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Perceived Sustainable Destination Image: Implications for Marketing Strategies in Europe

Arminda Almeida-Santana [1,*] and Sergio Moreno-Gil [2]

[1] Research Group in Business Management (Gide), University of León (ULE), 24007 León, Spain
[2] Institute of Tourism and Sustainable Economic Development, Universidad Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 35001 Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain; sergio.moreno@ulpgc.es
* Correspondence: aalms@unileon.es

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Abstract: There is currently a growing concern about the consequences of tourism activity on the environment. In this regards, sustainable management is understood as a key element that can help destination marketing organizations (DMOs) to improve a tourist destination's competitiveness. This study provides some clues about the best way to develop the image and branding of a destination using the concept of sustainable image. Through an analysis of 28,947 tourists from 18 European countries, this paper studies what sociodemographic, cultural, and behavioral characteristics of tourists influence their perception of sustainable destination. The results of the binomial logit analysis show that destination primary and secondary images, motivations, cultural background of tourists, and sociodemographic characteristics are determinant factors explaining the perception of sustainable destination image (SDI). Thus, the fundamental role of segmentation to positioning a destination as a sustainable destination is suggested. The study provides interesting recommendations for DMOs in order to be able to design better marketing strategies focused on destination image.

Keywords: sustainable destination; destination image; marketing strategies; communication; segmentation

1. Introduction

A concern of academics over the last couple of decades has been that of destination image [1], with it becoming one of the key topics among researchers. Although there have been many attempts to understand the concept of the image of a destination [1–3], it can be thought of as the accumulated perception of both cognitive and affective evaluations [4–6]. Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil (2018) [7] pointed out that the image's cognitive component concerns the beliefs and information in respect to a destination's attributes which are retained by tourists, whereas emotional feelings or responses to the characteristics of a place represent the affective component. Destination image has been defined by Bigne, Sanchez, and Sanchez (2001) [8] as the subjective interpretation of reality within the tourist's mind.

There is no doubt that tourists' profiles have undergone a significant change in recent years. Previous studies indicate a greater awareness of tourists on how their activity can impact on the destination's environment, society, and culture [9]. Thus, it can be said that sustainable tourist behavior is an extant and thriving field of study [9,10]. Some authors [11–13] dare to indicate that more and more tourists make purchases with an eye to the environmental, social, and economic quality of products. There is a growing trend towards the consumption of sustainable brands that influences the destination choice [14–17]. Therefore, currently, destinations are more concerned with sustainability in their response to adapt to the new demands of tourists [18]. Destination marketing organizations

(DMOs) must be able to convey a sustainable destination image if they want to improve their levels of competitiveness.

Notable efforts have been made within the literature to investigate factors which have an influence on image [18,19]; however, no research has undertaken analyses on the factors which determine a tourist's perception of an image of sustainable destination (SDI). Thus, the aim of this study is to understand whether tourists' sociodemographic, cultural, and behavioral characteristics influence their perception of a destination as being sustainable.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sustainable Destination Image

A greatly explored construct within tourism literature is that of destination image [1,20,21]. Since its inception into the academic studies in the early 70s, scholars have sought to clearly define this concept. Fakeye and Crompton (1991) [10] defined destination image as the mental representation based on a group of images chosen by the tourist from the large amount of images available through different information sources. The concept of a subjective, personal perception of the tourists was added latter by other researchers [8,22].

Sustainable destination has been defined by past studies as a destination which provides economic development, a higher level of standard of living, ecological preservation, and social and cultural heritage preservation [23,24]. However, SDI may be differently perceived by visitors.

