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Moldovan Perception of Greece as a Tourism Destination

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History</p> <p>Received 27th December 2016; Accepted 14th May 2017</p> <hr/> <p><i>JEL Classifications</i> M31, Z33.</p>	<p>Purpose: This research study analyzes Moldovans' intentions to visit Greece, and their perceptions of Greece's image as a tourism destination, according to the following dimensions: (1) environmental beauty and convenience, (2) country's citizens, (3) place and architectural structure, (4) shopping and tourist accommodation and (5) similarity of the local culture and cuisine with the Moldovan one. The goal is split into four objectives.</p> <p>Design/methodology/approach: For attaining the goal, a self-administered questionnaire was delivered. The empirical study was conducted in the capital of Moldova. The findings are based upon a sample of 139 respondents.</p> <p>Findings: The findings reveal that, overall, Greece's image as a tourist destination among Moldovan consumers is partially positive. The perceptions of the tourism dimensions were evaluated in the descending order as follows: place and architectural structure, shopping and tourist accommodation, environmental beauty and convenience, country's citizens and similarity of the local culture and cuisine with the Moldovan one.</p> <p>Research limitations/implications: – As it was undertaken only in the capital of Republic of Moldova and because most respondents are young people and females, the findings of this investigation do not absolutely reflect the perceptions of all Moldovans. Also, because the number of respondents is small, it is not representative of the whole Moldovan population. Hence, the results might not be very realistic and accurate.</p> <p>Originality/value – This study provides insightful theoretical implications and practical recommendations in creating marketing strategies that would help in managing and improving Greece's image as a destination among Moldovan tourists. Also, no study, at least to the researcher's knowledge, has evaluated Greece's image as a destination among Moldovan consumers. Finally, due to the increasing number of Moldovan tourists in Greece, it is important that Greece grasps this opportunity and positively influences the intentions of the visiting Moldovans via a positive destination image.</p>

Keywords:
consumer perception,
destination, Greece, image,
tourism.

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1. Introduction

According to the statistics compiled by the World Tourism Organization, the number of tourists travelling abroad has grown significantly from 25 million, in 1950, to 674 million in 2000, and 1186 million in 2015. This astonishing increase is, first of all, due to the improvements in the means of transportation. Secondly, increasing incomes of the consumers have encouraged the demand for tourism services. Finally, the ever-increasing number of destinations that can be visited has positively impacted the rise in demand for tourism services. Hence, tourism has become one of the largest economic sectors

in the world. Moreover, tourism has increased more rapidly than world trade over the past years. Additionally, the WTO forecasts continued increase in international tourist arrivals at a growth rate of 3.8% a year for the period 2010 to 2020 (WTO, 2016).

Therefore, the significance of tourism is widely acknowledged, due to its contribution to regional and national economic development (Bozbay & Ozen, 2008; WTO, 2016). Taking into consideration the fact that international tourism has a competitive and dynamic structure, the need to understand consumer needs and their attitudes, becomes critical. Thus, the study of tourism destination image, which is a somewhat recent

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addition to the area of tourism research, has become significant for practitioners involved in tourism activities, particularly in positioning destination images, and also for academics striving to comprehend the destination image construct. Moreover, the competitive character of the tourism industry obliges tourism destinations to build an effective marketing plan and strategy.

“Destinations mainly compete based on their perceived images relative to competitors in the marketplace” (Bozbay & Ozen, 2008, p.14). Hence, tourism image is essential to the success of a destination. A similar finding is reported by Cho (2008), who states that location attractiveness is a major factor motivating travellers into choosing a specific destination.

Based on WTO (2016), Europe is the most visited region in the world, with a 5% growth in international tourist arrivals. Greece, situated in Europe, is one of the Mediterranean countries, which represents a favorite tourism destination for international travelers (Bozbay & Ozen, 2008), with an increasing level of international tourist arrivals (see Table 1). Due to its location in the Mediterranean region, scenic landscapes and nature, rich architecture and preserved ancient history (WTTC, 2016; Nations Online, 2016), Greece has a large touristic potential. Additionally, the tourism industry exerts a strong influence on Greece’s national economic development, as travel and tourism constitutes 18.5% of GDP in 2015 (WTTC, 2016). A visual representation of the direct contribution of Travel and Tourism to Greek GDP over the last 10 years is shown in Figure 1.

