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Consumer's appreciation of regional image and the perceived quality of rural tourism

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**42nd European Regional Science Association Congress – “From Industry to
Advanced Services – Perspectives of European Metropolitan Regions”
Dordmund, Germany, August 27th –31st 2002.**

**Consumer’s Appreciation of Regional Image and the Perceived Quality
of Rural Tourism**

by

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Abstract

Tourists’ perception of regional image is critical as regards the degree of satisfaction obtained from the overall tourism experience. The present paper analyses the ways in which a region’s image is incorporated into the tourist product and the overall tourism experience. Regional image is acknowledged to entail elements of the socio-cultural, environmental and historical heritage of a region. The latter affect the quality of the tourist product as perceived by the tourists. Consequently, they also affect the tourist’s subjective judgement of satisfaction based on the quality of the tourism experience they have ‘consumed’.

The present paper utilizes data drawn from a E.U. Research Project (SPRITE QLK5-CT-2000-01211) survey conducted in two regional sites of rural tourism in Greece. Analysis and results focus especially on comparisons between the two study regions. Further, policy implications as regards the development of the rural tourism product are also discussed.

Introduction

Rural economies in most developed countries increasingly diversify towards new sources of income and new types of employment (Murdoch and Marsden 1994). The most dynamic shift observed relates to viewing countryside as a 'consuming place' (Urry 1995; Hopkins 1998); a fact that highlights the increasing importance of countryside as part of the tourism product market. Indeed, the tourism market has diversified significantly since the introduction of a whole new variety of tourism products such as extreme sports activities, religious tourism, cultural tourism and so on. Demand for these tourism products gives many rural areas the opportunity to exploit natural, cultural, historical and environmental resources that were previously left idle. The positive impact resulting from the implementation of a local/regional development pattern that is based on the revitalization of local resources has been widely acknowledged by both scholars and policy makers.

Until recently the tourism market was another example of a more or less globalized market mainly based on mass urban tourism and mass holiday 'sun and sea' tourism. Nowadays, peripheral areas have the ability not only to utilize their cultural, social, historical and environmental resources towards the provision of tourism products and services but, most importantly, they have the ability to differentiate their tourism products and services based on the image that tourists/consumers develop over a specific region. This refers to the process of attaching specific products and services to a specific place by means of incorporating attributes and elements that are distinctive of a rural place to the whole range of factors that constitute the 'overall tourism experience'. The relationship between region specific attributes and elements and a region's specific image is filtered by another key factor that is quality. Quality differentiates the tourism product/services provided by rural areas by being related to small-scale soft tourism, authenticity, distinctive rural landscapes, local culture and heritage, culinary culture, etc (Ilbery et al. 2001). Research findings have established the existence of a strong relationship between consumers' image of a place and consumers' quality judgement of the tourism experience in that place (Bigne et al. 2001; Dimara and Skuras 1999). Quality is the criterion according to which consumers evaluate a rural tourism experience, but regional image is the most decisive factor in the process of quality judgement construction.

The present paper analyses the ways in which, a region's image is incorporated into the tourist products and the overall tourism experience. Regional image is acknowledged to entail elements of the socio-cultural, environmental and historical heritage of a region. The latter affect the quality of the tourist product as perceived by the tourists. Consequently, they also affect the tourist's subjective judgement of satisfaction based on the quality of the tourism experience they have 'consumed'.

The present paper utilizes data drawn from a EU Research Project (SPRITE QLK5-CT-2000-01211) survey conducted in two regional sites of rural tourism in Greece. Analysis and results focus especially on comparisons between the two study regions. Further, policy implications as regards the development of the rural tourism product are also discussed.