Destination image research attempts to conceptualize the concept of destination image and to identify its dimensions [25–27]. These destination image researchers endeavor to unravel the components of this concept in order to facilitate DMOs in shaping strategies regarding customer segments. Thus, Echtner and Ritchie (1991) [19] claim a need for more research that will aim to provide an improved understanding of the destination image, further conceptualizing it in terms of an accumulation of attributes. Besides the more holistic impressions, it would also be important to measure the cognitive and affective images with the consideration immersed within the characteristics of the destination and the personal perception of the tourists [20,28]. Thus, the primary image is formed via acquisition of information through visitation of the destination [20], while information sources that are organic, induced, and autonomous form the secondary image [29].

Past research assumes that environmental and socioeconomic aspects of a location exhibit a direct linkage to the image of the destination [30], highlighting the importance of sustainability as a destination's positioning strategy. Consequently, Souza et al. (2014) [30] have claimed that the concepts of sustainability and image have a grounding in common basic aspects. However, past studies include sustainability as a component of cognitive image [27,31,32]. Given this prominence that sustainability is taking today, its association with the affective and general image of the destination is crucial.

2.2. Motivations

Motivations, as one of the key influences that guides the development of a destination image, are included in the models of destination choice and image formation [33]. These motivations can be grouped with respect to push and pull factors [34]. For Dann (1977) [35], what can be termed as internal (push) motives are linked to tourists' wishes and include such aspects as desires to escape or rest and to acquire prestige, adventure, and social interaction. Pull factors, on the other hand, are connected with a destination's attractiveness and resources. Previous research has shown that an individual's internal motivations significantly affects the formation of destination image [20,25]. For instance, Baloglu (2000) [36] found the relationship between motivations to relax, escape, and gain knowledge to be statistically significant.

In current tourism literature, motivation has often been used as a criterion of segmentation [37–39] with this method being suggested as one of the most effective [34,40]. Easy categorization of heterogeneous groups of tourists via these motivational factors has been shown to be possible by

numerous empirical studies [41–43]. Thus, an expansion of knowledge on the various motivations of tourists is important for the positioning of brands in differing markets [44,45]; however, previous literature has not paid special attention to the relationship between motivations to travel and SDI. Thus, the contribution of this study resides in a better understanding of this relationship. This can help DMOs in their choice of content to be communicated according to the motivations of tourists.

2.3. Cultural Background

A considerable volume of research has utilized national culture as a rationale for market segmentation [45–47], and thus, it is felt to be an appropriate basis for segmentation. Nationality has received growing attention in research studies since Hofstede (1980) [48], as it has been argued to be one of the most influential aspects that affects tourism behavior [49–52] and influences destination image [53–57]. Furthermore, national culture plays a key role in the way tourists from different countries interpret the sustainability and, in consequence, as a fundamental element on the sustainability image of tourism destinations [30].

Nevertheless, extant research on the manner in which national culture affects consumer behavior [58] and specially perceived destination image [59] is still not sufficiently conclusive. Researchers are seeking further studies on segmentation which utilize geographical criteria [60,61] that better guide the development of more improved, efficient marketing strategies [45,62].

Considering that which has been mentioned so far, the purpose of this paper is to initiate debate on the relationship between the image of tourism destination sustainability and the tourists' countries of origin. There is importance, both with respect to the academic realm and for practitioners, to have clarity in understanding how the national culture of tourists might cause SDI to differ. Through this, the design of better marketing strategies will be possible, which will lead to a more appropriate positioning of sustainable tourism destinations within different cultures.

2.4. Sociodemographic Characteristics

Consumer behavior research has traditionally been linked to sociodemographic characteristics, and these have been frequently used as segmentation criteria [63]. The incorporation of sociodemographic variables as factors influencing the perception of a destination's image has occurred in most image formation models [31,64]. Studies have identified that there are differences in image perceptions by gender, age, and level of education [31,65].

Given the changes in consumer behavior in relationship with sustainability, there is a need for the development of further research on SDI from the perspective of market segmentation. It is feasible that segmentation criteria that has a basis in sociodemographic characteristics may not be fully aligned with the profile of sustainable tourists.

