Annals of Tourism Research 61 (2016) 28–44

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Annals of Tourism Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/atoures

Advancing destination image: The destination content model

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 5 February 2016
Revised 3 July 2016
Accepted 8 July 2016

Coordinating Editor: Metin Kozak

Keywords:
Destination content model
Destination image
Tourist psychology
Tourist behavior

ABSTRACT

Knowledge of the mental representations that individuals hold about tourist destinations are important to understand their intentions. These mental destination representations have often been investigated by applying the concept of destination image. This study argues that the extant literature is often rather atheoretical and lacks operational rigor. These are major shortcomings which undoubtedly hinder the development of academic and managerial insights. In response, this study draws on contemporary psychology to develop the destination content model, comprising three informational components held in individuals' minds about destinations. The present study further outlines preferable methods and measures for each component, thus aiding researchers to investigate mental destination representations.

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Introduction

During the last four decades, tourism managers and researchers have devoted considerable effort to understand how individuals mentally form, store and use representations of destinations (Crompton, 1979; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). According to Dolnicar and Grün (2013), individuals' destination representations, often labelled 'destination image', is the most frequently studied topic across

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2016.07.003
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all tourism research. However, "the need for more research is critical to deepen the understanding of the destination image in influencing tourist travel behaviour" (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011, p. 542). As such, given the pivotal importance of this literature to both tourism managers and researchers, the focus of this article is to identify the key limitations and in response to present a holistic framework for understanding tourists' mental representations of destinations.

In the extant literature, individuals' mental representations of destinations have been defined, operationalized and measured in a variety of ways. While some studies treat destination image as an aggregated and evaluative construct (e.g. Assaf & Josiassen, 2011; Assaker, Vinzi, & O'Connor, 2011), other studies model it as a multi-faceted and rather descriptive construct consisting of qualitative adjectives that individuals use to describe a destination (e.g. Prayag & Ryan, 2012). The conceptual and empirical difference between these two perspectives is significant but has often been confounded under the generic 'destination image' label. Furthermore, studies not only differ on whether such mental destination representation is descriptive or evaluative in nature, but also on whether it is a cognitive or affective representation (e.g. Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997).

The intuitive but impalpable nature of destination image is both boon and bane: On the one hand, its visceral nature is highly attractive for both researchers and tourism managers, resulting in countless empirical and practical applications; while on the other hand, most of these applications are based on a rather prototypical understanding of destination image. As early as 25 years ago, Fakeye and Crompton (1991, p. 10) recognized the challenge presented by such studies stating that mental destination representations "have been atheoretical and lacking any conceptual framework." More recently, Beerli and Martin (2004, p.658) have reiterated this view by stating that studies "tend not to conceptualize this term [i.e. destination image] precisely." Motivated by this shortcoming, some studies (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002; Josiassen, Assaf, Woo, & Kock, 2015) have acknowledged the myriad of views on destination image in the literature and made initial developments towards a more consistent and appropriate framework.

While these studies contribute to the understanding of the complexity of destination image, two key gaps are yet to close. First, researchers still do not have a sound theoretical framework for the components that could make up mental destination representations and Gartner (1993, p. 209) suggests that "most tourism image research has been piecemeal without a theoretical basis for support." While "the assessment of attitudes in tourism study is the basis of much research activity" (Pearce & Packer, 2013, p. 392), a comprehensive model that provides sound theoretical bases from attitude research is yet to be developed in the tourism literature.

Second, and caused by the limited theoretical grounding of mental destination representations, most of the studies that conceptually distinguish between different components of destination representations fail to sufficiently implement this conceptualization at the operationalization stage. Using the label 'destination image' for several conceptually distinct concepts constitutes an important limitation to the theoretical and operational integrity of studies on mental destination representations, as well as to their applicability to, and comparability across studies.

The aims of this research are therefore twofold. Based on state-of-the-art attitude research, we provide a theoretically sound framework which identifies, conceptualizes and delineates the three components of the mental representations that people hold about a destination. This framework is labelled the destination content model (DCM), composed of a multi-dimensional cognitive component, an affective component and an overall evaluative cognitive component. Second, we provide a blueprint for the measurement of each of the three DCM components. This blueprint is based on a review of existing methodological approaches to the measurement of mental destination representations, and integrates relevant approaches from psychology, marketing and tourism research. We further provide an empirical test of the DCM on selected behavioral intentions.

Literature review

Understanding tourists' mental representations of destinations

Over the last four decades, within tourism research a myriad of different concepts have been referred to under the common label 'destination image', without a consensus on how to define or

measure it (Stylidis, Yaniv Belhassen, & Shani, 2015). Although the proposed conceptualizations differ significantly, a general agreement exists in the literature (Josiassen et al., 2015) that a 'destination image' is a mental representation of the destination in the individual's mind (Del Bosque & San Martín, 2008). This definition of destination image can be referred to as a prototypical understanding, that is, a concept which is not amenable to definition in terms of necessary and sufficient criteria (Rosch, 1975). Prototypical understandings are intuitive but at the same time hard to appropriately conceptualize and measure due to their fuzzy boundaries, making it necessary to apply a level of theoretical abstraction (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). In the study of destination image, researchers' definitions are often fuzzy because of two issues. First, there is little agreement on criteria that allow for a hierarchical organization of the destination image construct at different levels of abstractness. Second, all too often conceptual definitions and operationalizations of the construct have included not only components of the construct itself, but also its antecedents and outcomes.

In line with Grosspietsch's statement that "first of all, the term 'image' imposes a definition problem" (2004, p. 226), existing definitions on 'destination image' are testament to an often fuzzy understanding of the construct. In his frequently cited work, Crompton (1979) understands the construct as a cognitive and aggregated "mental conception" (p. 19), referring to it as "the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination" (p. 18). Baloglu and McCleary (1999, p. 870) similarly call it a "global impression about a destination." Another prominent definition is proposed by Lawson and Baud-Bovy (1977) who define destination image as a mixture of both an expression of multiple attributes and emotional thoughts.