Conceptualizing place image in tourism

There is broad agreement among numerous authors regarding the influence of place (tourist destination) image on the behavior of individuals, i.e. on consumer behavior in tourism (Fakeye and Crompton 1991; Baloglu and McCleary 1999a; Baloglu and McCleary 1999b; Bigne et al. 2001; Echtner and Ritchie 1993; Leisen 2001). At the same time image differentiates tourist destinations from each other and it is an integral and influential part of travelers' decision process regarding a specific place. On that base, image constitutes a principal component of promoting tourist destinations. Promotion is, in turn, especially important in tourism because tourism is an intangible service. It is actually an experience, which cannot be inspected prior to purchase (Fakeye and Crompton 1991). The image of a tourism destination in itself is neither positive nor negative; the value judgement differs with the affective association of different segments of the tourist market (Davidoff and Davidoff 1983). As Reynolds (1965: 75) stated, "different people will have different images of the same product; the number of people with a particular image is always a percentage and not the total population". In other words, image is an expression of appraisal and therefore a purely subjective notion (Gunn 1972). In some cases, the real and objective attractions offered in a place are not as important as the tourists' images of these. Putting emphasis on the subjective character of tourism image conceptualization Mayo (1973: 217) states that, "what is important is the image that exists in the mind of the vacationer [irrespectively

of], whether or not an image is in fact a true representation of what any given region has to offer to the tourist”.

Despite the importance of this research line in tourism, several authors recognize a lack of conceptual framework around tourist destination image (Gartner 1993). There is no complete conceptualization and operationalization of tourist destination image (Echtner and Ritchie 1991). As a result, there is great variation in both image definitions and approaches to its study (Gallarza et al. 2002). Nonetheless, various definitions of image focus upon the components and dimensions of image structure, as a means of understanding the subjective interpretations of reality made by a tourist (Kotler et al. 1993; Crompton 1979;).

What several studies agree upon is that image construct has two main components: the cognitive evaluations component and the affective evaluations component (Dobni and Zinkham 1990; Kotler et al. 1993; Baloglu and Brinberg 1997). Cognitive or perceptual evaluation refers to beliefs and knowledge about an object (evaluation of attributes of the object), whereas affective evaluation refers to feelings and emotions about the object (Zimmer and Golden 1988; Walmsley and Jenkins 1993; Gartner 1993).

This twofold conceptualization of place image strengthens the ability to measure the overall image that is attached to a place. In other words, measurement of only the objective attributes or features of place and tourist destinations cannot capture the complexity of the image construction and thus it is very often restrictive. As Ward and Russel (1981:123) say, “the meaning of a place is not entirely determined by the physical properties of place”. Although, a clear distinction is made between these two dimensions of image, they are also very much interrelated, as affective evaluation depends on cognitive evaluation of place objects, and respectively, the affective response and evaluations are formed as a function of the cognitive responses and evaluations (Stern and Krakover 1993; Russel and Pratt 1980).

The image of a place, therefore, is a mental construct of beliefs, knowledge along with feelings, emotions and impressions, which are all elaborated gradually by a tourist, while a complex and differentiated image of a destination will develop only after tourists are exposed to the varying dimensions of a place (Assael 1984). In that way, different appraisals of place image, has a different impact on consumers’ behavior, and their judgments of the quality of the overall tourism experience.

Figure 1. A twofold conceptualization of place image

Rural tourism market: the role of quality

Tourism market, even in rural areas is evolving as a highly competitive arena. Rural places and many mountainous areas hold similar characteristics, as they have similar objective attributes, such as natural resources, cultural resources, similar leisure activities, etc. In that sense, different tourism destinations in the rural areas operate in a very competitive way. In a state of high competition among destinations and their often-limited promotional resources and funding, what is of great importance is to identify the images of the places held by different consumers and profile the different segments that exist. Segmentation of tourism market in rural areas has been given little attention in tourism research but it is a decisive factor of promoting rural areas in the most receptive future consumers-travelers.

In that context we deal with the differential impact of regional image elements of the tourists' overall judgement of the quality of the tourism experience. Quality is a complex notion, which has different and sometimes contradictory meanings (Sornay 1993). Quality must, therefore, be thought of as a convention or social construction, which relies upon different appraisals. While there is no generally agreed upon definition of quality relevant to both products and services (Foster and Macrae 1992), important aspects of the concept of quality are the satisfaction of consumer needs

(Vastoia 1997) and a consistent level of performance, taste and so forth provided by the product or service (O'Neil and Black 1996). One of the essential features of quality, therefore, is that it is a "positional characteristic; something which is above minimum standards and which gives a product or service a cutting edge on its rivals." (Ilbery and Kneafsey 1998:331). The factors or indicators of quality can be categorized into objective and subjective (Sylvander 1993), with the former relating to attributes, which can be externally verified, controlled and replicated, and the latter being some experiential elements that lie upon the individuals.

