

Bulgaria as a tourist destination tourism essay



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2. 1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter review and analysis of the academic literature on the topics of Bulgaria and destination image will be conducted. The first sub-section of the chapter will discuss the importance of the tourism to the economy of Bulgaria and key facts and figures are presented. The focus of the study then moves on to brand image and branding, as they have an immense effect on the success of a destination. Competition between destinations and the changing nature of tourists' needs and requirements suggest that all destinations should be developed and managed as brands (Beerli and Martin, 2004). The subject of destination image is then reviewed, as it has become a key area of research for many academics in the past few decades (Chon, 1991; Echtner and Ritchie, 1991, 1993; Gartner, 1993; Baloglu, 1997; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Gallarza et al., 2002; Gertner and Kotler, 2004; Vaughan, 2007). The context of destination image is studied, and also what influence it has on tourist's buying behaviour and decision-making process (Mayo, 1973; Hunt, 1971, 1975; Chen and Tasci, 2007). Theories and concepts of destination image formation (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999), development (Butler, 1980) and measurement (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003) are analysed, so that the relationship between tourists' personal characteristics and the components of the perceived destination image are identified, prior to the primary research.

2. 2 BULGARIA AS A TOURIST DESTINATION

2. 2. 1 Tourism in Bulgaria

In 2011, between January and December 8, 712, 821 million international tourists visited Bulgaria (4% higher compared to 2010). The amount of

income generated from international tourism for the period is €2, 752, 600 million showing an increase of 3. 8% compared to the same time period of 2010 (OTPB, 2012). Tourism is an important aspect of Bulgaria's economy in the recent years, bringing income from tourism activities and improving the image of the country. The contribution of tourism activities in Bulgaria is significant, as more than 10% of GDP is generated by tourism and also it attracts most of the direct foreign investments to the country (OECD, 2007). The majority of tourists visiting Bulgaria come from the countries such as Greece, Romania, Germany and UK.

The number of UK tourist visits in 2011 was 306, 939 positioning UK on the fourth place by visitor numbers from all EU countries (NSI, 2012). Expectedly, the highest numbers of tourists flows from the UK occur during the summer season, during the months of June through to September (see Appendix 1?). However, numbers of tourist arrivals from the UK decreased significantly between 2008 and 2009, which could be as a result of the credit crisis that hit countries globally in 2008. Since then numbers are still decreasing, but at a slower pace (see Table 1?); this is a clear indication that marketing actions need to be targeted towards drawing the British tourist market back to Bulgaria.

Table 1. UK tourist arrivals in Bulgaria (2004-2011)

Country of origin

Year

2004

2005

2006

2007

2008

2009

2010

2011

United Kingdom

278, 823

380, 121

425, 941

360, 651

370, 908

316, 928

309, 482

306, 939

Source: OECD (2007)

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2. 2. 2 Main tourist attractions in Bulgaria

Tourist attractions in Bulgaria could be divided into five main categories (OECD, 2007):

Seaside resorts: Bulgaria's well-known Black Sea coast is 380 kilometres long and is one of the major attractions that draw tourists to the country, with established resorts such as Sunny Beach, Golden Sands and Nessebar.

Ski resorts: Winter sports are very popular in Bulgaria and ski resorts such as Bansko, Borovets and Pamporovo are gaining more and more popularity.

Spa resorts: Bulgaria is progressively developing its 'spa destination image' and is becoming popular for its spa facilities with 600 mineral springs to offer.

Historical sites: Bulgaria is one of the oldest countries in Europe, therefore it is full of heritage and history, so there is a great potential in the development of historical tourism.

Other: Bulgaria is becoming popular with many niche types of tourism such as: adventure tourism; wine tourism; ecotourism; rural tourism.

2. 2. 3 Facts about Bulgaria

In the following table key facts about Bulgaria as a country are presented (see Table 2), as stated by the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria (2011) and the Official Tourism Portal of Bulgaria (2012).

Table 2. Facts about Bulgaria

Population

7, 364, 570

Capital

Sofia

Geography

Southeast Europe

In the northeast part of the Balkan Peninsula

It is a European, Balkan, Black Sea and Danube country

On the crossroad between Europe, Asia and Africa

Climate

Climate can be divided into five distinct zones:

Temperate-continental

Continental-Mediterranean

Transitional

Black Sea zone

Mountain zone

Language

Bulgarian (official)