Addressing the prototypical understanding of 'destination image' in the tourism literature, Josiassen et al. (2015) propose dimensional reductions along which existing interpretations of 'destination image' differ. Firstly, studies implicitly assume either a descriptive (e.g. Pan & Li, 2011) or evaluative nature (e.g. Sparks & Pan, 2009). Secondly, studies also disagree on the level of aggregation of these mental representations. While some studies assume that individuals mentally store a destination as a single-dimensional evaluation (e.g. Assaker et al., 2011), other studies view the mental representations as consisting of several, potentially unrelated beliefs, and thus have applied a multi-dimensional approach (e.g. Prayag & Ryan, 2012).

Third, Baloglu and McCleary (1999) indicated that the tourism literature is also divided on the nature of the individual's mental responses to the destination. While many studies view the mental representation of a destination as a cognitive state, some studies understand it as a state of feeling (e.g. Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou, & Kaplanidou, 2015) or even doing (Gartner, 1993). Against this background, the present study introduces the destination content model (DCM). We also draw attention to the way in which the extant interpretations of 'destination image' are represented in the DCM. By doing this, three conceptually and empirically distinct mental components of the DCM are identified, hierarchically structured and linked to selected tourism outcomes.

Developing and hypothesizing the destination content model

Attitude research provides a fruitful theoretical substrate for research on mental destination representations. In particular, attitude research conceptually distinguishes between cognitive and affective as well as descriptive and evaluative mental states and views them in a hierarchically-structured mental network that enables researchers to conceptualize and operationalize interactions between these mental states (Eagly, Mladinic, & Otto, 1994). However, central to many studies across disciplines is the notion in attitude theory that mental states are inextricably linked to behavioral intentions. Application of attitude research is therefore well-suited since tourism researchers are often most interested in the link between mental representations of a destination and behavioral intentions towards that destination (Assaker & Hallak, 2013). Fundamental to and shared by many studies on attitude research is an emphasis on a hierarchical multi-component nature of attitude, consisting of cognitive elements, affective elements, and overall attitude (Bodur, Brinberg, & Coupey, 2000). Against this background, the present study develops the DCM in which three mental components interact, and drive tourist behaviour (see Fig. 1).

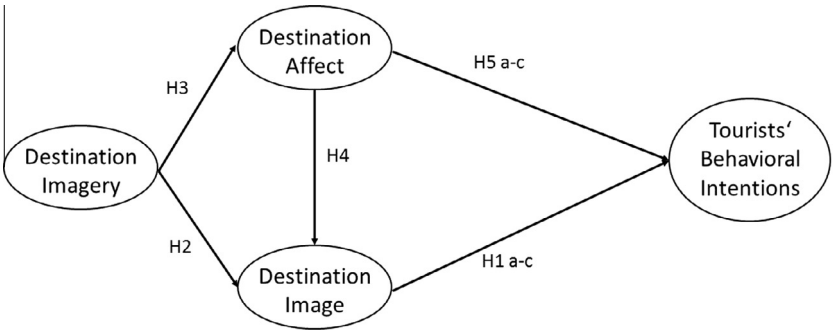

Fig. 1. The destination content model (DCM).

Destination Image

Psychologists commonly define attitude as a "summary evaluation" (Ajzen 2001, p. 28) or an "overall evaluation" (Eagly et al., 1994, p. 113) of the attitude object. Similarly, several tourism studies treat mental destination representations as an overall evaluation of a destination and conceptualize it as a holistic or gestalt concept (e.g. Assaker & Hallak, 2013; Josiassen & Assaf, 2013; Sparks & Pan, 2009). We follow Josiassen et al. (2015, p. 3) and use the label 'destination image' (DI) for this overall evaluative construct, defined as *an individual's overall evaluative representation of a destination*.

An evaluation can be defined as "the imputation of some degree of goodness or badness to an entity" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 3), thus, DI is best conceptualized as a single-dimensional reflective construct that exists in an individual's mind and can readily be elicited from memory. Against this background, studies that are concerned with the evaluative predisposition individuals hold towards a particular destination are therefore advised to conceptualize and label destination representations as DI.

A key contribution of attitude research is its ability to explain and model intentions and behavior that stems from the evaluative meaning individuals attach to objects (Bagozzi, Lee, & Van Loo, 2001). Most studies that investigate how attitudes predict behavioral intentions refer to the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and its predecessor, the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Tourism research frequently investigates the influence that mental destination representations have on tourist behavior, in particular the willingness to visit (WTV) a destination (Tigre-Moura, Gnoth, & Deans, 2015) and to provide word-of-mouth recommendations (Simpson & Siguaw, 2008). In addition to testing these two prevalent tourist behaviors in a nomological network, we also introduce willingness-to-pay as an additional outcome based on Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman's (1996) work suggesting that individuals who hold more favorable mental representations about a destination may have a higher propensity to pay more. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

H1. Destination image has a positive effect on tourist behavior. Specifically, destination image positively relates to (a) willingness-to-visit, (b) willingness to provide word-of-mouth recommendations, and (c) willingness-to-pay.

Destination imagery

Attitude also manifests through associations linked to the attitude object. In their seminal study, Eagly et al. (1994) state that the "overall evaluation of attitude objects derive from cognitions, that is, from the beliefs formed about the attitude object" (p.113). Similarly, tourism studies are also not only interested in the overall evaluation of a destination (DI), but also frequently conceptualize the destination representation as a host of attributes that individuals mentally link with a destination. Likewise, Echtner and Ritchie (2003, p. 42) state that "destination image could be considered in terms of both an attribute-based component and a holistic component."