As mentioned earlier the present paper attempts to identify those elements that differentiate consumers' judgements of the overall quality of tourism experience. Results of the tourism experience evaluation in two Greek peripheral rural areas indicate that consumers/tourists may be classified into two categories; first, those who evaluate the specific tourism experience as one of "high quality" and second, those who evaluate the specific tourism experience as one of "conventional quality". Utilizing these two different evaluation outcomes as a criterion to differentiate among tourists, two distinct categories of tourists have emerged. Those identified as 'quality consumers' are associated with a positive evaluation of the quality of the overall tourism experience, whereas those identified, as 'conventional consumers' are the ones associated with low evaluations of the quality of the overall tourism experience. In order to account for these differences in evaluation we test the hypothesis that different place images are the decisive factors in the consumers' final judgement of the quality of the overall tourism experience. This actually involves the performance of two tests, the one referring to the cognitive components of place image and the other referring to the affective components of place image.

Data and Methodology

Sample and the profile of the study areas

Data are drawn from an EU Research Project (SPRITE QLK5-CT-2000-01211) survey conducted in two regional sites of rural tourism in Greece, namely Kalavryta and Evrytania. A total number of 101 tourist's questionnaires were collected, (51 from Kalavryta and 50 from Evrytania). As research is ongoing these questionnaires constitute only a small fraction of the final survey sample. However, preliminary results

as to how regional images are constructed may be drawn and also compared at a second phase with the findings of another sub-sample. Due to the diversity of tourism products and services offered in both study regions, diverse tourists are expected to be captured by the final survey sample which has been designed to be collected in different seasons of the year. This way, the importance of different regional specific attributes in the construction of regional image expected to be captured.

The two study areas share both similarities and differences. The study area of Evrytania, a prefecture at NUTS III level of analysis, is a mountainous area heavily dependent upon the tertiary sector of the economy and more specifically tourism. It is characterized by the development of a core city that is Karpenissi; the capital city of the prefecture that concentrates almost all economic activities in the area. Evrytania is a relatively isolated area in terms of distance from main urban centers such as Athens and Patras. The study area of Kalavryta, region at NUTS IV level of analysis, is also a mountainous area heavily dependent upon tourism. It is differentiated from Evrytania, among other things, as regards its close proximity to main urban centers (Athens and Patras, from where most tourists in the area originate) and its relatively easier accessibility.

Overall, both areas are lagging behind in the development of the primary and the secondary sectors of the economy. Nonetheless, they are both endowed with rich natural resources, history, and culture and traditions, i.e. they are both rich in factors that constitute tourists' attractions. The operation of ski centers in both areas is an important tourist attraction, which enables other activities related to history and culture, for example, to develop parallel and grow as complementary to the main tourist activities. Both areas promote the development of a web of interlinked tourist activities and services, in an attempt to take advantage of an increasing flow of tourists in the area that were drawn initially by the operation of the ski centers.

The measurement of image

Respondents were asked to place themselves on a strongly agree to strongly disagree scale concerning their subjective judgment of the overall tourism experience by answering to the following question: "*Your overall tourism experience can be judged as a quality experience*". Those respondents answering 'strongly agree' or 'agree' are regarded as consumers valuing their tourism experience above their subjective

perception of a conventional experience and thus, it may be argued, that they have consumed a quality service. All others are regarded as having a conventional experience.

Our conceptualization of image construction is based on the identification of cognitive and affective components. These components were chosen on the basis of selecting from those indicated in the relevant bibliography the ones that are present in the two study areas. Table 1 summarizes the cognitive and affective components that are used in the analysis. Tourists were asked to evaluate each of the cognitive image components on the same ordinal scale from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Similarly, the affective image components were evaluated on an ordinal scale from 1 to 5, (e.g. 1=relaxing, 5=distressing).