3. Methodology

3.1. Population

Generating greater than half of the yearly international arrivals, Europe represents the world's largest outbound region with respect to tourist flow [66]. Therefore, tourists aged 16 or over who, within the last two years, had gone abroad and who had made use of the Internet to plan their trip were the target population for this research. Tourists from the 18 major European countries, in tourist terms, were utilized for this study: Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, Russia, Finland, France, Netherlands, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, United Kingdom, Czech Republic, and Sweden.

3.2. Sample Selection

This research was progressed through the use of a computer-assisted web interview (CAWI). A sample from the 18 countries was considered and was yielded from a database of panelists residing in each of these countries. It was to maintain the representativeness of the sample with respect to the population of each country. In order to achieve this, a random selection of the sample was undertaken, with this being based on the variables of stratification of the geographical area and province, on the one hand, and of the criteria of gender and age, on the other. Participation in the research by the selected sample was sought by sending them a personalized e-mail, with a personalized link being embedded in the e-mail that led them to an online survey. To achieve the expected quantity of completed surveys, two reminders were sent during the three months of fieldwork in the countries so as to encourage response. This culminated in the final sample consisting of 28,947 tourists.

Visits to the Canary Islands (Spain) was the focus of the analysis of the results, in particular with respect to the sustainable perceived image of this destination. In addition to the reason of convenience, the Canary Islands were chosen as the specific case due to it being a leading destination in Europe which enjoys a well-known brand throughout the continent. Given that it receives approximately 15 million tourists annually and has a complex economic ecosystem [7], these are factors which make it a perfect subject for consideration of the topic of sustainability. One of the 17 autonomous communities of Spain, the group of Canary Islands is formed as an archipelago located in the Atlantic Ocean.

Island destinations face specific challenges regarding tourism development [67]. The Canary Islands are highly relevant as a place of research, due to steady discussions about tourism development and growth [68] and the islands' character as an experimental zone for sustainable tourism in the context of an overflowing capacity of tourism growth [69]. Thus, sustainability in the Canary Islands destination has been the subject of a great amount of recent studies [70–73].

3.3. Questionnaire, Quality Control, and Data Analysis

The questionnaire was translated into the languages of each of the 18 countries. The survey was undertaken once the questionnaire had been pre-tested in the languages of the potential tourists and questions that had raised difficulties in comprehension had received pertinent corrections. Upon completion of the necessary programming, the online system undertook a review of all of the conducted surveys. This included detecting the amount of time that respondents had taken to complete the survey, and any survey answered in less than 5 minutes was deemed as not valid. A binomial logit analysis was performed after completion of the fieldwork. A logit model based on the theory of random utility was chosen for this research. In utilizing this model, robustness in the estimated results is guaranteed, along with fulfilment of the properties of the conventional utility functions as established by the theory of the consumer.

With respect to the variables included in the model, tourists were invited to answer how sustainable they perceived the Canary Islands destination. A score of 1 indicates very unsustainable and 7 indicates very sustainable. For the statistical treatment of this variable, following the study of Almeida-Santana and Moreno Gil (2018) [7], it was necessary to dichotomize it, understanding that tourists who marked a 6 or 7 out of 7 were considered to perceive the destination as sustainable, while we understand that those who gave values between 1 and 4 do not perceive the Canary Islands destination as sustainable. Table 1 shows the description of all the variables included in the estimated model.

Table 1. Description of the variables included in the model.