These cognitive attributes that individuals link to a destination are often referred to as 'beliefs', 'impressions' or 'schemas'. Destination attributes can be cognitive and affective descriptors and enable the individual to describe or characterize a destination without necessarily implying a certain evaluation. This study draws on the duality-model (Josiassen et al., 2015, p. 4) and labels this host of descriptive attributes the destination imagery (DY), defined as *an individual's diverse cognitive and affective associations relating to a destination*.

An important distinction needs to be made between the affective associations such as 'exciting' or 'friendly' (e.g. Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Tigre-Moura et al., 2015) and experiential affective states. While the affective associations that are part of DY are indeed affective descriptors (Russell, 1980), they do not reflect an affective response of the individual towards the destination. As such, while DY includes affective descriptors, the construct is cognitive in nature.

While it was Crompton who argued as early as 1979 for the delimitation of the descriptive and evaluative dimension of destination image, all too often tourism studies continue to intertwine descriptive and evaluative mental structures about destinations. Crompton's view is conceptually anchored in early attitude theory (e.g. Rosenberg, 1956) and most prominently represented in the expectancy-value model (EVM) of attitude (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The EVM is based on the notion that individuals' overall evaluative attitude stems from the portfolio of associations they ascribe to and hold of an attitude object.

In concert with this view, but using the label 'image' instead of attitude, Kotler, Haider, and Rein (1993, p. 141) state that "images represent a simplification of a large number of associations and pieces of information connected with the place. They are a product of the mind trying to process, categorize, and essentialise huge amounts of data about the place." Germane to this discussion is the seminal view that associations serve as the input for an evaluation process, rather than being evaluative themselves. While many studies have operationalized DY as a descriptive/evaluative amalgam, modelling DY as the descriptive input and DI as the evaluative output is more theoretically appropriate.

In addition, DY and DI are assumed to be linked by a mental evaluative process that 'translates' the amounts of rather descriptive information into an overall evaluation. While the distinction between mental structure and mental processes exists in psychology, reflected by the seminal research streams on attitude structure on the one hand, and attitude formation/change on the other hand, tourism research often suffers from an operational conflation of mental structure and mental processes (Karl, Reintinger, & Schmude, 2015).

Ajzen (2001) documents that descriptive associations and evaluations are distinct forms of mental representations and should therefore be treated as distinct constructs. While an individual can acquire various associations and mentally link them to a destination, the evaluation of these associations relies on different mental capacities and should not be dogmatically assumed. For example, the association of 'multicultural' may be a part of DY, but whether it is evaluated as a positive or negative feature cannot and should not be assumed.

Likewise, evaluative judgments differ from non-evaluative (i.e. descriptive) judgments in important psychological and neurological ways (Jarvis & Petty, 1996). As a consequence, not distinguishing between descriptive and evaluative mental states results in problematic measurement approaches. Individuals draw on DY when forming an overall evaluative judgment, represented by DI. Thus, DY is thought to drive DI (Josiassen et al., 2015). It is hypothesized:

H2. Destination Imagery positively relates to Destination Image.

Destination affect

While cognitions have historically dominated in both attitude and tourism research, recent research in both disciplines increasingly directs attention towards affective states and how they drive behavior and decision making (Lerner, Li, Valdesolo, & Kassam, 2015). Although image theory argues that country images have both a cognitive and an affective component (Alexander, Brewer, & Herrmann, 1999), many tourism studies downplay or even neglect the affective component of mental destination representations (e.g. Crompton, 1979), or integrate the cognitive and affective components. This is problematic because affect is fundamentally different from its cognitive counterparts

(Crites, Fabrigar, & Petty, 1994) and experienced as a discrete entity or 'natural kind' (Barrett, 2006) in separate parts of the brain (Panksepp, 2007).

Affect experienced towards an object plays an important role in the evaluation of that object, and research often refers to these experienced feelings about a stimulus as 'integral affect' (e.g. Lerner & Keltner, 2000). Likewise, this study argues that individuals hold an overall affective response to a destination, a so-called internal affective code that contains meaning (Barnard, Duke, Byrne, & Davidson, 2007). This affective mental representation is labelled destination affect (DA), and defined as *an individual's overall affect attributed to a destination.* DA is not to be understood as the host of complex emotions felt towards a destination as a result of visiting it (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010) but rather as positive and negative core affect, i.e. basic feelings of good or bad (Barrett, 2006). However, while Hosany and Gilbert's (2010) emotional experiences are conceptualized and operationalized as the outcome of actual visits, DA exists as a stable affective predisposition and is causal for a destination visit, rather than being the result of it.

While the EVM provides the conceptual base for understanding how the cognitive constructs DY and DI constitute descriptive, respectively evaluative mental representations, DA is theoretically grounded in feelings-as-information theory (Schwarz, 1990). Feelings-as-information theory argues that individuals use the valence of their feelings to infer the direction of their predispositions towards the destination. Likewise, Peters, Västfjäll, Gärling, & Slovic, (2006, p. 80) outline that "by translating more complex thoughts into simpler affective evaluations, decision makers can compare and integrate good and bad feelings rather than attempt to make sense out of a multitude of conflicting logical reasons". This affective response will often be automatically activated by any given destination-related cue (Pham, 1998). As Smith and DeCoster (2000) outline, affect attributed to the destination is experienced as part of the destination's properties rather than as a perceptual consequence of mentally interacting with the destination.

An important consideration pertains to the question of how destination affect interacts with the cognitive mental structure of DY and DI. As early as the 18th-century the philosopher Hume (1739) proposed that affect should guide reasoning. Likewise, Zajonc (1984) argues for the primacy of affect, stating that an individual's feelings about an object regularly override what he or she thinks about this object. This view has been incorporated into the seminal multi-component view of attitudes in which cognitions co-exist with and drive subsequent affect (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). This view is firmly grounded in appraisal theories (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985), which argue that an individual's affective response to a psychological object is based on how they cognitively understand this object. In accordance with this conceptualization, research (e.g. Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007) documents that affect often predicts behavioral intentions better than cognitions, thus functioning as a mediator between the two. Against this background, the present study conceptualizes DA as driven by DY. Thus it is assumed that the various associations about a destination not only serve as the input for the overall cognitive evaluation DI, but also translate into an overall affective state of like or dislike (Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2007). It is therefore hypothesized:

H3. Destination Imagery positively relates to Destination Affect.