Table 1. Cognitive and affective components of image

Cognitive components of image	Affective components of image
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good recreational opportunities • Good sporting activities • Attractive natural landscape • Appealing historic sites / Interesting monasteries, churches, monuments • Interesting local culture and traditions • Interesting traditional settlements and villages • Friendly local people • Sites of environmental interest • Appealing culinary culture • Quality local products • Appealing climate • Accessible region • Easy transportation within the region • High travel cost • Remote region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relaxing – Distressing • Fascinating – Boring • Pleasant – Unpleasant • Exciting – Dull • Safe – Dangerous • Uncrowded – Crowded

Results

Table 2 presents the percentage distribution of tourists' evaluations of the cognitive components of regional image in both study areas. Analysis showed that the two tails of the ordinal scale of evaluation present no significant differentiation. Thus the two tails have been subsumed, resulting in an ordinal scale of three responses that is disagree, neither agree nor disagree and agree. In general, tourists' responses to the evaluation of the cognitive components of image do not differ significantly in the two study areas. As shown in Table 2, a significant percentage of tourists in both areas agree upon statements such as 'attractive natural landscape', 'quality local products', 'good sporting activities', 'interesting traditional settlements and villages', 'sites of environmental interest', 'friendly local people' and 'easy transportation within the region'. Among the cognitive image components for which tourists' evaluations differ significantly between the two study areas are 'good recreational opportunities', 'interesting local culture and traditions', 'accessible region' and 'remote region'. Tourists in the area of Kalavryta evaluate negatively elements such as 'accessible region' despite that the vast majority of them does not consider the area as 'remote'. Also, a large percentage of respondents in the Kalavryta area have a neutral image as regards the area's 'recreational opportunities'. A large percentage of respondents in the Evrytania region do consider it 'accessible' despite that they also consider it 'remote region'. Finally, respondents in the Evrytania region have to a large percent neutral image as regards the areas' 'local cultures and traditions'. The other elements of regional cognitive image do not present either significant similarities or significant differences. Such elements are 'Appealing historic sites / Interesting monasteries, churches, monuments', 'interesting traditional settlements and villages', 'appealing culinary culture', 'appealing climate' and 'high travel cost'.

Table 3 summarizes the respondents' evaluations of the affective components of regional image in both study areas. Feelings and emotions regarding both areas are positive; the vast number of respondents in both areas considers them as 'relaxing', 'fascinating', 'pleasant' and 'exciting' tourism destinations. However, we should notice that these feelings are rather stronger in the case of Evrytania. Different responses are again observed as regards tourists' feelings of the places' 'crowdeness' and 'safety'. Compared to Evrytania, Kalavryta is considered a crowded place; while it is even more interesting that Kalavryta is also judged negatively as regards safety.

The total sample has been divided into two sub-samples on the basis of tourists' judgement of the overall quality of the tourism experience in the study areas. The two sub-groups were named 'quality consumers' and 'conventional consumers' in order to differentiate between high quality or else positive quality judgements and standard quality judgements among the respondents. This would refine the results of the analysis involving the identification of the cognitive and affective image components that determine different types of overall tourism experience evaluations. Respondents in the two sub-samples evaluate differently the different components of image despite that the socio-demographic profile of both types of tourists does not present any significant differentiation. In other words, 'quality consumers' and 'conventional consumers' do not differ in terms of age, education and sex. However, the two sub-samples present different economic profiles with the 'quality consumers' belonging in a higher income category. Finally, the two sub-samples do not differ in terms of the tourists' mode of travel since the majority of respondents in both categories travel individually and not as part of an organized group.

Table 4 presents the results of a the chi-square test testing for association in the joint distribution of the frequencies of two variables and also the estimated eta coefficient measuring the size of association between a nominal (quality judgment variable) and an ordinal variable (all variables measuring cognitive and affective components of image).

