 (Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Sezer & Harrison, 1994; Sonmez & Sirakaya, 2002). More recently, a series of legislation arrangements have led to protests occasionally spread throughout the country. The first massive expression of public unease with the national developments was expressed in Turkey in June 2013, at the peak of the tourism season. As a result, Taksim square in Istanbul was turned from a popular tourism hub into an arena for debate, drawing the attention of international media and highlighting the power of social media.

When focusing on destination branding in a country context, it is worth mentioning that Turkey is more positively evaluated as a destination and more negatively as a country (Martínez & Alvarez, 2010). Besides, the research of Tasci et al. (2007) revealed that Turkey lacks a clear image. Therefore, the study focuses on Istanbul as the case to weigh the importance of destination image components for actual visitors. Moreover, assessing tourists' evaluations of Istanbul during the protests will help understanding the extent to which marketing efforts geared at creating a positive destination image may also be effective in changing the more general country image (Martínez & Alvarez, 2010).

## **3. Methodology**

A phenomenological study is embarked upon to determine visitors' interpretation of the destination's image, according to a destination image framework. Moreover, the

study seeks to assess the importance travellers attribute to each destination image component and, as a result, decide to share their comments on social media. Given that user-generated content influences the customers' decision-making process (Jalilvand et al., 2012), interest focuses on visitors' reviews on the largest online network of travel consumers, i.e. the TripAdvisor (O'Connor, 2010).

The main objective of the study is to determine visitors' interpretation of the destination image components, according to a destination image framework, as recognized by visitors' comments on TripAdvisor. The selected framework has previously been tested by San Martín & Rodríguez del Bosque (2008) using a conventional quantitative method. Alternatively, the present study is built upon a qualitative approach. The study analyzes the comments already posted, thus strategically includes a social media source for research data collection and analysis (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). To be specific, destination image-search keywords link is of critical importance to destination image studies and online marketing (Pan and Li, 2011). Therefore, a content analysis of TripAdvisor posts on the "Historic Areas of Istanbul" page was carried out using specific keywords. In June 2014 the respective page more than 3,400 reviews, is ranked first among the 640 pages referring to attractions in Istanbul and has received the 2014 Certificate of Excellence on the Historic Sites certificate type. Therefore, a study focusing on the destination image of Istanbul is developed based upon the content analysis of respective postings and comments on the Historic Areas of Istanbul.

In total, in 2013 the highest number of international arrivals in Istanbul occurs between May and September (Culture and Tourism Directorate of Istanbul, 2014). Consequently, analysis includes the 203 reviews posted between June and September 2013. The reviews are collected and content-analyzed using thematic content analysis (i.e. cognitive, affective, and conative). In order to maintain consistency, the coding process is conducted separately by the two authors. An inter-rater reliability check was then conducted by the other author. The inter-rater reliability check and the content analysis reveals that there is no need for a more detailed classification of the three destination image components (e.g. differentiate between tourism and general infrastructure in the case of the cognitive component). However, distinguishing between negative and positive image traits is essential in order to provide significant input for the destination and country brand in general. It is important to mention that some words (e.g. "busy", "crowded") are categorized according to the meaning of the respective sentence. In some cases, for instance, such words refer to the urban area and in others to monuments/ heritage sites. Thus, in the analysis the former is included as a review on the natural environment and the latter on the cultural environment. Given the current status of research, next to the content analysis, a descriptive analysis is also considered necessary.

#### **4. Findings**

Istanbul is a destination attracting visitors of different nationalities. According to official figures, in 2013, regardless their travel motive or the duration of their stay, more than 1,1 million arrivals come from Germany, while around 573.500, 503.000, 478.200, 456.100 and 437.500 visitors are Russian, U.S., French, U.K. and Italian nationals respectively (Culture and Tourism Directorate of Istanbul, 2014). During 2013, around 386.300, 261.400, 241.200, 228.600 and 223.100 arrivals are realized by Iranian, Libyan, Iraqi, Azerbaijani, and Saudi Arabian nationals respectively.

Furthermore, people posting on TripAdvisor have the option to share or omit their personal details. The demographic characteristics usually posted refer to the nationality and the gender, while other characteristics, such as age, occupational status, or household income are not added by the reviewers. In fact, in the 203 reviews put in the scope, seventy-eight (78) of the reviewers do not state their gender either. From the 61.68% of the reviewers who state their gender, seventy-seven (77) are men, and forty-eight (48) women. On the other hand, the vast majority of the reviewers (i.e. 86.21%) share information on their country-of-origin. In sum, there are one hundred - seventy six (176) reviewers who mention their country of origin. Almost one in three reviewers comes from North America, since forty-five (45) reviewers state being U.S. and twenty (20) Canadian nationals. Moreover, twenty-five (25) reviewers come from European countries, with an additional number of thirty- three (33) reviewers coming specifically from the U.K.. Finally, thirty (30) reviewers come from Asian countries, seventeen (17) from Australia, three (3) from South Africa and three (3) from South American countries.