H4. Destination Affect positively relates to Destination Image.

H5. Destination Affect has a positive effect on tourist behavior. Specifically Destination Affect positively relates to a) willingness-to-visit, b) word-of-mouth, and c) willingness-to-pay.

Increased attention towards the role of affect is also evident in tourism research, in particular among studies concerned with understanding tourist behavior (e.g. Bigne, Andreu, & Gnoth, 2005). The most frequently cited approach to the role of affect towards destinations is an application of Russell's (1980) model of affective quality (e.g. Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). However, we argue that this 'affective image' is not an affective component but rather a cognitive component that has often been misunderstood and incorrectly applied to tourism studies (e.g. Stylos, Vassiliadis, Bellou, & Andronikidis, 2016). Baloglu and McCleary (1999) use the label 'affective image' to express affective descriptors that individuals use to describe a destination. While this view is in concert with the parental psychology literature (Russell, 1980), many other studies conflate affective descriptors with

Table 1
Conceptual characteristics of the DCM components.

Destination Imagery (DY)	Destination Image (DI)	Destination Affect (DA)
Multi-dimensional	Single-dimensional	Single-dimensional
Cognitive	Cognitive	Affective
Descriptive	Evaluative	Evaluative

experiential affect towards a destination. In other words, this study argues that affect (and not affective descriptors which are by nature cognitive), commonly understood as a basic, universal, and psychologically irreducible experiential state of mind (Russell & Feldman-Barrett, 1999), has never been measured in the destination image literature.

Against this background, what researchers have often conceptualized as affect or emotions has not been operationalized as such but as affective descriptors or attributes. The most severe consequence of this issue is that it has hampered the development of a true affective destination construct. Such a construct needs to unambiguously capture the subjective affect individuals experience towards a destination, rather than using affective descriptors. For example, existing studies have used affective descriptors such as 'friendly/hospitable people' (Tigre-Moura et al., 2015), however, this does not imply affect as a respondent may think that the people are friendly but still does not like the country. This problematic operationalization becomes apparent as other studies (correctly) operationalize 'friendly local people' (Stylidis et al., 2015) as a cognitive item, and thus as part of DY. As long as such conflicts exist in the tourism literature and the same items are used for different constructs, progress of the discipline is significantly hampered.

In conclusion, we argue that destination information is mentally stored in a three-dimensional space, in which the components of descriptive cognitions, affect and overall cognitive evaluation co-exist and interact (see Fig. 1). Further, Table 1 summarizes three of the core conceptual dimensions along which the components differ. In line with psychology research, the three mental components interact but have independent effects on tourists' behavioral intentions.

Operationalizing the destination content model

In light of the conceptual challenges that have haunted the study of tourists' mental destination representations it is no surprise that the operationalization of the focal concepts has often been problematic. Specifically, measures for mental destination representations often vary from study to study, causing an ambiguity that hinders the development of the research area. A solid and reliable measurement that is aligned with the underlying conceptual definition is not only crucial to the applicability of DY, DA and DI but also to the further development of research in the area.

Measuring destination imagery

The operationalization of individuals' destination associations (DY) has long been a challenge for tourism researchers because of the composite nature of this concept (Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2008). While most studies which attempt to measure DY agree that beliefs, attributes or associations about a destination should be captured by this construct, the way these are captured differs significantly across studies. The measurement of DY virtually resembles a free-for-all and suffers from substantial flaws along at least three methodological dimensions: the item development procedure, causal directionality, and descriptive vs. evaluative indicators.

The item development procedure

There are at least two distinct views in the literature on how to arrive at a final set of items for the measure. One group of studies take a structured approach to measure DY (e.g. Chen & Phou, 2013), and obtain data through standardized close-ended survey questions. Structured methods provide an ease of data collection and analysis, are suitable for coding and increase the comparability of results across destinations. The structured approach is based on the premise that the same generic associations are

relevant for the DY for all destinations and all individuals across cultures and countries. Neglecting the possibility that destination associations might vary among destinations and respondents is the key short-coming of this approach. Although individuals could potentially form countless beliefs about a destination, only associations that are readily elicited influence judgment and behavior at any given moment (Ajzen, 2001). This approach risks neglecting important associations while capturing associations which are irrelevant or even misrepresentative. In other words, a structured approach with generic associations is neither sufficiently inclusive nor sufficiently exclusive.

The other main approach in the literature to item development is the use of unstructured methods such as in-depth interviews, open-ended questions or content analysis to identify specific destination associations and attributes that individuals hold towards a particular destination. This approach traces back to Echtner and Ritchie (1993) who suggested a sequence of unstructured and structured methodologies that enable researchers to understand both common and unique destination attributes. This study agrees with the notion that unique attributes should make up DY and suggests labelling them *diagnostic* associations as the label 'unique' implies that only associations *sui generis* are used. In contrast to diagnostic attributes, an inclusion of common attributes in the DY scale is questionable because not all attributes of a destination are part of the DY if they are not diagnostic for the particular destination. For example, it is questionable whether an attribute like 'safety' (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999) is part of every tourist's DY for every destination.

Against this background, this study recommends that unstructured qualitative methods should be used to capture a portfolio of distinctive attributes, and that this portfolio needs to be developed separately for each destination-respondent pair under investigation. Accordingly, Beerli and Martin (2004, p. 659) mention that "the selection of attributes used in designing a scale will depend largely on the attractions of each destination". This approach accounts not only for potential association variation across destinations, but also for association variation across respondents (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 2000). In summary, a two-stage approach is proposed for capturing DY. The first stage is qualitative and collects a pool of distinct and accessible destination associations for the destination. The second stage is quantitative and measures the strength and valence of each destination association at the individual level.