'Quality consumers' seem to evaluate higher the cognitive components of image that refer to 'sport activities', 'culinary culture' and 'climate'. In other words, the two destinations are shown to have a good reputation or else a positive image that is structured upon the fact that tourists can enjoy a variety of good sporting activities, good food and a clean and pleasant climatic environment. Thus, enjoyment from the tourism experience is directly linked to the satisfaction derived from the above elements. Also, 'quality consumers' agree upon that the regions are relatively more difficult to 'access' although they do not consider the 'cost of access' to be high. This, however, can be a positive evaluation of a region's image. 'Access' to a place may as well be an integral part of the overall tourism experience in the sense that the trip is part of the 'adventure'. As regards the affective components of image the 'quality consumers' category finds the two tourism destinations to be rather more 'fascinating' and 'pleasant'. This may also be interpreted as support to the above arguments regarding accessibility. Both destinations constitute places of extreme natural beauty, a statement with which the total sample of

tourists have agreed upon. This fact seems to underlie the respondents' perception of the visit in these places.

However, it seems that the 'attractive natural landscape' along with 'local culture and traditions' are the two most important image construction elements in the case of the 'conventional consumers'. 'Conventional consumers' seem to place more emphasis on the satisfaction derived from visiting a place of extreme natural beauty, while they appreciate more the satisfaction derived from visiting a place with rich culture and traditional heritage. This striking difference between the two sub-samples of consumers as regards their tourism experience evaluated by different place attributes demands further analysis. The only explanatory factor, available at this stage of research, is the consumers' difference in income levels. Intuitively, the image of low income tourists may depend more on less costly activities. This is further supported by the fact that 'conventional consumers' have evaluated the two places as less 'fascinating' and 'pleasant', attributes that are usually enhanced through the participation in sports and other recreational activities.

Conclusions

Both study areas are mountainous areas lagging behind in development. Tourism has gradually developed as a dynamic sector of the economy in both study areas, enhancing regional income and employment. Relatively close to each other and presenting similarities as tourist destinations, the two areas are considered as competitive tourism destinations.

Analysis of the image perceptions that tourists possess regarding both areas reveals that image is a key element of promoting and marketing these areas as tourism destinations. Understanding tourists' perceptions of image in each area and the way in which it has been constructed is a key element in promoting these areas as tourism destinations. Each area should harmonize its tourism promotion strategies to those elements that seem to be the most decisive factors for the construction of tourists' image.

Also, analysis reveals that different market segments exist in both areas with each segment appreciating differently the various image construction elements. Therefore, 'quality consumers' needs are differentiated compared to those of the

'conventional consumers'. In that sense, promotion of place should incorporate the more attractive elements and attributes of place focusing on the existing segments.

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Table 2. Appreciation of cognitive image components by tourists in both study areas

	Kalavryta				Evrytania				ALL			
	Disagree	NA-ND	Agree	N	Disagree	NA-ND	Agree	N	Disagree	NA-ND	Agree	N
Good recreational opportunities	13,3	55,6	31,1	45	0	8,2	91,8	49	6,4	30,9	62,8	94
Good sporting activities	2	28	70	50	0	34,7	65,3	49	1	31,3	67,7	99
Attractive natural landscape	0	0	100	50	0	0	100	50	0	0	100	100
Appealing historic sites / Interesting monasteries, churches, monuments	0	10	90	50	0	22	78	50	0	16	84	100
Interesting local culture and traditions	2,1	29,8	68,1	47	4,2	47,9	47,9	48	3,2	38,9	57,9	95
Interesting traditional settlements and villages	4,3	25,5	70,2	47	6	18	76	50	5,2	21,6	73,2	97
Friendly local people	10,6	23,4	66	47	4	28	68	50	7,2	25,8	67	97
Sites of environmental interest	0	16,7	83,3	48	0	12,5	87,5	48	0	14,6	85,4	96
Appealing culinary culture	6	28	66	50	0	22,4	77,6	49	3,0	25,3	71,7	99
Quality local products	4,1	26,5	69,4	49	2	32,7	65,3	49	3,1	29,6	67,3	98
Appealing climate	2,2	35,6	62,2	45	4	18,4	77,6	49	3,2	26,6	70,2	94
Accessible region	30,6	26,5	42,9	49	10	36	54	50	20,2	31,3	48,5	99
Easy transportation within the region	10	22	68	50	12	24	64	50	11	23	66	100
High travel cost	34	46	20	50	32	60	8	50	33	53	14	100
Remote region	96	2	2	50	42,9	26,5	30,6	49	69,7	14,1	16,2	99