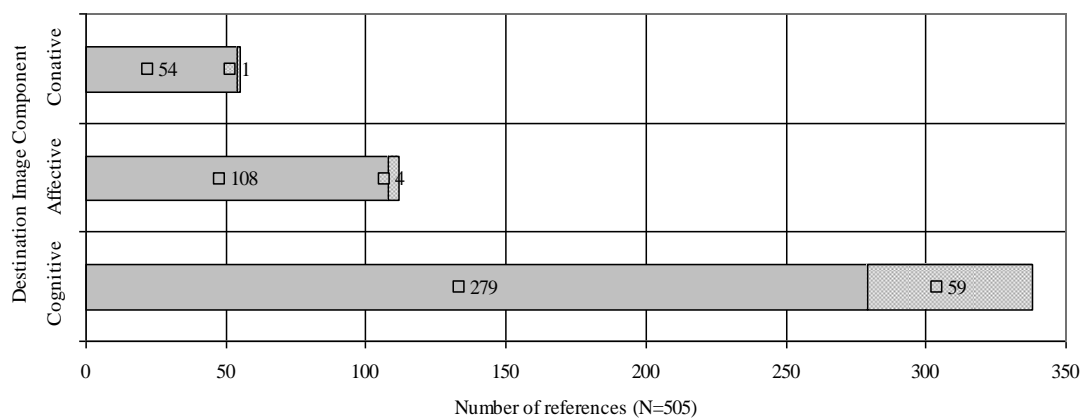
Preliminary analysis reveals that in 203 reviews, 505 references to destination image components can be detected. However, as depicted in Table 1, this does not mean that reviewers comment on all three components. In fact, 66.93% of the references focus on cognitive destination image, while no more than 10.89% of the references are about the conative component.

Table 1: Summary of number of references per destination image component

Destination Image component	Frequencies (N=505)	Percentage (%)
Cognitive	338	66,93
Affective	112	22,18
Conative	55	10,89

The next step includes an attempt to reveal whether reviewers tend to share their positive or negative experiences and beliefs about the destination. Analysis points out that 87.33% of the references (i.e. 441 out of 505 references in total) positively evaluate the destination. In detail, 279 of the positive comments refer to cognitive, 108 to affective and 54 to conative destination image (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Negative and positive comments about the three image components



When focusing on those reviewers who have provided information about their gender, Table 2 below indicates that 79.22% of the male reviewers (i.e. 61 out of 77) tend to post only positive reviews. On the other hand, the respective percentage for female



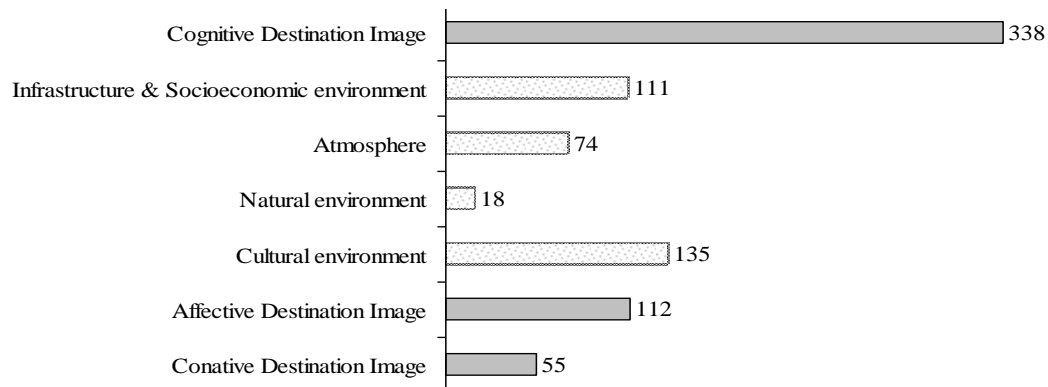
reviewers is 64.58% (i.e. 31 out of 48). In fact, women is twice more likely to post both negative and positive comments than men, since 31.25% of the female reviewers recognized both negative and positive aspects of the destination in their comments, as opposed to 14.29% of the male reviewers (i.e. 15 out of 48 and 11 out of 77 respectively). Finally, only seven (7) tourists post negative comments. The two (2) comments posted by female reviewers come from an American tourist taken advantage by a taxi driver and an Australian tourist, victim of a pick-pocket. Male comments strictly negatively on cognitive aspects as well and stated being dissatisfied by the crowded, busy and noisy city.

