FACTORS THAT EXPLAIN THE CHANGE IN THE IMAGE OF A TOURIST DESTINATION BEFORE AND AFTER A VISIT

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In the academic literature, there are very few works that focus on the evolution of the image of tourist destinations during the different phases of the trip (prior to, during and after the visit), despite the relevance that it has for the sector due to the effects caused in terms of satisfaction and loyalty (Kim, McKercher and Lee, 2009; Yilmaz et al., 2009). Although in the literature there are studies that analyse the impact of a number of factors, such as the sources of information and personal characteristics of the tourist on the process of forming the image of the destination (Beerli and Martín, 2004a, 2004b; Ryan and Cave, 2005; Tasci, 2007; Tasci and Gartner, 2007; Ferreira, 2011), no studies have evaluated how these factors influence the change of image of the tourist destination before and after the trip, considering in its conceptualisation the three components of the image of a tourist destination widely reported in the literature (perceptual/cognitive, affective and global), which are correlated with each other.

In this context, this research has arisen, the objective of which is to analyse the antecedents or the causes that lead to a change in the image during and after the visit, which must be considered and managed by operators in the tourism market, since the image is one of the most influential factors in the success of tourist destinations. To that end, a model that aims to explain the factors influencing the pre- and post-visit change of image has been developed and empirically validated.

From the literature review, two variables have been identified as factors that influence the pre- and post-visit change of image that are directly related to the tourist's search for information and that relate to the time invested in the search for secondary information and the number of secondary sources consulted (Schmidt and Spreng, 1996; Fodness and Murray 1997,1999; Gursoy and McCleary, 2004), the first being an antecedent of the second (Balouglu and McCleary, 1999a, 1999b; Gursoy and McCleary , 2004). However,

this process of finding information is affected both by the level of uncertainty that tourists have about the destination, which generates the need to expand their previous knowledge about it (Bettman, 1979; Crotts, 1999; Swarbrooke and Horner, 1999; Quintal, Lee and Soutar, 2010), and the level of involvement in or interest a tourist has for the trip, which also has an impact on the change of image (Gursoy and McCleary., 2004; Martín et al, 2008). On the basis of these works, seven working hypotheses have been formulated (H1 to H7). Moreover, there are several works which have studied how certain characteristics of the trip influence the behaviour of tourists, such as the duration and intensity of the visit (Giltelson and Crompton, 1983; Fodness and Murray, 1997, 1999; Hyde and Lawson, 2003; Beerli and Martín, 2004a, 2004b; Hyde, 2008), which have led us to propose four new hypotheses (H8-h9c).

To test these hypotheses that ultimately make up the explanatory model of the gap in the image of a tourist destination, an empirical study has been conducted, using personal interviews in a sample of 411 leisure tourists in Tenerife (Canary Islands) of both sexes, 16 or more years of age, from abroad or elsewhere in Spain and visiting the island of Tenerife for the first time. The selection of participants was carried out at places of interest in Tenerife frequented by tourists, who were surveyed at the end of their stay. The fieldwork was conducted in June and July 2015. The profile of respondents was quite similar to that of the population in terms of the distribution percentage of nationality, gender and age.

The measurement scales used were designed from the literature review and mostly correspond with 7-point Likert scales. The time spent looking for information, the level of uncertainty before the trip to Tenerife, and level of involvement with the destination were measured with scales formed by a single item. To measure the gap in cognitive, affective and overall image, three scales were formed with 15, 2 and 1 items respectively, in which the respondent had to assess the extent to which each item had been better, the same or worse than expected according to the information they had before making the journey on a scale ranging from -3 to +3, where -3 was much worse than expected, 0 was equal to expectations, and +3 was much better than expected. However, the low percentage of negative gap (-3 to -1) indicated the need to recode to a single state, which has been labelled as "Equal to or slightly worse than expected," including scores ranging from -3 to 0. The intensity of the visit was measured according to the level of interaction of the tourist with the destination through a dichotomous scale which includes 18 attractions in Tenerife that could be visited by tourists during their stay at the destination. The travel time was measured as the number of nights stay. Finally, the number of sources of information was measured through dichotomous scales on the use of 14 sources.