Table 1: International Tourist Arrivals in Greece

	2013	2014	2015
Number of persons (in thousands)	17,920	22,033	23,599
Change based on the previous year	15.5%	23%	7.1%

Source: Compiled by the researcher based on WTO (2016)

Since it is widely acknowledged that destination image has a strong influence on tourist behavioural intentions, it appears that the Greek image as a tourism destination is the major factor in the success of this destination. Hence, the creation and maintenance of a positive destination image is an essential task for the Greek tourism services suppliers.

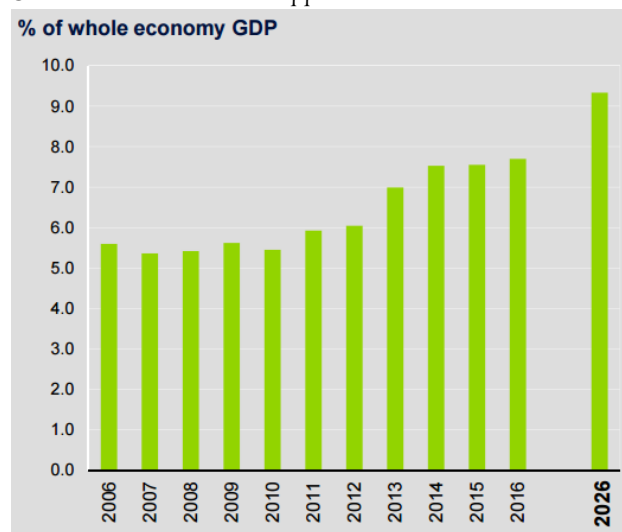


Figure 1: Direct contribution of Travel and Tourism to Greek GDP

Source: WTTC (2016, p.3)

In this context, the Republic of Moldova is becoming an important economic partner for Greece, particularly after the visa liberalization from the 28th of April 2014, when Moldovan citizens were finally allowed to travel to the European Union, including Greece, without a visa for 3 months. As a result, according to the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova (2016), the number of Moldovan tourists visiting Greece increased from 4066 tourists in 2011 to 21158 tourists in 2015. Obviously, Moldovans are becoming an important increasing customer base for the Greek tourism industry. Thus, the Greeks must grasp this opportunity and also the advantageous geographic closeness between Moldova and Greece to ensure that the Greek image among Moldovan consumers is positive, due to the fact that, most probably, the Greek image as a tourist destination has a vital importance in influencing Moldovan consumer behavioural intentions.

Hence, the main goal of this study is to evaluate the Greece’s image as a tourist destination among Moldovan consumers. It intends to analyse the consumers’ distinguishing perceptions about Greece’s image as a tourism destination according to the following dimensions, using Bozbay & Ozen (2008) model: (1) environmental beauty and convenience, (2) country’s citizens, (3) place and architectural structure, (4) shopping and tourist accommodation and (5) similarity of the local culture and cuisine with the Moldovan one. Further, the study aims to measure Moldovans’ intention to visit Greece. Afterwards, the research intends to correlate each of the five tourism destination dimensions and the demographic factors with the intention to visit Greece, in order to identify significant relationships between the independent and the dependent variables. Finally, this research study intends to test if there is any significant difference in perceptions between the Moldovans who have already visited Greece and the Moldovans who have never visited Greece.

This study offers valuable information for academics and practitioners. First of all, no study, at least to the researcher’s knowledge, has evaluated Greece’s destination image among Moldovan consumers. Only a slight research attempt was made by Magenta Consulting (2015) through its employee’s one-week vacation in Greece. Twenty-eight members of the team collected statistics through observations. The conclusion of that small investigation was that “Greeks exploit tourism to its true value and promote culture” by widely selling traditional Greek products, by promoting experiential tourism and by being open to the customers’ desires (Magenta Consulting, 2015). Second, the Greek tourism marketers should be interested in determining exactly the image of Greece as a tourism destination, so that, in case of negative perceptions, to adopt the right strategies that would help to overcome the unfavorable country image, or, in case of positive perceptions, to use the country image as a competitive advantage. This is particularly important for the Greek economy, since tourism contributes substantially to the country’s GDP. Finally, due to the increasing number of Moldovan tourists in

Greece, it is important that Greece grasps this opportunity and positively influences the intentions of the visiting Moldovans using a positive destination image.

