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**A Memorable Tourism Experience and its Effect on Country Image**

**Abstract**

This study sets off to explore the importance of memorable tourism experience for the formation of positive image traits and behaviours for a country image in a tourism context, recognising the central role played by experiential satisfaction. Given the significance of experience design for academia and practitioners, it focuses on how memorable tourism experiences impact on image, satisfaction and behaviour. The proposed conceptual model is tested in a quantitative study in Athens, Greece. The findings confirm the direct and indirect impact of memorable tourism experience on country image formation. Thus, the study offers a reliable empirical justification of a theoretically grounded model that contributes to scholarly thought and practitioners' understanding on how to best inspire future behaviour through experience.

**Keywords:** memorable tourism experience; country image; cognitive, affective, conative image; experiential satisfaction; structural equation modelling

# **A Memorable Tourism Experience and its Effect on Country Image**

## **1. Introduction**

Nearly 40 years ago, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) advanced an experiential approach with their -at the time- pioneering work on the experiential aspects of consumption focusing on consumer fantasies, feelings and fun. Experience thinking stands out in the tourism sector and the discipline of tourism management but the – proposed in the ‘90s (Arnould & Price, 1993; Otto & Ritchie, 1996) – term “Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE) remains in an emerging stage today (e.g., Chen & Rahman, 2018).

This study seeks to extend the work of Kim (2010) who developed a theoretical model of the MTE effect on behavioural intentions. The quantitative research design involved a survey amongst visitors in the centre of Athens Greece around the Acropolis, a tourist attraction of great national symbolic significance. Kim and Brent-Ritchie (2014, p. 332), called “for future research to examine the structural relationships among MTE, satisfaction, destination image and loyal behaviour”. We respond to this call by examining the relationships between Country Image (CI) in a tourism context and Tourism Satisfaction (TS) in two ways. First, by addressing MTE of world-class top-notch recognition as is the case of monuments that are national symbols. Here, we consider that, from a brand management perspective, the country holds a crucial position in the image formation process. Thus, our research interest moves away from the norm of limiting to Destination Image, and, in line with Nadeau et al. (2008), we instead investigate Country Image in a tourism context. Second, by empirically testing the constructive relationships between MTE, CI and Satisfaction following a more in-depth examination which approaches the Image construct as a function of its components. Further to the above, this particular empirical study contributes

because its analysis is built upon data collected onsite, thereby allowing searching for image formation in real-time experience conditions.

## **2. Literature review**

Experience has been recognised as central in tourism management (Chang, 2018; Hudson and Ritchie, 2009), where the “product” itself (i.e., tourist destination) is the integrated experience composed by offered products, services and public goods (Buhalis, 2000; Smith, 1994). Among the major developments in the conceptualisation of (tourism) experience, Uriely’s (2005) contribution stands out since he notes both the multiplicity of experience and the subjective negotiations of meaning that determine the experience. What this means is that “[t]he tourist experience, or what people experience as tourists, is unique to the individual; thus, there are as many forms of tourist experience as there are tourists” (Sharpley & Stone, 2012, p. 2).

In order to successfully manage this extremely personalised and “customised” reality, tourism management literature utilises the broader typologies of experiences and, as proposed by Cohen (1979) or much later by Uriely et al. (2002), defines those as ordinary and extraordinary ones. According to this typology, the literature recognizes and relates memorability either to the experience per se, as reflected by Oh et al.’s (2007) definition, who approach experience as “enjoyable, engaging, memorable encounters for those consuming these events” (p. 120), or to the extraordinary ones, and the “memorable”, “special”, “extraordinary” and “peak” descriptions are used interchangeably (Knobloch et al., 2017; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Arnould and Price (1993) position the “memorable” experiences

somewhere in between the “experiences” and the “extraordinary” ones, since they conceive the latter as being “stronger” than the memorable ones.