Table 2: Distribution of positive and negative comments

	Male	Female	Total
Only positive comments	61	31	92
Only negative comments	5	2	7
Positive & negative comments	11	15	26
<b>Total</b>	77	48	125

At this point, a more in-depth approach to the comments is considered necessary. Particularly in the case of cognitive destination image, the pattern seems in line with the framework developed by San Martin & Rodriguez del Bosque (2008), as portrayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2: An insight into destination image components



Most reviewers post comments on cognitive image, leading to a total of 338 references to relevant aspects. In further detail, there are sixty-six (66) positive references regarding infrastructure and the socioeconomic environment. These references mention the *location*, the *safe* and *'walkable' area*, the *friendly people*, the *good shopping* and *transportation* alternatives. On the other hand, forty-five (45) negative comments are recognized. As a male U.S. national characteristically writes, *"You feel intimidated by the crowd and the city"*. Negative reviews mainly mention the *traffic*, the *long waiting queues* as well as street sellers (*'pushy sellers'*) and *taxi drivers*.

Additionally, seventy-one (71) positive comments refer to the atmosphere, and repeatedly use adjectives such as *cosmopolitan*, *restful*, *calming*, *peaceful*, and *romantic*. Istanbul, in short, is identified as *"a beautiful city [where one can] walk and feel the authentic features"*. The negative comments about atmosphere were only three (3) and refer to the fact that the area is *"very noisy"*. Moreover, Istanbul is *"very Middle Eastern: This was a shocker since Istanbul is usually presented as a mostly*

*European city*". It is interesting to underline that all three negative comments come from Americans. One of these visitors, however, adds that it is likely to return (i.e. "*I will probably go back*" to use his own words).

Ten (10) positive comments describe the natural environment (fauna/flora, landscapes, and parks) and refer mostly to the *parks* of Istanbul (i.e. both on the European and Anatolian side of the city), the *tree-line country yard*, and the *sunsets*. Visitors also point out the importance of "*Choosing the right season*, because of the hot weather in the summer months. The negative comments are only eight (8); three (3) of the negative reviews are posted by British, and two (2) by Australian tourists. Three reviews refer to the "*crowded urban environment*" and one (1) to the "*busy*" landscapes. Negative comments include suggestions to avoid the hot months as well.

As also depicted in Figure 2, the vast majority of the comments refer to the cultural environment. To be exact, comments include one hundred and thirty-two (132) references to the cultural environment (e.g. cultural attractions, cultural activities, and customs). Most references are about the cultural aspects of the Golden Horn area, such as Aghia Sofia, the mosques, other heritage sites and museums. For instance, visitors, among others, mention: "*[the] historic areas are fantastic*" (Australia, female); "*history worth to see*" (Belgium, male); "*A glimpse of two millennia history!*" (U.S.A., male). In addition, nine (9) positive comments referred to the *food* and five (5) to the Turkish bath (*hammam*). On the other hand, the negative comments are only three (3). In detail, a male tourist from South Africa who does not share any positive comments only post: "*Terrible state of neglect*". The other two comments come from tourists who also share some positive attitude. To be exact, a male tourist from Brazil comments that "*women must be aware of [the] dress code*" but underlines positive comments on the atmosphere, the cultural environment and the affective destination image and adds his impression that Istanbul is a "*fascinating city*". Finally, a male reviewer from the U.K. likes the *Blue Mosque* and the *Top Kapi Palace*, yet refers to *Aghia Sophia* as an experience that provides "*poor value for money*".

Seeking to analyze more the affective component, one hundred and eight (108) positive comments are identified. Comments includes the use of adjectives such as "*magnificent*" or "*nice*", which are recorded seven (7) and four (4) times respectively. Furthermore, seven (7) reviewers mention the word "*experience*", and three (3) more refer to Istanbul as an "*interesting*" city. Moreover, thirteen (13) reviewers characterize the city as "*beautiful*" and thirteen (13) more characterize it as "*great*". There are nine (9) comments including the verb "*enjoy*", and eight (8) more including the verb "*like*". Some stronger affective image components (e.g. *heart touching, surprise, wonderful, outstanding, excellent, WOW, awesome, inspiring, astonished, unique, fun, breath-taking*) are recorded as well. The word "*love*" is used from seventeen (17) reviewers, while ten (10) more evaluate Istanbul as an "*amazing*" destination. Finally, a U.S. female tourist characteristically writes: "*I fell in love*".