The causal directionality

Within the literature, the consensus view is that tourists' destination associations are most appropriately measured along multiple dimensions (e.g. Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004). In order to sufficiently define and operationalize a multi-dimensional construct, researchers need to specify the relational direction between the overall construct and its dimensions (Law, Wong, William, & Mobley, 1998). If the assumption is that the items reflect a latent construct then it is a reflective measure, and if the items form the construct then it is a formative measure (please see Josiassen et al., 2015 for a more thorough discussion of reflective and formative measures in tourism). However, in the tourism literature the relational direction between the DY construct and its dimensions is rarely specified, and in the instances where directionality is specified it is almost always specified as a reflective measure. In line with recent research (Josiassen et al., 2015), we argue that this is not a feasible approach for measuring DY, and that an individual's diverse destination associations can only be appropriately captured as a formative measure.

Descriptive vs. evaluative indicators

A shortcoming of many existing studies is that destination attributes are intrinsically linked to evaluative meaning. Some studies seek to simultaneously capture the associations that individuals hold towards a destination and the evaluation of the associations. By doing this, the mental process of evaluation is contained in DY. We argue that measures of DY should ensure that descriptive (rather than evaluative) indicators are used. This would overcome current limitations by ensuring that the associations linked to a destination and the evaluation process that draws upon these associations are treated as distinct mental phenomena.

Further, DY is often measured by asking respondents to rate an existing set of generic attributes rather than asking for specific attributes. This results in knowledge about how the destination rates

along a set of attributes in relation to other destinations, but it does not capture the actual set of attributes that form the specific imagery for each particular destination. While this approach is a way to capture evaluative meaning from rather descriptive attributes, it may suffer from 'double denial'; a low rating (i.e. 'very bad') of an attribute like 'nightlife' could either be caused by the individual's perception that the nightlife in this destination is not good, or that nightlife in general is an unfavorable attribute of a destination. As such, Likert-scales framed in this manner capture ambiguous meaning and should be avoided (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

Taking these shortcomings into account, this study draws on the EVM and proposes a two-dimensional evaluative space in which DY is measured. While the qualitative methodology stage captures the portfolio of associations linked to a destination, each association of this portfolio is then mentally processed in terms of association valence and association strength (Ajzen, 2001). Association valence reflects the subjective degree of positivity or negativity (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000) that an individual attaches to an association. As discussed, a priori assuming the valence of specific associations is not meaningful. Association strength is defined as the subjective probability of a link between an association and the destination. The higher this probability, the stronger, more accessible and diagnostic is the particular destination association for an individual. Measuring the strength of each association that makes up DY is important as research documents that cognitive memory is organized hierarchically with some associations retrieved more easily and faster than others, resulting in higher impacts on behavior (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996).

In order to ascertain the strength and valence for each association the respondents were asked these questions: *How much do you relate this attribute to [country] as a tourist destination? and For you as a tourist in [country], would this attribute be negative or positive?* Both items are measured on Likert scales ranging from not at all (0) to very much (6), and very negative (-3) to very positive (3). In accordance with the EVM, the valence of an association contributes to DY in direct proportion to the person's subjective confidence that the destination possesses the attribute in question. DY is measured in the following manner (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975):

$$\mathrm{DY} = \sum \mathrm{Strength}_i \times \mathrm{Valence}_i$$

This approach captures the evaluative association valence and the strength of the association link to the destination independently and thus overcomes the double denial challenge that often conflates empirical tests of association strength and association valence.

Measuring destination image

Existing studies broadly agree on measuring the overall evaluative destination representation as a bi-polar, single-dimensional and reflective construct (e.g. Josiassen & Assaf, 2013). While this study agrees with these aspects of the operationalization of DI, two shortcomings remain. First, DI should be measured only with cognitive and not affective items. Increasing evidence highlights the necessity of distinguishing between cognitive and affective evaluations (Ajzen, 1991). However, many studies have used both affective as well as cognitive items to measure DI, thus conflating affective and cognitive evaluations (Sparks & Pan, 2009). Second, some studies measure DI with a one-item scale (e.g. Assaker et al., 2011). However, single-item scales severely limit researchers' ability to ascertain measure quality. Furthermore, recent evidence demonstrates that multi-item scales significantly outperform single-item scales in terms of predictive validity suggesting that single-item scales should be avoided in social sciences (Diamantopoulos, Sarstedt, Fuchs, Wilczynski, & Kaiser, 2012). Thus, we strongly suggest that tourism researchers use multi-item scales rather than single-item scales when measuring latent constructs.

All things considered, taking a holiday to [country] is… (7-point Likert-scale)

(1) good/bad
(2) positive/negative
(3) favourable/unfavourable
(4) worthwhile/not worthwhile

Drawing on existing studies that attempt to capture an individual's overall evaluative predisposition toward a destination or other objects (Bagozzi et al., 2001; Eagly et al., 1994; Josiassen & Assaf, 2013), we propose the above scale for DI.

Measuring destination affect

While many studies acknowledge the importance of destination affect in tourist decision-making, no study exists to date which has developed a measure for such an affective component. In particular, tourism studies which conceptually distinguish destination affect from cognition fall short on sufficiently implementing this distinction at the operational stage. As such, this study proposes the first scale for integral affect that individuals experience towards a destination, labelled destination affect (DA).

Existing attempts to measure destination affect are almost exclusively based on the circumplex model which integrates valence and arousal into one grid (Russell, 1980). While it is widely acknowledged that this framework captures a 'description of the affective quality attributed to environments', it does not measure the affect which individuals experience towards an object, such as a destination.