Table 3. Appreciation of affective image components by tourists in both study areas

ALL

	%	1	2	3	4	5	
Relaxing	59,2	26,5	11,2	2,0	1,0		Distressing
Fascinating	24,2	53,5	17,2	5,1	0,0		Boring
Pleasant	55,1	31,6	10,2	3,1	0,0		Unpleasant
Exciting	39,8	39,8	15,3	4,1	1,0		Dull
Safe	23,5	17,3	39,8	16,3	3,1		Dangerous
Uncrowned	45,4	38,1	14,4	2,1	0,0		Crowded

Kalavryta

	%	1	2	3	4	5	
Relaxing	52,1	33,3	12,5	2,1	0,0		Distressing
Fascinating	24,5	51,0	20,4	4,1	0,0		Boring
Pleasant	50,0	39,6	10,4	0,0	0,0		Unpleasant
Exciting	35,4	39,6	18,8	6,3	0,0		Dull
Safe	14,6	12,5	56,3	12,5	4,2		Dangerous
Uncrowned	29,2	50,0	18,8	2,1	0,0		Crowded

Evrytania

	%	1	2	3	4	5	
Relaxing	66,0	20,0	10,0	2,0	2,0		Distressing
Fascinating	24,0	56,0	14,0	6,0	0,0		Boring
Pleasant	60,0	24,0	10,0	6,0	0,0		Unpleasant
Exciting	44,0	40,0	12,0	2,0	2,0		Dull
Safe	32,0	22,0	24,0	20,0	0,0		Dangerous
Uncrowned	61,2	26,5	10,2	2,0	0,0		Crowded

Table 4. Chi-square test and estimated eta coefficients

	Kalavryta		Evrytania		ALL	
	Eta	χ^2	Eta	χ^2	Eta	χ^2
Good recreational opportunities	0,116	0,592	0,168	1,377	0,101	0,941
Good sporting activities	0,516	13,033** ¹	0,002	0,000	0,261	6,655**
Attractive natural landscape	----- ²	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
Appealing historic sites / Interesting monasteries, churches, monuments	0,053	0,142	0,082	0,330	0,022	0,049
Interesting local culture and traditions	0,218	2,228	0,257	3,167	0,169	2,708
Interesting traditional settlements and villages	0,134	0,841	0,077	0,289	0,091	0,786
Friendly local people	0,192	1,739	0,230	2,584	0,025	0,058
Sites of environmental interest	0,205	2,020	0,284	3,884**	0,026	0,064
Appealing culinary culture	0,356	6,320**	0,203	1,980	0,280	7,669**
Quality local products	0,211	2,175	0,141	0,956	0,074	0,526
Appealing climate	0,368	6,113**	0,228	0,2489	0,281	7,362**
Accessible region	0,059	0,171	0,220	2,369	0,124	1,506
Easy transportation within the region	0,145	1,058	0,192	1,808	0,080	0,628
High travel cost	0,396	7,847**	0,227	2,515	0,275	7,485**
Remote region	0,200	2,007	0,113	0,615	0,041	0,163

<i>Affective</i>						
Relaxing – Distressing	0,222	0,501	0,241	2,857	0,151	2,201
Fascinating – Boring	0,295	4,275	0,305	4,556	0,280	7,671**
Pleasant – Unpleasant	0,343	5,640**	0,327	5,231	0,278	7,471**
Exciting – Dull	0,306	4,486	0,236	2,728	0,248	5,960
Safe – Dangerous	0,061	0,180	0,193	1,823	0,082	0,658
Uncrowded – Crowded	0,368	6,516*	0,196	1,847	0,231	5,140

¹ Single and double asterisks indicate statistical significance at the $\alpha=0.10$ and 0.05 levels, respectively

² No statistics are computed because this variable is a constant