2. Theoretical Background

Since the 1960's, various studies have been conducted on the "country image" concept (Han, 1989). The wide-ranging literature in international marketing offers a diversity of definitions of country image. A clear coherent definition is given by Martin & Eroglu (1993, p. 193), who define country image as "the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country". An even simpler definition that is widely adopted is that image "is a set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that people have of a place or destination" (Bozbay & Ozen 2008, p.15). Moreover, image is comprised of both cognitive and affective components. According to Kleppe & Mossberg (2005), country image is developed using political, economic and technological factors.

Image has been proven to be an essential determinant of the consumers' decision process (Bozbay & Ozen, 2008). More specifically, the country of origin image influences the consumer perceptions towards products originating in certain countries (Bowe, Lockshin, Lee & Rungie, 2013). Hence, the country of origin image has an impact on product image formation. Moreover, the numerous studies found that consumers have different country images and perceptions of products coming from different countries (Han, 1989; Kleppe & Mossberg, 2005). Thus, consumers use the image of a country to infer the quality of the products and services from the respective country, particularly when consumers are not familiar with the specific brand. That is why the international marketers are advised to use the country image as a competitive advantage, in case of a positive image, and should take the necessary steps in overcoming an unfavorable country image (Parameswaran & Pisharodi, 1994). For instance, a study among German consumers found out that the recent image of Greece as a crisis-ridden country is neutral, which has a positive or a negative impact on the image of Greek wines, depending on the consumer (Cazacu & Papadopoulos, 2015).

What is more, for the post-communist countries, which had to change from the command economy to the market economy, country image is critical to economic growth and development (Pătrașcu, 2014). Therefore, governments create a favourable country image by engaging in nation branding campaigns.

Tourism industry researchers have considered that country image has a strong impact on the people's desire to visit a country, either for business, tourism or migration purposes (Bowe, Lockshin, Lee & Rungie, 2013; Jun & Hong-Liang, 2014; Ghada Abdalla, 2007; Lee, 2009). Image is significant in attracting potential visitors. Perceptions, rather than reality, are the motivations behind people's decision to visit a destination (Bozbay & Ozen, 2008). For example, business travellers' perception of India is formed "by its culture and heritage, natural resources, general infrastructures, night life, social environment, and lodging services" (Yen, da Gama & Rajamohan, 2008, p.129)

Thus, an essential concept discussed in this study is "destination image", which is usually defined as tourists'

general perceptions of a certain destination (Lee, 2009; Ghada Abdalla, 2007). As the destination marketers are engaged in a tough competition to attract tourists (Upadhyaya, 2012; Ruzzier, Antoncic & Ruzzier, 2014), they must strive to establish a positive image of their destination (Jun & Hong-Liang, 2014; Bozbay & Ozen, 2008; Martin & Eroglu, 1993), first of all, by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their destination and, secondly, by providing essential approaches in managing and developing the tourist destinations (Lee, 2009). For instance, Australia's image was successfully marketed as an iconic tourism image, even though Australia is "a country of hi-tech development, technological advancement, hard work and great production capacity" (Bowe, Lockshin, Lee & Rungie, 2013, p. 469). Thus, it is important to have a positive destination image, as it directly influences the satisfaction level (Lee, 2009; Ghada Abdalla, 2007).

The marketer's duty is to match the promoted destination image with the perceived destination image in the consumer's mind, in order to avoid a false and inaccurate destination image (Bozbay & Ozen, 2008). This is done through an effective marketing strategy, which starts initially with the evaluation of the destination image among the consumers.

Moreover, destination image was found to play a role as important as service in tourists' decision-making process (Moon, Ko, Connaughton & Lee, 2013), which is one more reason to work on the enhancement of the destination image. Furthermore, the results of a study show that event image has an important influence on the destination image (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007). Thus, it is essential to organize successful events in the places where the tourism marketers intend to enhance the number of tourists.