Ethnic and regional dialects

2.3 BRAND IMAGE

A brand image of a destination is an object that is created and developed in the mind of the consumer. It incorporates the tangible, intangible, psychological and sociological characteristics of a destination (Kapferer, 1997). It is “ a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that both identifies and differentiates the destination; furthermore, it conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; it also serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience” (Ritchie and Ritchie, 1998: 103). Hence, academics argue that the concept of visitor experience is a key input and should be integrated in the process of destination branding (Berry 2000; Pine and Gilmore 1999). Since the early 2000s studies of destination image have advanced beyond simply understanding visitors’ perceptions as they were, instead the concept of destination branding was developed to examine further the destination image (Upadhyaya, 2012). One of the earliest destination branding concepts was introduced by Cai (2002) underlining the disparity between destination image formation and branding. “.. Image formation is not branding, all the former constitutes the core of the latter. Image building is one step closer, but there still remains a critical missing link: the brand identity” (Cai, 2002: 722). Whether or not a destination pays great attention to the promotion of its brand image, consumers will always have certain images of that particular destination. Sometimes these images may be a cliché or a result of stereotypes; however they certainly affect consumer behaviour and may impact the decision-making process (Morgan et al., 2004). Authors point out that the

stereotyping of nations is a common theme, and it is formed by mental representations which are commonly shared within a society or nation.

2. 4 BRANDING

Destination branding is a useful method to differentiate the destination from its rivals and to gain competitive advantage. Branding is used “ to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to those goods or services from those of competitors” (Aaker, 1991: 7). The process of branding involves economic, commercial, social, cultural, and government practices, which must be coordinated into an innovative strategy (Moilanen and Rainisto, 2009). Aaker and Joachimsthaler’s (2000) framework of branding outlines the four key factors of brand equity: awareness, perceived quality, associations and loyalty. Good branding is vital for destinations, as it aims to improve destination’s reputation and enhance its economic, political and social development (Anholt, 2009). The reputation of a country or destination is formed on the basis of long-term impressions constructed by number of perceived images and actions (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990), therefore country’s identity is “ the backbone of reputation” (Fombrun, 1996: 111). However, reputation changes very slowly and it does not necessarily follow real changes (WTO, 2009). Consequently, it is important for a country to develop good reputation over time; otherwise it will eventually become a ‘ victim’ of its rivals. Because of nation’s economic competition, careful brand management and control is vital. Tourists have the freedom of choice nowadays and they are more likely to choose a destination which is perceived for its value, benefits, inexpensiveness or accessibility (Morgan et al., 2004). It is important to understand “ the different ways in which national

brands are perceived in different countries and regions... and how this diversity of perception can be managed in international branding campaigns" (Anholt, 2002: 230). In most countries governments, NGOs, agencies and companies that are responsible for country's branding are segregated from one another and in many case ambiguous messages are sent out, creating a very indistinct picture of the destination (Anholt, 2007). The effectiveness of the branding operations between these institutions depends upon their understanding of the resources availability at the destination, to what extent the region is developed and the interrelationship of these developments (Kelly and Nankervis, 2001). The growing competition in the tourism industry, suggests that the process of destination branding should also adopt the concepts of destination image and competitiveness. Academics and practitioners, both stress on the significance of image formation and destination uniqueness, in order to build a strong destination brand (Blain et al., 2005). According to their research branding affects destinations in a positive manner, enhancing their image amongst visitors and supporting DMOs to measure destinations achievements. A key factor for the success of a destination brand remains the extent to which the particular destination relates with the target markets.

2. 5 DESTINATION IMAGE

The image of a place is an important aspect of the tourists' decision-making process and it is most likely to affect their choice of holiday destination (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). There is a wide range of academic studies that are focused on the link between destination image and destination selection process (Mayo 1973; Hunt 1975; Milman and Pizam 1995). The

study of destination image dates back to the 1970s, when Hunt (1971) looked at the concept for the first time. Since then many more studies focused on the definition of destination image, however there is no consensus over it “...image is one of those terms that will not go away ... a term with vague and shifting meanings” (Pearce, 1988: 162). Gallarza et al. (2002) studied the concept of destination image and produced a list that summarises definitions by key tourism authors (see Table 3).

The image of a destination is often related to individual’s perceptions of a place and what the tourist experience may be like and it “ consists, therefore, of the subjective interpretation of reality made by the tourist” (Bigne et al., 2001: 607). The destination image does not really exist, as it is the mental projection of the destination’s identity and it is not a single concept, but a set of interpretations (Govers and Go, 2009). According to Echtner and Ritchie (2003: 43), destination image is “ not only the perceptions of individual destination attributes but also the holistic impression made by the destination”.