Focusing on *memorable tourism experiences*, a significant body of work has offered definitions and a conceptualization of the MTE construct (Kim, 2010; Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Kim et al., 2012), with the most prominent that of Kim et al. (2012), who define the construct as “a tourism experience positively remembered and recalled after the event occurred” (Kim et al., 2012, p. 13). Kim et al. (2012) also argue for the importance of remembered experiences in place-related purchase situations, as people recall their past experiences before making destination choices (Kim et al., 2012). This realization leads to the search and establishment of new measuring tools. Indeed, they claim that “existing customer experience measures are insufficient when attempting to understand the experiential factors that influence future behavioural intentions” (Kim et al., 2012, p. 12). Given that MTE are the best predictors of future behaviour (Chandralal, Rindfleish, & Valenzuela, 2015; Chen & Rahman, 2018; Kim et al, 2012; Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2014), the investigation of their role in different constructs and settings will shed more light and contribute to a better understanding of the construct itself, thus it requires further attention.

The desire to understand the relationship between image, destination evaluation and tourism experience is intrinsically related to the attempt to understand the formation of destination images. When referring to image in the tourism context, three main research streams are evident: the one that refers to destination image (Tasci et al., 2007), and those that focus on either country image or place image, with the last two being considered as parts of the first, due to the considerable overlaps that scholars recognise between them (Elliot et al., 2011; Nadeau et al., 2008). *Country image* is often identified through either the cognitive or the affective components only (Alvarez & Campo, 2014; Laroche, Papadopoulos, Heslop & Mourali, 2005; Servidio & Ruffolo, 2016; Wang, Li, Barnes, & Ahn, 2012) and in fewer

cases through both (Allred et al., 1999; Elliot et al., 2011; Gertner and Kotler, 2004; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009), leaving the conative aspect out. This lack of a consistency on a conceptualization of the construct has been pointed out in a review by Roth and Diamantopoulos (2009). Studies have discussed the importance of the image in destination choice (e.g., Decrop, 2010) and in establishing destination loyalty (e.g., Assaker & Hallak, 2013; Yuksel et al., 2010). However, the dynamic process of image formation also remains unexplored. Particularly when the image formation is correlated with important MTE, then the discussion is still in its infancy. Therefore, we argue for a need to link the process of image formation and the effects of the image, particularly focusing on the tourist experience and satisfaction. Following the Nadeau et al. (2008) methodology, we are placing emphasis on the MTE by relating this to the national/country symbol within the broader country image context, in an attempt to confirm that country image has a direct and positive effect on destination image (Palau-Saumell et al., 2016). Via its salient MTE, the country and thus the destination image has an impact on satisfaction (Wang and Hsu, 2010) and behavioural intention (namely conative image) (Loureiro & Gonzalez, 2008).

Last, *satisfaction* is considered a particularly significant factor influencing consumer behaviour in tourism (e.g., Yoon & Uysal, 2005). There is an agreement that the higher/more positive perceived image positively affects the expressed satisfaction (Castro et al., 2007; Chi and Qu, 2008; Lee et al., 2005), so the association between the two constructs is strong and positive. When searching for the relative impact of the different dimensions of image on satisfaction, this varies (Lee et al., 2005). However, the models that relate image with satisfaction are not rare, mostly treating satisfaction as an in-between factor between image and behavioural intention components (Chen and Tsai, 2007; Lee et al., 2014; Oliver, 1980).

The main consequence of satisfaction is thought to be loyalty to the destination (e.g., del Bosque & San Martin, 2008), although Bigne et al. (2008) link it to wider behavioural

responses, such as the consumers' willingness to pay more. As regard satisfaction apart from the empirical investigation carried out by DeNisco et al. (2015), no other research has come to our attention that has investigated the impact of tourism experience on the evaluation of all three components of Country Image, let alone the MTE impact on evaluation, satisfaction and further behavioural intentions. Moreover, there is a lack of empirical investigation on the impact of recent experiences (in real time and on site) on satisfaction (Mazursky, 1989). On the contrary, mostly past experiences have been related to the satisfaction construct. However, the majority of studies suffer from the disconnection we have noted above, in the sense that they treat the three processes of image, satisfaction and experience formation as separate and disconnected. It is useful to explore the more intricate ways in which the three processes might be interlinked, which is what this article attempts. Therefore, we adopt the concept of "experiential satisfaction" as a more representative expression of our approach.