Two crucial problems can be identified in the measurement of the affective destination component. First, asking respondents to describe a destination as 'gloomy-exciting' simply means that this item reflects respondents' agreement to describe the destination as 'gloomy-exciting'. Although this notion seems obvious and intuitive, tourism research has traditionally interpreted this item as if the respondent indicates personally feeling gloomy or excited towards the destination. Likewise, one can describe a destination as 'pleasant' without feeling pleasure, 'relaxing' without feeling relaxed or 'lovely' without feeling love. The problematic nature can be further illustrated by noting that some studies (e.g. Del Bosque & San Martín, 2008; Stylidis et al., 2015) use almost identical item labels (i.e. 'pleasant') to measure both cognitive descriptive associations (DY) and affect (DA).

Second, typically studies measuring the affective component have aggregated it to an overall evaluative construct by summing up respondents' answers to questions about the valence and arousal respectively. This is problematic for two reasons. First, the circumplex model consists of two dimensions, valence and arousal, that cannot be meaningfully aggregated in an algebraic function. Aggregating the dimensions of arousal and valence to an overall evaluative composite score is impossible as high or low arousal is not implicitly positive or negative (Russell, 1980). The second reason pertains to the criterion of unambiguity. Assuming that 'relaxing' is positive is problematic as it may have a negative connotation for some individuals (i.e. 'boring').

All things considered, how do you feel about the destination [country]? (7-point scale)

(1) like/dislike
(2) pleasant/unpleasant
(3) attraction/repulsion
(4) comfortable/uncomfortable

Drawing on existing literature that measure affect towards an object (e.g. Bagozzi et al., 2001), DA is understood as a first-order reflective construct and measured with the four items above.

Methods

This study tested the DCM in a qualitative and subsequently a quantitative study. While the components DA and DI, and the three outcome variables willingness-to-visit (WTV), word-of-mouth (WOM) and willingness-to-pay (WTP) can be directly measured in the questionnaire with existing scales, the association pool for DY needs to be developed in a qualitative study for each destination separately. The DCM is tested in the context of the two destinations Germany and Spain. While Germany is the seventh-biggest tourist destination in the world, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first time in the literature that tourists' mental destination representations of Germany are investigated. The image of Spain has only been sparsely investigated with generic associations (Andreu, Bigné, & Cooper, 2000). Both the qualitative and quantitative studies were carried out in an urban region in Denmark.

Qualitative study

The aim of the qualitative study was to collect destination-specific and salient associations that individuals link to the tourist destinations Germany and Spain. For each of the two destinations, 25 semi-structured interviews, balanced in gender and age, were conducted that lasted 20–45 min. Respondents for the 50 interviews were recruited in Denmark through a public street intercept technique in which every tenth individual was approached (Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2007). Interviews were conducted with an interview guide in line with Echtner and Ritchie's (1993) approach. This approach allows respondents to think freely about the destination and to describe their associations in their own words.

Whenever respondents used generic descriptive terms such as 'interesting' or 'colorful' the interviewer probed to elicit more specific associations which gave cause to the generic descriptor. Synonymous expressions were grouped together under one label using two criteria: (a) best representative of the underlying meaning, and (b) most frequently mentioned (Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2008). Associations that were frequently mentioned (in this study by more than 20 percent of the interview partners) yielded 18 associations for Germany and 13 associations for Spain that were then used in the quantitative study. A full list of all attributes is shown in Table 2.

Quantitative study

A questionnaire was constructed which contained items to measure DY, DA, DI, and the outcome variables WTP, WOM and WTV (measured on 7-point scales), as well as age, and gender. Potential respondents were approached in regional trains in an urban region in Denmark during November 2015, using a systematic field intercept method (Pappu et al., 2007). A total of 337 questionnaires were collected, 175 for Germany and 162 for Spain. The surveyed respondents comprised of 44.8% of males for Germany and 47.5% for Spain, with the majority having visited Germany (97%), respectively Spain (93%) before. In terms of age, 33.4% (58.7%) of the respondents for Spain (Germany) were between 18 and 29, 22.8% (18.9%) between 30 and 39, 21.6% (14.4%) between 40 and 49, and 22.2% (8.0%) 50 and older. For the formative DY construct, each of the attributes identified in the qualitative study was measured along 'association strength', and 'association valence', resulting in 18 and 13 for Germany and Spain respectively. Table 2 provides further details from the attitudinal strength-valence (ASV) analysis.

Mean association strength indicates how strongly respondents link an attribute to the destination, while the association valence shows how positive (or negative) respondents evaluate it. In general, all attributes received relatively high strength values, indicating that the preceding qualitative study satisfactorily identified relevant beliefs. For example, respondents make a very strong associative link between Germany and 'Berlin' ($\bar{x} = 5.14$), while 'Rainy weather' is rather negatively evaluated (with a mean of −.75). The standard deviation of association valence can be interpreted as an indicator of the valence dispersion among respondents. For example, the valence related to 'touristy' for Spain varies considerably among respondents, indicating a spread covering negative and positive valence. As such, these numbers support our argument that the evaluation of attributes should not be assumed but measured for every individual.

Multicollinearity is undesirable and all variance inflation factors (VIF) are lower than the threshold of 5, and almost all are below 3.3 (see Table 2), indicating that no harmful multicollinearity exists (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006). The two attributes of 'sunny weather' and 'hot climate' share variance, and one ('hot climate') was therefore excluded from further analysis.

As shown in Table 3, all five reflective constructs showed excellent composite reliability, convergent validity, and factor loadings of all constructs being above .7 (see Fig. 2).

We measured word-of-mouth (WOM) using an adapted measure from Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003). The scale items have also been used in similar studies (Simpson & Siguaw, 2008; Zeithaml et al., 1996). The final WOM scale measures the degree to which respondents agree with four statements: *I talk up [country] as a holiday destination; I bring up [country] in a positive way in conversations about holiday destinations*; *In social situations, I often speak favorably about [country] as a tourist destination*; *I recommend [country] as a tourist destination to other people when asked*.

Table 2
ASV analysis of DY attributes for Germany and Spain.