Table 3. Selected Definitions of Product, Place and Destination Image

Selected Definitions of Product, Place and Destination Image

Hunt (1971): Impressions that a person or persons hold about a state in which they do not reside

Markin (1974): Our own personalized, internalized and conceptualizing understanding of what we know

Lawson and Bond-Bovy (1977): An expression of knowledge, impressions, prejudice, imaginations and emotional thoughts an individual has of a specific object or place

Crompton (1979): An image may be defined as the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination

Dichter (1985): The concept of image can be applied to a political candidate, a product, and a country. It describes not individual traits or qualities but the total impression and entity makes on the minds of others

Reynolds (1985): An image is the mental construct developed by the consumer on the basis of a few selected impressions among the total of total impressions. It comes into being through a creative process in which selected impressions are elaborated, embellished and ordered

Embacher and Buttle (1989): Image is comprised of the ideas or conceptions held individually or collectively of the destination under investigation. Image may comprise both cognitive and evaluative components

Fakeye and Crompton (1991): Image is the mental construct developed by a potential tourist on the basis of a few selected impressions among the total of total impressions

Kotler et al (1994): The image of a place is the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person holds of it

Gartner (1993), (1996): Destination images are developed by three hierarchically interrelated components: cognitive, affective, and conative

Santos Arrebola (1994): Image is a mental representation of attributes and benefits sought of a product

Parenteau (1995): Is a favorable or unfavorable prejudice that the audience and distributors have of the product or destination

Source: Gallarza et al. (2002: 60)

2.5.1 Destination image formation

The appeal of a destination is affected by the mind image tourists have of that place. According to Gartner (1993: 193) the perceived mind image of a destination is formed by “distinctly different but hierarchically interrelated components: cognitive, affective and [according to some] conative”. Beerli and Martin (2004) suggest that the following factors affect the perceived destination image a tourist holds of a place: motivations (affective image component); travel experience (cognitive and affective); socio-demographic and personal characteristics (cognitive and affective). Many academics conclude that destination image is affected by two types of factors: stimulus (information sources; previous experience; distribution) and personal (psychological; social); these are combined to form the framework of destination image formation (see Figure 1) (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). Social factors such as gender and age are found to have a significant impact on the individual's perceptions of destination images (Baloglu, 1997; Walmsley and Jenkins, 1993). A study of British tourists visiting Turkey by Andreu et al. (2005) found that significant differences exist between the genders; females had relaxation and escape motives for travel, whereas male tourists favoured attributes of a destination such as recreation and

activity. It is important to understand the factors that influence destination image creation, as this would provide an opportunity for specific market segments to be targeted (Goodall, 1990). Reynolds (1965: 69) argues that the destination image formation is based upon set of impressions gained from a “flood of information”. It is often formed by information gathered from various information sources such as: opinions of friends/relatives; publications in newspapers, magazines, travel brochures; any other type of promotional material. Individual’s image of a destination is likely to develop overtime and Gunn (1994) indentified the three key stages of the image formation process: the organic image (based on information from non-tourism sources such as mass media); the induced image (based on tourism sources such as travel brochures); and the experiential image (based on tourist experiences during a visit). However, movement from one stage to another involves a gradual transition.

Figure 1. A General Framework of Destination Image Formation

Source: Baloglu and McCleary (1999: 870)

Reynolds (1965: 70) argues that often “image is used as equivalent to reputation”, therefore the right expectations must be raised by a destination. However, the more different tourist’s culture is from the culture of the host communities, the more challenging is to meet these expectations. Different people would have different perceived images and these are often related to stereotypes of nations, which are not necessarily accurate, as they may be based on exceptions and impressions rather than on patterns and facts (Morgan et al., 2004). According to MacKay and Fesenmaier (2000)

perceived images are based on cultural background, as people with different national cultures would have different values and beliefs. In general all types of tourists associate positive destination image with varied and attractive natural beauty and good climate and although crowding is a sign of destination popularity, overcrowded destinations are avoided by many tourists. As suggested by Ross (1994) the key factors for destination image formation are its: scenery; climate; geography and congestion. Other destination attributes perceived as key are: safety; history; cultural diversity; famous citizens; and the esteem of visiting a place (Kelly and Nankervis, 2001). " Every place on earth possesses its own peculiar characteristics, both as a result of natural physical forces, and acts of man" (Gunn, 1994: 27). Consequently, the scope and scale of supply provision and the degree to which the natural environment has been altered by human activity influence on the perceptions of destination attributes.

2. 5. 2 Destination image development

There are two perspectives by which destination image can be reviewed - the managerial perspective (supply side) and the potential visitor perspective (demand side) (Kelly and Nankervis, 2001). Appropriate management actions when shaping the destination image are key to how tourists will perceive that image; therefore understanding of the evolution of a destination is important. Butler's (1980) well-known model of the tourism area life cycle (TALC) provides a clear framework to how a destination develops over time. It incorporates six sequential stages of: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation and decline or rejuvenation (see Figure 2). The model provides information about the

destination progression, levels of investments and the types of tourists it appeals to (Davidson and Maitland, 1997). Each stage of the model is linked to changes in the scale of facilities provided at a destination and to what extent the provision of these facilities is by local or external providers. Defining at what stage is a particular destination is hard, but is essential for its management. In reality, defining the life-cycle stage of a destination requires a mixture of observation, estimation and basic market intelligence; a survey of tourists' perceptions of a particular destination often can provide information about their attitudes towards tourism growth (Kelly and Nankervis, 2001). Clear understanding of destination's life-cycle stage can help destination planners to slow down or speed up its development process.