### **3. Methodology**

The focus of this study is on experience of actual tourists and how memorable experiences impact on image, (experiential) satisfaction and behaviour. In order to reach these objectives, the content of MTE and country image components was put in the scope and their in-between relationships are investigated.

#### **3.1 Participants and procedures**

This study took place in Athens, Greece and set off to investigate the importance of (memorable) tourist experience for the formation of positive country image traits and behaviours recognising the central role played by satisfaction. According to official data, pre-COVID international tourists' arrivals in Greece exceeded 30 million (OECD, 2021). For pre-testing purposes, the questionnaire was administered to a group of international tourists

during their stay in Athens. Preliminary analysis suggested that overlaps can be eliminated if image items similar to memorable tourism experience items (e.g., political stability, security) were not included in the final questionnaire. Subsequent model purification further suggested that a total of 18 items should be included in the final model.

The study participants were international tourists visiting Athens. Convenience random sampling was selected as the most appropriate method, given time limitations and based on parameters such as the ability to speak English, accessibility and willingness to participate in the research. In detail, convenience sampling in this study meant approaching tourists randomly at popular tourist districts (e.g., Plaka, Monastiraki), and asking them to participate on a volunteer basis. In total, 210 questionnaires were completed.

### **3.2 Measures**

The study is quantitative in nature. Overall satisfaction represents a measurable variable, but memorable experiences and image are latent variables. Focusing on image, the relevant scale could be built upon either the 'cognitive – affective – overall' (e.g., Baloglu & McLeary, 1999; Beerli and Martin, 2004) or the 'cognitive - affective - conative' image approach (e.g., Gartner, 1993). The latter was considered as the most adequate alternative, given that the study seeks to investigate the image formation in relation to experience, satisfaction, and future behaviour (i.e., conative image and the intention to re-visit or recommend). Thus, in line with Agapito et al. (2013), the scale used to assess image has been adjusted from relevant previous scales (Gartner & Konecnik-Ruzzier, 2011; Martinez & Alvarez, 2010; Qu et al., 2011). Memorable experiences build upon Kim et al.'s scale and recognized dimensions (2012). A 7-point Likert scale was preferred for all questions except some queries connected to demographics (e.g., nationality/ country of origin).



It is critical that the measurement of each latent variable is psychometrically sound (Byrne, 2001). Standard deviations did not reveal high variation, while skewness and kurtosis values for the variables included in the study were satisfactory (i.e. skewness and kurtosis were both between -2 and 2), indicating a normal distribution (West, Finch & Curran, 1995).

- **Table 1 near here** -

Analysis regarding missing values, construct and multivariate normality led to 200 usable questionnaires. This number is in line with recent studies examining the sample size which is required for undertaking structural equation analysis (e.g., Wolf et al., 2013).

### **3.3 Data analysis**

To analyse the data, we used the two-step approach to Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), where the measurement and structural models are estimated separately (Anderson and Gerbing, 1998). SPSS and AMOS were the chosen tools to assess validity and consistency. The main reasons for using structural equation modelling, the two-step approach and AMOS were the normal distribution of the data along with the confirmatory rather than exploratory character of this study. Therefore, we could proceed to factor and path analysis in order to investigate validity and consistency. This means first undertaking a confirmatory factor analysis for memorable tourism experiences and destination image and then confirming the complete model using path analysis.

## **4. Results**

The objective of our study is in line with the two-step approach that suggests assessing the measurement model before the structural one. As a result, the two latent variables (i.e.,

memorable tourism experiences and destination image) are first put on the scope as distinct measurement models. Then, we proceed with the final model which brings these two variables together and includes satisfaction as well.

Preliminary analysis on the MTE and CI components is illustrated in Table 2 and reveal Cronbach's alpha values and composite construct reliabilities indicate reliability and internal consistency in line with Nunnally's (1978) recommendations. Subsequent analysis indicated discriminant and convergent validity. Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Average Shared Variance (ASV) values and high standardized factor loadings indicate reliability, internal consistency, convergent and discriminant validity (i.e.,  $ASV < AVE$  for all latent constructs; Blanthorne, Jones-Faremer, & Almer, 2006; Hair et al., 2010).