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis of second order applied to the scale recoded to four states of the gap in the cognitive image of the destination, generating four dimensions which were labelled as "Natural Resources", "Heritage and Infrastructure" "Tourist Activities" and "Environment". The analyses also confirm that this is a scale that meets the criteria of validity and reliability.

The results of the structural equation modeling indicate that the fit is satisfactory and that the percentages of explained variance of the gap in affective and overall image are high (69.3% and 60.9%), which did not occur with the cognitive gap (15.2%). These results suggest that (1) the level of uncertainty before organising a trip and the interest

shown by the prospective tourist in the destination before travelling have a direct and positive impact on the number of secondary information sources consulted by tourists, which is not the case for the time the tourist dedicated to the search for information, allowing hypotheses H2 and H5 to be accepted and H1 to be rejected; (2) the higher the level of uncertainty that a prospective tourist has, as well as the level of involvement or interest in the destination, before organising a trip, the greater will be the time that a prospective tourist engages in the search for information, allowing, therefore, hypotheses H3 and H4 to be accepted; (3) the number of secondary information sources consulted by the prospective tourist directly and positively influences the pre- and post-visit gap in cognitive image, which is not the case for the level of involvement, therefore H6 can be accepted, but not H7; (4) the longer the duration of the journey, the larger will be the number of sources of secondary information consulted, so hypothesis H8 must be rejected, since the direction of the relationship is contrary to that which was formulated theoretically, and; (5) the larger the number of attractions visited by the tourist - as an indicator of the intensity of the visit - the greater will be the gap in cognitive image and the smaller will be the gap in affective image, the gap in overall image being unaffected, therefore hypothesies H9a and H9b to be accepted and hypothesis H9c to be rejected.

Therefore, these results show that (1) the time spent searching for information is a variable of tourist behavior, which is conditioned by uncertainty about the destination and the level of interest in the trip; (2) the number of information sources consulted by the prospective tourist influences the change in cognitive image; (3) the tourists that visit a larger number of sights during their stay have a much better cognitive image of the destination than they did initially, probably due to the fact that many attractive places at a destination are not sufficiently well-known by tourists before a visit and therefore come as a pleasant surprise to them, and; (4) the negative effect of the intensity of the visit on the change in affective image leads us to think that tourists who believe before they travel that the destination is a pleasant, enjoyable or exciting place, tend to visit more places during their stay and therefore their affective image changes less.

This research has sought to contribute to a greater knowledge of the area of the image of tourist destinations and, more specifically, the concept of the change the image undergoes after a visit to the destination and the factors that explain this, as much in the academic field as the professional.

From an academic point of view, we have tried to provide a conceptual framework to help further progress in the development of the topic of tourist destination image in order to better understand the process of its evolution during the different stages of a trip. In this sense, it is intended to respond to the need for various authors to study in greater depth the factors that influence the change in the perceived image of tourist destinations, given the limited empirical evidence available on this subject, and help cover the gap in the academic literature. In this respect, and as already mentioned above, this model whose aim is to analyse in an integrated and holistic manner the determinant factors that cause a change in the image.

From a practical standpoint, the overall understanding of the process of how the gap in the image of tourist destinations form and the factors that influence this change will help operators in the sector and the public institutions responsible for the commercial

management of destinations to project an image as close as possible to its reality. It would be advisable for market operators and the public institutions responsible for the image of tourist destinations to assess the real potential in their communications so that the projected image of the destination is as close as possible to the tourists' perceptions after they visit the destination. Moreover, the agency responsible for marketing the destination should enhance the tourism website and provide comprehensive, objective and real information regarding places of interest that will encourage tourists to have a greater level of interaction with the destination. The more information available to tourists and the greater the level of interaction they have with the destination, the more positive will be the gap in cognitive image. Focusing on the tourist destination of Tenerife, the results of the empirical research show that the projected image generates a positive change, since tourists tend to have a much better experience during their stay than they expected.