Figure 2. Tourism area life cycleDoc - 06-01-2013 14-58. jpg

Source: Butler (1980: 5)

TALC outlines a clear relationship between the various types of tourists and the nature of destination they visit (Davidson and Maitland, 1997). At first, destination is discovered by adventurous tourists, then it is visited by mass tourists and finally it becomes commercialised. This idea has been adopted by Plog's (1973) classification of tourists, dividing them from ' allocentrics' to ' midcentrics' to ' psycocentrics'. He suggests that a destination would appeal to different types of tourists at different points in time, as ' allocentrics' are more likely to discover new destinations and move on by the time ' psycocentrics' adopt them.

2. 5. 3 Components of destination image

Echtner and Ritchie's study (1991) developed a framework of three continuums that are suggested to be the main components to form destination image (see Figure 3). The three continuums that shape the image of a place are: "(1) attribute-holistic; (2) functional-psychological; and (3) common-unique" (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993: 3). The first continuum is concerning how a destination is perceived, on one end are the actual attributes of a place, whereas on the other end are the holistic perceptions (imagery). Therefore destination image should be formed on impressions of attributes (such as accommodation, climate, transport, etc.) and holistic impressions (mental and imagery pictures). The second continuum represents the functional characteristic or in other words those that can be measured (e. g. attractions, scenery, prices) and the less tangible or psychological characteristics (such as safety, friendliness, etc.). The third continuum consists of the common characteristics of a destination on one side and the unique or " must-see sights" (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993: 4). Authors suggest that in order to fully capture the image of a destination all of the above components should be measured.

Figure 3. Components of Destination Image

Source: Echtner and Ritchie (1993: 4)

2. 6 MEASUREMENT OF DESTINATION IMAGE

The creation and development of a destination image is a complex process and consequently the measurement of the image is also that compound. Echtner and Ritchie (2003) have developed a two dimensional means to

measure destination image: open ended questionnaires (to measure holistic attributes) and an attribute-based eight factor scale to measure image performance. However, “ very few studies use qualitative methods as the main techniques. Among all collection procedures, the seven-point Likert Scale is the most commonly used” (Gallarza et al., 2002: 67). Table 4 illustrates a summary by Echtner and Ritchie (2003) of destination attributes that have been used by many academics in their destination image measurement researches. Similar attributes are categorised under general headings and then are positioned on a continuum that place them either towards the functional or psychological end. Destination measurement should take into account all attributes of a destination, as the elimination of any attribute may result in an incomplete output. As Echtner and Ritchie (2003) conclude the most comprehensive measure would incorporate all types of measures from scales to measure attributes to open-ended questions aiming at visitors holistic impressions.

Table 4. Attributes Used by Researchers to Measure Destination Image

Source: Echtner and Ritchie (2003: 45)

2. 7 PREVIOUS STUDIES OF BULGARIA

Bulgaria is a relatively new destination, therefore the author of this study assumed that knowledge of the country within the UK tourist market would be less than for other established destinations. There was a lack of any previous research on the topic of destination image of Bulgaria, as perceived by the British tourists. In reality, there are only a limited number of studies associated with images of countries from Central and Eastern Europe

(Hughes and Allen, 2008). A study of the authors McCleary and Whitney (1994) examined the perceptions of Western tourists towards Eastern European countries and suggested that Bulgaria needed to adopt better strategies for image modification and distribution. Hall (2004) was another author to suggest that countries from the CEE should consider development and implementation of brands.

2. 8 SUMMARY

In this chapter the country of Bulgaria was explored as a tourist destination, however because of the emerging nature of the destination, there was a clear lack of past studies in the area. Besides, previous studies of destination image were critically reviewed, with regards to its importance in the context of tourist decision-making process and destination competitiveness. The importance of development of brand image and branding strategies were outlined, as methods for differentiation and image enhancement (Blain et al., 2005). It was quite hard to define what destination image is because of the ambiguity of the term (Pearce, 1988); therefore earlier academic work was used to form the base of this study. Studies from key authors on destination image formation process were examined in order to gain deeper insight of how images are formed (Gunn, 1994; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999), which has a great influence on the push and pull factors of a destination. The studies of Etchner and Ritchie (1991, 1993) were used to define the key components of the formation of destination image and also their study (2003) was used in the process of development of a research instrument, as part of the primary research. The instrument and methodology used to

complete the study will be explained in greater details in the following chapter.

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