Attributes for Germany	Strength (mean)	Valence (mean)	Valence (std)	VIF S*V
Everything is in order	4,53	1,87	1,08	1,69
Oktoberfest	4,59	1,18	1,73	1,22
Good infrastructure	4,75	2,13	0,98	1,77
Berlin (Berliner Wall, Brandenburger Tor)	5,14	2,04	1,13	1,35
Ambitious working attitude	4,02	0,91	1,38	1,42
Beautiful nature	3,77	1,68	1,16	1,30
German food (sausages, meat)	4,07	0,59	1,70	1,14
Ease of communication	3,33	1,09	1,50	1,95
Friendly people	3,97	1,63	1,29	2,19
Big country	4,33	0,95	1,34	1,74
City vacation	4,59	1,60	1,30	1,89
Cheap	3,60	1,42	1,50	1,38
High Urbanization	4,03	0,82	1,41	1,52
Historical places & buildings	4,63	1,77	1,23	2,39
Cold weather	3,23	-0,38	1,54	2,17
Rich history (World War I and II, East and West)	4,85	1,64	1,41	2,44
Rich culture	4,29	1,52	1,30	1,96
Rainy weather	3,14	-0,75	1,58	2,11
Attributes for Spain	Strength (mean)	Valence (mean)	Valence (std)	VIF S*V
Sunny weather	5,31	2,18	1,24	3,82
Hot climate	5,02	1,89	1,34	4,16
Spanish food (Paella, Tapas)	5,01	1,29	1,73	2,01
Cultural Traditions	3,82	0,85	1,50	2,05
Friendly people	4,03	1,69	1,09	2,27
Wine (Sangria,Rioja)	4,60	1,39	1,57	2,16
Relaxed lifestyle	4,69	1,75	1,19	1,58
Touristy	4,26	-0,39	1,73	1,23
Rich Art (Dalí, Picasso)	3,77	0,75	1,61	1,47
Vibrant nightlife	4,08	1,10	1,61	2,06
Barcelona (Sagrada Familia, La Rambla)	4,89	1,50	1,31	1,75
Lifely atmosphere	4,63	1,51	1,37	2,31
Beautiful beaches	4,06	1,55	1,15	1,61

Table 3
Reliability and convergent validity of measured variables.

Variable	Composite reliablity		AVE	
	Germany	Spain	Germany	Spain
DA	.92	.94	.77	.79
DI	.94	.94	.81	.79
WTV	.95	.94	.81	.80
WOM	.96	.96	.85	.85
WTP	.92	.91	.74	.72

Willingness to visit (WTV), adapted from Oberecker and Diamantopoulos (2011), include four statements ranging from *I strongly intend to visit [country] in the future, It is very likely that I would choose [country] as my tourist destination, I would like to take a holiday in [country', to I plan to visit [country] as a tourist at some point in the future.*

Willingness to pay (WTP) was adapted from and previously employed by Zeithaml et al. (1996) and Baker and Crompton (2000). The scale asks respondents about their agreement with four statements: *I would continue to visit [country] even if the prices to go there were increased*; *I would pay a higher price to visit [country] than to visit other countries*; *I would be willing to spend more money for a holiday in [country] than for a similar holiday in most other countries*; *As a tourist, I would go to [country] even if it was more expensive than most other places.*

Results

When examining the reflective aspects of the model there were no serious cross-loadings from the reflective constructs to indicators meant to indicate any of the other reflective constructs. To investigate discriminant validity further we applied Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion. For every possible pair of reflective constructs in the model AVE was greater than the squared correlation between them, indicating good discriminant validity. To ascertain if multicollinearity was a threat we tested for variance inflation. All VIF were below 4, and thus clearly below the critical threshold of 10 indicating that collinearity is not a problem (Belsley, Kuh, & Welsch, 1980). The model further explains a substantial portion of the variance in the dependent variables for Germany (DA .36, DI .71, WOM .62, WTV .46, and WTP .19) and Spain (DA .56, DI .73, WOM .44, WTV .48, and WTP .15). In total, the data and the proposed model indicate adequacy for hypothesis testing.

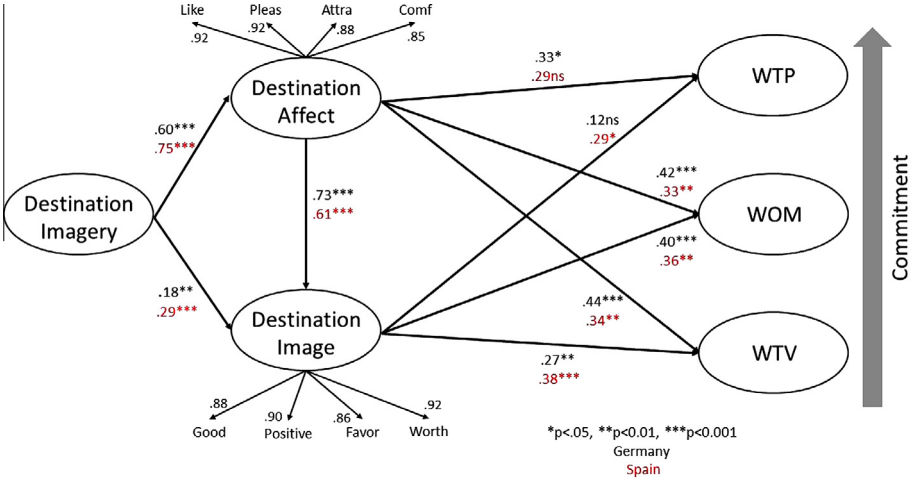

Fig. 2. Path model results for Germany and Spain.