On the other hand, the affective component includes four (4) negative comments. In detail, a British female tourist negatively comments on the street-sellers and states she "*disliked*" the city. Furthermore, a male tourist writes that "*It will not be a transformative experience*" but adds that "*the top three attractions are conveniently located and you must see them*". Additionally, a Canadian tourist characterizes the city as *clean* and *busy* and the people as *friendly*, yet adds that the city "*isn't anything of special interest*". Finally, an Australian female tourist posts mostly negative

comments referring to the people and service and writes “[there were] people constantly wanting our money, bad taxi service and food”. In general she comments that the experience is “quite disheartened”, but is impressed by the rich *culture* and *history*.

Proceeding to the conative component, fifty-four (54) positive references can be recognized. Different levels of excitement can be detected, as reflected with the intention to revisit or recommend in the following examples: “...and off you go!”, “[it is a destination] to experience and visit!”, “[Istanbul is] not to be missed, recommended and...will return”, “[Istanbul is] worth to see, must see”, “[I will] definitely go back!”, “[Istanbul is] worth seeing”, “[I] can’t wait to go back”, “[one] must see [the city]”, “[Istanbul is a city] to discover and observe...”. Particularly tourists in eight (8) comments say that “[one] must visit [Istanbul]” and twelve (12) more times they comment that “[Istanbul is] worth to see”. The only negative comment connected to conative destination image comes from a female Australian tourist who was mugged and advises potential travellers to “Be careful!”.

At this point it is worth mentioning that during June 2013 the Taksim Square/ Gezi Park Protests in the European center of Istanbul were taking place, not very far from the Historic Areas of the Golden Horn. However, in total, only four (4) comments are about the protests, two (2) were recorded in June and two (2) in July. All comments mention that there is no problem with protests and riots (i.e. “We didn’t notice the protests”) and add positive comments regarding affective destination image (e.g. “amazing city”). These four comments are posted by two U.K., one U.S. and one Irish national.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Focusing on the demographic characteristics of the sample, it seems that mostly men tend to share their views on TripAdvisor or, alternatively, men more than women state their gender when posting their reviews. This does not come as a surprise, given that men have been found to have higher average online travel spending than women (TIA, 2001). Furthermore, U.S., Canadian and U.K. nationals are those who mostly post their reviews on TripAdvisor, although most of the arrivals come from German and Russian nationals (Culture and Tourism Directorate of Istanbul, 2014). This finding is in line with previous findings which reveal that European-Middle East and African travellers comment about historical sites more than travellers from other regions (Text100, 2012), and stress out the leading role of UK social network penetration in the EU-5 (eMarketer, 2013). Similarly, the study focuses on the Historic Areas of Istanbul, and travellers from the U.S. centre on museum and galleries when posting their comments on social media (Text100, 2012).

Previous studies on the role of social media in online travel information search has pointed out that certain keywords (e.g., nightlife and restaurants) are clearly more likely to generate more social media search results as compared to others (e.g., attractions) (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Furthermore, Xiang & Gretzel (2010) argue that virtual community websites are more closely tied to the “core” tourism businesses such as attractions, activities, and accommodations, while consumer review sites are related to shopping, hotels and restaurants, and, social networking, blogs, and photo/video sharing sites with events, nightlife, and parks. On the other hand, analysis of the TripAdvisor posts on the Historic Areas of Istanbul reveals that attractions,

activities and other elements of the cognitive component are considered significant to be mentioned from a destination image point-of-view. In fact, characteristics of the cultural environment constitute the component which received the largest number of references. The reasoning probably justifying reviewers' focus on such elements can be found at the fact that they are rating the attraction entitled "Historical Areas of Istanbul".

According to Anholt (2004), tourism is only one of the six dimensions of the place/country brand hexagon and it interacts with the other five dimensions (i.e. culture & heritage, people, governance, export brands, investment & immigration). As a result, the study is embarked upon previous studies investigating overlaps between destination and country image (e.g. Heslop & Papadopoulos, 1993, Nadeau et al., 2008, Kladou et al., 2014) as portrayed in the descriptions travelers choose to express when reviewing a particular destination. Findings reveal that only four (4) reviews posted on the "Historical Areas of Istanbul" TripAdvisor webpage between June-September 2013 mention the protests and events centered on Taksim square. On the other hand, more reviews refer to negative attributes with a more long-lasting effect on the urban environment and visiting experience (e.g. heavy traffic, sellers' and taxi drivers' behavior).