- Table 2 near here -

#### **4.1 Confirmatory factor analyses: Memorable tourism experiences and country image in a tourism context**

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) is used to verify the MTE factor structure suggested by Kim et al. (2012). CFA reveals positive correlations among the dimensions of the MTE construct. To be exact, correlations ranged from .328 to .707 and were significant at the 99% statistical level. Correlations did not exceed the threshold of .85 (Kline, 2005), thus they are not considered excessively high. Yet, they are high enough to indicate the presence of a second-order factor, namely MTE. Thus, MTE can later be imputed as a composite variable in AMOS. This additional step is in line with the aim of providing a comprehensive model, easy for scholars and practitioners to use and interpret. The scale for the three country image components was adapted from previous studies (Gartner & Konecnik-Ruzzier, 2011; Martinez & Alvarez, 2010; Qu et al., 2011). CFA confirms the structure of the CI components and findings suggest that the second-order cognitive image factor can be imputed as a

composite variable in AMOS and contribute to a more comprehensive model in subsequent path analysis. Model fit of both the MTE model and the country image complete model is in line with established criteria (Comparative Fix Index (CFA) $>.900$ , Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) $<.08$ ; Bentler, 1992; Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Byrne, 2001).

#### **4.2 Complete measurement model and path analysis**

In order to assess the complete measurement model including country image and MTE, we first need to investigate the common method bias. Harman's single factor method reveals that 30.667% ( $<50\%$ ) of the variance can be explained by a single factor, thus common method bias is not an issue. Focusing on the complete measurement model including country image and MTE, analysis on discriminant and convergent validity reveals AVE and ASV values and high standardised factor loadings, indicative of both. Commonly used goodness-of-fit indices (CFI $=.924$ ; RMSEA $=.058$ ) are in line with established criteria. Table 3 presents model fit when investigating the causal relationships between country image and MTE as well as the mediating effect of satisfaction.

- **Table 3 near here** -

Given the model fit indices (Table 3) and the results presented in Table 4, the direct effects of cognitive and affective image on conative image are statistically significant when satisfaction is also included in the model as mediator. Yet, the fact that there is a slight drop in the respective standardised weights reveals that both the effect of cognitive on conative and of affective on conative are only partially mediated. The indirect effect is statistically significant as well.

- **Table 4 near here** -

Figure 1 depicts the results relevant to the causal relationships between country image and MTE as well as the mediating effect of satisfaction.

- **Figure 1 near here** -

## 5. Conclusion

MTE, country image and satisfaction are critical constructs for managing tourist experiences. Therefore, this study examined their content, the structural relationships between country image components, the role of MTE via the most representative symbol of the country and the importance of experiential satisfaction in “real – time” and “on-site” circumstances. Findings confirm specific contributions to the literature, connected to construct-related validation, justification of the proposed model and verification of experiential satisfaction as a mediator.

This study offers an empirically grounded justification regarding the relationships that exist between cognitive, affective and conative country image. In line with previous research (Lin et al., 2007), cognitive image had the strongest impact on affective image (.805) while affective image has a significantly lower impact on conative image (.438). This confirms the relationship between emotions and MTE (Servidio & Ruffolo, 2016) but also implies that cognitive image should not be undervalued and all three image dimensions should be utilized in a synergistic way. The salient position of cognitive image as the most influential dimension is a conclusion that confirms other similar findings (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Furthermore, the study showed that strong relationships exist between all investigated constructs and that the proposed connections build a robust and valuable conceptual model. It is shown that MTE have a strong and significant effect on the Cognitive Image which, in

turn, affects both Affective and Conative Image but also Satisfaction. Similarly, Affective Image has an impact on both Satisfaction and Conative Image. Finally, Satisfaction also affects Conative Image. At the same time, the results indicate that Satisfaction is affected more by Affective rather than Cognitive image. This is consistent with previous conceptualizations in the tourism literature (Lee et al., 2014), according to which affective appeal turns out to be critical in experiential contexts.

It is also interesting to note that, when mediation findings are compared between “cognitive image-satisfaction-conative image” and “affective image -satisfaction-conative image”, scores are higher in the “without the mediator” (i.e., satisfaction) relationships. This means that rather than being primarily driven by satisfaction, conative country image is at large influenced by the other image dimensions. This finding is aligned with Baloglu and Brinberg’s (1997) argument that image dimensions are directly and closely intertwined.