Category	Variables	Definition
Sociodemographic and geographic variables	Age	A continuous variable that explains the age of the individuals in years
	Gender	Dichotomic variables that take 0 as a value when the individual is male and 1 when is female
	Years of study	Number of years of study
	Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, Russia, Finland, France, Netherlands, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Sweden	Dichotomic variables that take 0 as a value when the individual does not belong to one of the nationalities under study and 1 when they do
Motivation variables	Fodness Scale (1994) [74]. See Table 2	Scale of 1 to 7 (very negative image to very positive image)
Behavioral characteristics (Primary and secondary images)	Number of times a destination is visited	A continuous variable that explains the number of visits to Canary Islands
	Last year visited	Number of years since the last visit
	Has seen advertising about the destination	Dichotomic variables that take 0 as a value when the individual has seen advertising about the destination and 1 when they have not
Endogenous	Sustainable Destination Image (SDI)	Dichotomic variables that take 0 as a value when the individual has not perceived a sustainable image and 1 when they have

Table 2. Motivation factor analysis.

Variables	MOT1	MOT2	MOT3	MOT4	Cronbach´s Alpha
To go to places that are fashionable	0.738				0.560
To look for entertainment and fun	0.688				
To enjoy and spend time with friends	0.479				
To rest and relax		0.772			0.623
To spent time in a destination with good beaches and pleasant climate		0.654			
To enjoy and spend time with family		0.611			
To go to comfortable places		0.495			
To do sports			0.834		0.692
To be in contact with nature			0.692		
To do watersports			0.636		
To do exciting things			0.487		
To know new and different places				0.780	0.413
To escape from daily routine				0.545	
Cronbach´s alpha					0.768
% Explained variance: 55.933					
KMO: 0.806					
Bartlett: 49379.541					
Significance: 0.000					

4. Results

Below, in order to fulfil the aim of this study, a binomial logit model has been estimated with the perception of a sustainable destination image (SDI) as dependent variable. The model explored the existence of a relationship between SDI and sociodemographic, cultural, and behavioral characteristics of tourists.

A factor analysis was undertaken prior to estimating the model so as to examine the motivations' dimensions. The aim for this was to affect a reduction in their dimensions and an appropriate identification of the determining factors. With due regard to the criteria addressed in the literature,

each item has been classified in respect to the higher loading. With the majority of the factor loadings being greater than 0.40, this is an indication of a good correlation between the items as well as the factor grouping to which they belong [75,76]. The validity of these analyses was further supported by the outcome of Pearson correlation coefficient calculations for each of the variables and factors.

Completion of the factor analysis on the motivations revealed four dimensions that explain 55.93% of the variance. As portrayed in Table 2, the first factor incorporates 3 items which we have labelled as "Fashion, Fun, and Friends". Four items are collected together for the second factor, namely "Sun, Beach, Relax, and Family". The third factor also holds 4 items, in this instance, related to "Sports and Nature". Lastly, 2 items comprise the fourth factor named "Knowledge". Regarding the findings of the Cronbach's alpha calculations, it is necessary to consider that MOT4's low value could feasibly be consequential to this factor only consisting of 2 items, given that Cronbach's alpha is known to be sensitive to the number of items in a scale [68]. It can be said that these findings are largely in accordance with the literature [18,55,77,78].

Table 3 summarizes the results of the estimation for the proposed model. Regarding the consumer's previous experience as a tourist in a specific destination, it was unsurprisingly found that the greater the number of times a destination is visited, the greater is the likelihood of SDI being evident ($\beta = 0.004$; $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, it is also not surprising that a tourist having had a recent travel to the Canary Islands increases the probability of perception of SDI ($\beta = 0.200$; $p < 0.01$). These findings align with the argument that primary sources of information influence the perceived destination image, as suggested by Beerli and Martín (2004) [20].

As for advertising, tourists having seen advertisements about the destination have a positive influence on SDI ($\beta = 0.187$; $p < 0.05$), and thus, this portrays the importance of this tool being utilized by destinations (as secondary sources of information) for enhancing the image of sustainable destination.