The hypotheses were tested using partial least squares path modelling (PLSPM). Although PLSPM is also useful to conduct "analysis of structures when normality of data cannot be assumed" (Assaker & Hallak, 2013, p. 27), skewness and kurtosis coefficients were within the acceptable limits of -1 to 1. Following standard procedures for obtaining significance scores in PLSPM, we applied a nonparametric bootstrapping routine using 500 random samples (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009). PLSPM was chosen over other path modelling techniques because of its ability to handle models with formative aspects (Hair, Sarstedt, Hopkins, & Kuppelwieser, 2014). Models for Germany and Spain respectively were tested and reported.

Overall, we found strong support for the DCM across both datasets. The results show that DI positively affects behavioral intentions, thus supporting H1. Specifically for destination Spain, DI positively relates to WOM (.36, $p < .01$), WTV (.38, $p < .001$), and even to WTP (.29, $p < .05$). Willingness to pay a higher price for a trip to one destination over another might indicate a greater commitment than willingness to visit or to recommend. For destination Germany, DI positively relates to WOM (.40, $p < .001$), and WTV (.27, $p < .01$). However, the relationship between DI and WTP is not significant (.12, n. s.). Thus, for this dataset H1a and H1b are confirmed while H1c could not be confirmed.

After establishing that DI affects tourist decision-making, we tested whether DI is driven by individuals' DY as asserted by H2. The results show that for both destination Spain (.29, $p < .001$) and Germany (.18, $p < .01$) DY is a strong driver of DI. Therefore H2 is confirmed.

In regards to H3, the path from DY to DA is significant and positive both for Spain (.75, $p < .001$) and Germany (.60, $p < .001$). This result also further indicates external validity of the DY measure. The study also explored the potential for DA to drive DI, and for both Spain (.61, $p < .001$) and Germany (.73, $p < .001$) this link is significant. These findings fully confirm H3 and H4.

Finally, in regards to the relationship between DA and tourists' behavioral intentions the results show that for destination Spain, DA positively relates to WOM (.33, $p < .01$), and WTV (.34, $p < .01$). The link to WTP (.29, $p > .10$), however, was not significant. For destination Germany, DA positively relates to WOM (.42, $p < .001$), WTV (.44, $p < .001$), and to WTP (.33, $p < .05$). Combined, these results confirm H5a and H5b, and partially confirm H5c. These results collectively indicate that the DCM is a statistically valid and robust model to understand individuals' mental destination representations and related behavioral intentions. Similarly, the model provides a good fit for the data, as indicated by eight out of nine significant path coefficients in the model (Assaker & Hallak, 2013).

Conclusion

The present study answers frequent calls for more theory-based research on 'destination image'. Several tourism researchers have noted this gap, and state that research efforts on 'destination image' are often "insufficiently theory-based, resulting in a lack of framework or solid conceptualization" (Beerli & Martin, 2004, p. 658). In response, the present study introduces and empirically validates the destination content model (DCM). The DCM comprises multiple and causally linked components of mental destination representations. It is a flexible theoretical framework that has important implications both for the conceptual advancement and empirical application of the mental destination representations literature.

The DCM enables more theoretically sound future research as well as increases sensitivity to choice of appropriate conceptualizations and operationalization of the focal concepts by reducing conceptual and methodological ambiguity. An affective mental destination representation is applied for the first time in tourism research. In addition, the DCM draws on seminal psychology research, thus addressing recent calls from academicians to establish stronger links between psychology and tourism, in order to overcome 'the limited success of linking attitudes and behaviour' in tourism research (Pearce & Packer, 2013, p. 393).

The DCM provides several important implications for tourism managers who want to understand how their destination is perceived by tourists and can trigger positive behavioral intentions. With the help of DY, managers can identify strengths and weaknesses of their destination offering, and plan marketing strategies accordingly. For example, if managers identify a negative attribute that tourists strongly associate with a destination, they may either try to weaken the link (association strength)

between the attribute and the destination or increasing its favorability (association valence). For example, the DY for Spain reveals that ‚touristy' is an unfavorable association while the weather and climate represents a very favorable association. Accordingly, tourism managers should seek to actively diminish the ‚touristy' association by increasing the authenticity of the destination, while at the same time being aware that while the climate association is a strength it is not an attribute which separates Spain from, for example, Turkey or Greece. For Germany, the negative associations relating to the weather are hard to manage while the key positive associations (e.g. ‚Berlin') can be strategically managed as a unique selling proposition.

We urge future research to investigate the mental information processes that exist among the three components of the DCM, the potential antecedents and outcome variables. While the DCM conceptualizes the structure and components of the mental destination representations, future research needs to provide an understanding of the mental processes that exist among these mental structures. This deeper insight may, for example, help explain why the effect of DA on WTP is only significant for Germany, while the effect of DI on WTP is only significant for Spain and not Germany.

Further, while the DCM is based on the state-of-the-art consensus in the attitude literature, some insights from psychology allow for reciprocal effects between the cognitive and affective components of the DCM, by the application of information processing theories (e.g. Forgas, 1994; Phelps, 2006). While the causal directions tested in this research represent the dominant view, the DCM is able to accomodate alternative causal links, and we highlight the opportunity to investigate alternative causal relationships within the DCM. In addition, intentions may differ from actual behavior, and future research may therefore test the DCM on actual tourist behavior. Also, the sample in the present study contains statistical power to test the DCM with respondents who had visited the destinations under investigation. It would also be interesting to validate the DCM with a sample of visitors without prior experience. While the present study conceptualizes the DCM from a tourist perspective, it may also be worthwhile to measure it among other stakeholders such as tourist managers (e.g. Stylidis et al., 2015), and local residents (Stylidis, Avital Biran, Sit, & Szivas, 2014).

In conclusion, this study argues that it might be for good reason that tourism researchers have used several approaches to conceptualize and operationalize 'destination image'. Since one concept is not able to appropriately represent the complexity of cognition and affect, and their impact on tourist behavior, the DCM provides a comprehensive framework in which to understand tourist decision-making. As such, the study addresses the important needs of managers and researchers to understand "how tourists think, feel and behave." (Pearce & Packer, 2013, p. 386).

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