## **6. Implications**

Our analysis shows that formation of METs is part of a wider experiential satisfaction process and the cognitive dimension plays a vital role in gaining positive visitor assessment. Furthermore, the model provides a generally missing synergistic approach to the treatment of the several incidences that contribute to the memorable tourism experience.

Our study responds to a previous call of Sthapit and Coudounaris (2018) for further examination of whether satisfaction combined with tourists’ MTE dimensions is a better prediction on behavioural intention. Previous studies recognize the importance of image to behavioural intentions of tourists and other involved parties (e.g., Bigne et al., 2001). It is suggested here that, for many visitors, MTE precede real-time place image formation, which subsequently leads to satisfaction. This demonstrates the relative importance of cognitive, affective and conative image dimensions and their associations as implied dimensions of the

memorable tourism experience. Conative image still remains the blackbox: it is influenced by experiential satisfaction, cognitive and affective image but there is more to conative image than the current study managed to confirm. The MTE construct constitutes a powerful tool for destination managers in their effort to keep their destination competitive in the international setting. Our conceptualisation and model can be utilized to identify and influence those key factors that drive visitors' satisfaction.

The main contribution of this study is the verification of a reliable conceptual model that brings the MTE to a deservedly central position and that connects MTE with country image in a tourism context as well as experiential satisfaction in an analytical way. Subsequent studies could adapt the scales used to further evaluate their reliability and validity. However, each destination holds its own uniqueness and, in this sense, additional tests could enhance the robustness of the particular model, via incorporating other country-related MTEs with or without exceptional symbolic value. Thus, future studies could explore further refinement of our scales, employ possible cultural or other influences (Zare, 2019) and test for additional mediators.

A limitation of this study relates to the fact that our analysis approached visitors as a homogeneous group and did not consider the number of prior visits or other demographic characteristics that might have masked valuable differences among the different visitor segments. Therefore, we encourage researchers to further validate the proposed model by investigating the tested relationships for different visitor profiles. It is also recommended to examine the differences between repeat and first-time visitors. Furthermore, this study focuses on experiences, yet constitutes a "photographic" shot as it reflects visitors' perceptions in a particular moment during their visit and does not consider whether visitors were in the beginning, in the middle or close to the end of their trip. Hence, the number and depth of experiences each respondent may have had with the destination / country may have

biased the responses. In order to address this limitation as well as those emerging from the strict use of a self-administered questionnaire to reach valid conclusions, we propose a multi-methodological empirical approach, which will take place throughout the journey and will include observation and in-depth interviews but possibly also an experimental design. Previous studies, when comparing the post- with the pre-trip image, find statistically significant differences. Thus, future studies could utilize the dynamic nature of destination / country image formation by following a “tracking” approach in their methodology. In order to complete the picture, one has to take into consideration all images, namely the pre-trip, the real-time as well as the post-trip image. **Exploring the importance of MTEs for diverse groups (e.g. for tourists originating from different countries as in Kim, 2013) might help destination/ place practitioners design more effective marketing tools (Dias and Dias, 2019).**

The MTE construct constitutes a powerful tool for destination managers in their effort to keep their destination competitive in the international setting. Therefore, successful identification and formation of its significant dimensions are essential for destination management. Our conceptualisation and model can be utilized to identify and influence those key factors that drive visitors’ satisfaction. For instance, our study reveals that the cognitive aspects (i.e., entertainment/recreation, atmosphere and natural environment) play a critical role in the satisfaction-building process. Our conceptual framework and analysis show that this formation of METs is part of a wider experiential satisfaction process and the cognitive dimension plays a vital role in gaining positive visitor assessment. Although customer experience is the “starting point” of any competitive footprint, in the tourism setting the experience has not been investigated to the extent it deserves. Furthermore, the model provides a generally missing synergistic approach to the treatment of the several incidences that contribute to the memorable tourism experience. This synergistic understanding is

helpful in improving and homogenizing all aspects that build the Memorable Tourism Experience bringing them to a harmonious level inspiring loyal behaviour.

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