Furthermore, the motivations related to going to places that are fashionable, to looking for entertainment and fun, and to enjoying and spending time with friends have positive effects on SDI ($\beta = 0.365$; $p < 0.01$). In the light of the results of our study, those tourists are 40% more likely to perceive the destination as sustainable. The motivations of rest and relaxation, of spending time in a destination with good beaches and pleasant climate, of enjoying and spending time with family, and going to comfortable places all positively influence SDI ($\beta = 0.244$; $p < 0.01$). They are 27.7% more likely to perceive SDI. The motivations of doing sports and being in contact with nature ($\beta = 0.205$; $p < 0.01$) also has a positive effect on the tourist perceiving SDI. These are the tourists with the minor probability to perceive SDI. However, the motivations to know new and different places and to escape from the daily routine do not have an influence on SDI.

Furthermore, the relationship between the nationality of the tourists and their perception of SDI was analyzed. Here, positive relations were revealed with the majority of the markets: Germany, Austria, Belgium, Spain, Russia, France, Netherlands, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, United Kingdom, and Czech Republic. Therefore, the Canary Islands are more likely to be perceived as an SDI by tourists from these countries, whereas the nationalities of Denmark, Finland and Sweden were found to be nonsignificant. Attending to the differences between countries, it could be confirmed that the nationalities with a minor perception of sustainability are the Austrians, the Dutch, and those from Luxembourg. However, the Russians are those who, only because they are of this nationality, are more likely to perceive the destination as sustainable. The greatest value in the case of Russians can be explained by the fact that Russia could be considered as not being a typical European country and, further, that the preferences and experience of Russian tourists differ strikingly from those of tourists of the other European countries [79]. Those results give weight to the concept that national culture influences the way tourists from different countries interpret the sustainability and its fundamental role in the formation of sustainability image of tourism destinations [30].

The results found that age and level of studies determine SDI. The results show, in line with Baloglu and McCleary (1999) [31] and Calantone et al. (1989) [65], that the older a person is, the greater

is the likelihood that the individual will perceive SDI (β = 0.163; $p < 0.01$). On the other hand, the relationship between the mean studies level of a tourist and SDI is negative (β = 0.140; $p < 0.01$).

Table 3. Estimated binomial logit model.

	Sustainable Destination Image		
	β	**ε**	**Percent Change in the Odds**
Number of times a destination is visited	0.004 ***	0.001	0.4
Last year visited	0.200 ***	0.023	22.1
Has seen advertising about the destination	0.187 ***	0.061	20.5
MOT1: Fashion, Fun, and Friends	0.365 ***	0.033	44.0
MOT2: Sun, Beach, Relax, and Family	0.244 ***	0.031	27.7
MOT3: Sports and Nature	0.205 ***	0.031	22.7
MOT4: Knowledge	-	-	-
Germany	0.753 ***	0.160	112.4
Austria	0.457 **	0.185	57.9
Belgium	0.867 ***	0.184	138.0
Denmark	-	-	-
Spain	2.171 ***	0.171	776.9
Russia	2.637 ***	0.312	1296.4
Finland	-	-	-
France	0.906 ***	0.203	147.4
Netherlands	0.452 ***	0.168	57.1
Ireland	1.262 ***	0.168	253.1
Italy	1.814 ***	0.205	513.7
Luxembourg	0.592 **	0.259	80.8
Norway	0.822 ***	0.172	127.6
Poland	1.745 ***	0.234	472.6
Portugal	1.836 ***	0.214	526.9
United Kingdom	1.102 ***	0.163	201.0
Czech Republic	0.973 ***	0.239	164.5
Sweden	-	-	-
Age	0.163 ***	0.029	17.7
Gender	-	-	-
Education	−0.140 ***	0.031	−13
Constant	−1.690 ***	0.197	
−2 Log likelihood	6815.447		

Note: *** 0.01%; ** 0.05%.

5. Discussion

The theoretical implication of this study lies in presenting a comprehensive understanding of factors influencing an SDI. More specifically, the model uses destination primary and secondary images, motivations, cultural background of tourists, and sociodemographic characteristics to explain the perception of SDI. Those variables are crucial in fully understanding the perception of SDI. This means that destination marketing organizations should adjust their strategies to different market segments, attending to the mentioned variables. As far as we are aware, no other researchers have investigated this relationship prior to us.