Findings further suggest that reviewers, especially men, tend to share their positive comments more than the negative ones. Additionally, reviews which explicitly refer to conative destination image include only one negative post. In corporate marketing literature, affective associations, as expressed with emotional evaluations, are referred to as attitudes toward products (Shimp, 1989). Moreover, the various attitudes which the consumer develops of the product features are compensatory, meaning that a negative attitude on one attribute can offset positive feelings on others and vice versa (Gross & Peterson, 1987). Thus, a consumer forms an overall attitude toward a product by balancing his or her attitude combinations (Leisen, 2001). Similarly, a given tourism destination might consist of natural attractions, cultural attractions, and other features (e.g. San Martin & Rodriguez del Bosque, 2008). Given that the overall attitude toward a destination depends on the 'balanced' outcome of perceived experience with the perceived importance of the destination characteristics, one may conclude that online reviewers tend to be positively inclined toward their visiting experience in Istanbul.

### **Implementation, Limitations and Future Research**

Particularly for the case of online marketing, previous studies have mentioned the significance of capturing the "niche" image held by only a few tourists (Pan & Lo, 2011). On the other hand, tourists' comments on TripAdvisor support the significance of more generic destination products and overall atmosphere. In specific, tourists may comment more on cognitive aspects, yet in their comments they refer to aspects covering a large variety of characteristics (e.g. culture, people, atmosphere). Thus, *destinations are evaluated [...] according to the 'brand'* (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007, p. 43), and a positive attitude towards a destination seems to be connected to more than one attribute. This finding is in line with works on destination and place branding (e.g. Kladou & Kehagias, 2014) and provide further evidence to the importance of collaboration among destination stakeholders.

Furthermore, a study on TripAdvisor and reviews' influence when choosing accommodation has already revealed that potential travelers consider these reviews accurate (Travel Daily News, 2012). Moreover, actively responsive businesses are viewed favorably by users, regardless of whether they are dealing with positive or negative feedback, as they appear to care about their customers' experiences. On the other hand, the case of Istanbul reveals no attempt or intention to address the reviews made, although the tourism strategic plan explicitly focuses on marketing tools. Thus, practitioners should reconsider the role of social media and adjust their marketing approach accordingly by effectively addressing reviews and actively revealing their customer orientation. Besides, one of the most important challenges in the promotion of a tourist destination is to recognize its strengths and weaknesses in the individual's mind (San Martin, & Rodriguez del Bosque, 2008). DMOs should develop different actions to maintain the strengths of the tourist destination, elaborate on the positive comments, and improve the attributes where main weaknesses are identified.

Despite the importance of recognizing the images tourists have of a destination (e.g. Chen & Uysal, 2002; Pike & Ryan, 2004) and the increasing significance of online information sources and social media (e.g. Buhalis & Law, 2008), there is a paucity of studies investigating destination image in an online context. The present study contributes to the literature by assessing the three image components as presented on TripAdvisor by tourists who chose to share their opinion with potential travelers and reveals the central importance of cognitive image. However, given its exploratory nature, this study has several limitations. In addition to the lack of comprehensiveness due to the narrow focus on the three destination image components and destinations selected, the data reflect only a snapshot of reviews on TripAdvisor. Therefore, assessing Istanbul destination image in a more collective manner by including TripAdvisor reviews on other Istanbul pages (e.g. Beyoglu, Taksim reviews) could add to the complete reflection of Istanbul as a destination, include tourist evaluations related to other country/ place brand dimensions, and provide evidence of the importance and the management of the Taksim square events to the international traveler. Furthermore, evaluating additional destinations in 'times of crises' could add to the literature related to *place branding* and *crisis management in a tourism content*. This will also allow for additional comparisons and analysis of the online tourism domain beyond the context used in this study.

Zeng & Gerritsen (2014) have stressed out the need to strategically include social media sources for research data collection and analysis. In an attempt to use social media per se as the primary data source, the study has built upon reviews posted on TripAdvisor rather than developing an alternative research tool. As a result, the demographic information used to assess the profile of the internet users is limited to gender and nationality. Moreover, several of the reviewers do not wish to share this information either. Therefore, profiling users of TripAdvisor for planning and online experience sharing is limited compared to previous studies (e.g. Ip, Lee, & Law, 2012). Future research focusing on travel social media other than TripAdvisor is expected to contribute to the generalization of the findings based on users' demographics. Consequently, this research methodology should be applied to other studies and tourist destinations in order to generalize the findings.

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