The more intense the previous experience (primary image) in the destination, the more likely are travelers to have an SDI. This study further suggests that a key determinant of SDI is a destination secondary image. Thus, destination marketing organizations should consider these findings when designing their marketing strategies. The secondary image of a destination could be affected by destinations and the companies operating in the sector through various sources of information such as magazines, tour operators, travel agencies, social media, and so on [80]. DMOs must be able to design strategies in which an image of a sustainable destination is projected since, according to the results of

our study, the information that the tourist receives through these sources will influence their perception of a sustainable destination and, consequently, their decision of whether to visit the destination. Those results are in line with the study of Lian and Yu (2019) [81], who highlighted the influence of online information sources in the decision to travel.

Furthermore, the results suggest that three motivational factors ("Fashion, Fun, and Friends", "Sun, Beach, Relax, and Family", and "Sports and Nature") are statistically significant for SDI. Whilst we had hypothesized that a traveler's motivation to know new and different places and to escape from the daily routine would have a positive effect on the SDI, our findings have revealed that this is not supported. Therefore, destination marketing organizations should project the SDI according to tourists' motivations [33,82]. Thus, the content used to promote the SDI should be adapted to match tourism motivations. In this way, the possible congruence that exists between the message and the specific motivations of the target market could determine better results [45]. Either way, developing a professional social command centre in charge of managing the social content of the destination seems to be an interesting strategy to foster SDI.

Our findings also suggest that the cultural background of a tourist is an important factor determining SDI. More specifically, our findings reveal that national culture influences the way tourists from different countries interpret sustainability and its fundamental role on the sustainability image of tourism destination formation [30]. This sheds lights on the usefulness of using the nationality as a segmentation criterion, helping marketers to tier customers. DMOs should pay special attention to the markets of The Netherlands, Austria, and Luxembourg, since they are those that have a lower probability of perceiving the destination as sustainable. In markets such as Russia, Spain, Portugal, and Italy, efforts must be aimed at maintaining or even improving the SDI. This is in accordance with the Almeida-Santana et al. (2018) [45] study, which suggests nationality as being a relevant factor when seeking to comprehensively understand the behavior of travelers when choosing their holiday destination.

Furthermore, the results also determined that age and level of studies determine SDI. The results show, in line with Baloglu and McCleary (1999) [31] and Calantone et al. (1989) [65], that the older a person is, the more likely they are to perceive SDI. The negative relationship between the mean study levels expressed by the tourists and SDI is demonstrated. Destination marketing organizations should consider those results in order to better design their marketing strategies. Younger tourists have a lower perception of a sustainable destination, so marketing campaigns aimed at this younger segment should place greater emphasis on the projection of a sustainable destination image. The same approach could be applied to the segment with a high level of studies.

Finally, some limitations of this research are given. This study considers SDI only in respect to the Canary Islands. However, it could be applied to other destinations. SDI could also be further analyzed, with introduction to the model of other factors influencing SDI.

6. Conclusions

This study has focused on seeking to explain the factors that influence the perception of a sustainable destination image by tourists. The importance of carrying out this research is justified by the growing concern shown by tourists about the impact of their activity [83]. DMOs must adapt to the new demands of tourists and design strategies that allow them to position themselves as a sustainable destination if they want to remain competitive in this day and age in which sustainability is fundamental [83].

In order to achieve the aims of this study, information was collected from tourists from 18 European countries who have visited the Canary Islands. This is presented as an appropriate destination to study sustainability [70–73].

The findings of this research confirm that the primary and secondary images of the destination, the travel motivations of tourists, and their nationality, as well as their age and level of studies influence

their perception of SDI. This gives emphasis to the importance of segmentation in the design of destination marketing strategies to position the destination as sustainable.

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