Additionally, a study determined that, out of six information sources, the cognitive wisdom of the tourists plays the most influential role in shaping the image of the Indian destinations. Thus, destination marketers must use long-term strategies, as the short-term strategies cannot work in manipulating cognitive wisdom. Hence, word-of mouth, tourism department publications, PR effort, electronic media and professional sources appear to have only a small influence on the destination image (Sarma, 2007).

It is important to note that several studies have proven that destination image has a strong influence on tourist behavioral intentions (Bozbay & Ozen, 2008; Ghada Abdalla, 2007; Lee, 2009; Jeeyoon, Joon Ho & Yu-Kyoun, 2014). For instance, Bozbay & Ozen (2008) show that people having very high intention levels to visit Greece, rate high all the destination image dimensions, while people who have low intentions to visit Greece, on the contrary, rate very low the destination image dimensions.

Finally, destination image is a complex notion, as it is made up of several elements: cognitive, affective (Jun & Hong-Liang, 2014) and behavioral elements (Lee, 2009). Yahya (2000) distinguishes between (1) primary elements of a tourist destination, such as climate, ecology, culture and traditional architecture, and (2) secondary elements of a tourist destination, i.e. attractions, facilities, infrastructure, transportation, and hospitality. Additionally, Yahya (2000) proposes three dimensions as the main determinants of the attractiveness of tourist

destinations: hotel factors, restaurant factors and transportation factors. Further, Upadhyaya (2012) study reveals that destination image contains (1) functional features, i.e. accessibility, physical atmosphere etc. and (2) psychological features, i.e. friendliness, relaxation etc. Bozbay & Ozen (2008) consider that the destination image has five dimensions: (1) environmental beauty and convenience, (2) country's citizens, (3) place and architectural structure, (4) shopping and tourist accommodation and (5) similarity of the local culture and cuisine.

As shown above, the classification of destination image elements and the measurement of destination image have been of significant interest to many tourism researchers and marketers. Some researchers used structured methods; others used unstructured methods, though preference was given to the structured measurement techniques (Bozbay & Ozen, 2008). Similarly, this study will use a structured model, more specifically, the one proposed by Bozbay & Ozen (2008), due to its wide successful usage, ease of use and simplicity of measurement.

The main goal of this study is to evaluate the Greek image as a tourist destination among Moldovan consumers. The goal is split into four objectives:

1. Evaluate the Greek image dimensions as a tourist destination;
2. Measure Moldovans' intention to visit Greece;
3. Identify significant relationships between:
 - a. the destination image dimensions and intention to visit Greece;
 - b. demographic factors and intention to visit Greece.
4. Identify significant differences in perceptions between the Moldovans who have already visited Greece and the Moldovans who have never visited Greece.

The study uses Bozbay & Ozen (2008) model (see Figure 2). Thus, the following dimensions are evaluated: (1) environmental beauty and convenience, (2) country's citizens, (3) place and architectural structure, (4) shopping and tourist accommodation and (5) similarity of the local culture and cuisine with the Moldovan one.



Figure 2: The Conceptual Model Used
Source: Adapted based on Bozbay & Ozen (2008)

3. Methodology

For attaining the goal, a self-administered questionnaire was delivered both online and printed. The empirical

study was conducted in the capital of Moldova in February-May 2016. The population of this research study is Moldovan citizens who have an interest in travel and tourism activities. The respondents were asked to express their opinion as regards the image of Greece as a tourism destination. Thus, using 27 Likert statements, the respondents assessed their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement. The level of agreement was measured on a seven point Likert scale, where (7) represents absolute agreement and (1) – absolute disagreement. Similarly, their intention to visit Greece was measured using three seven-point Likert statements. Additionally, the questionnaire included a section that asked for the respondents' demographic profile, i.e. age, gender, monthly income and occupation. The findings are based upon a sample of 139 respondents.

4. Results and Discussion

The collected data were statistically analysed using SPSS 17. First, the demographic profile of the respondents was analysed.

As shown in Table 2, young people, aged 18-25 is the largest group of respondents, representing 60.4% of the total respondents. Then, one third of the respondents belong to the second age group of 26-35 years. Hence, together, these two young age groups have a cumulative percent of 95%, which shows that basically young people are interested in travel and tourism activities.

Table 2: Descriptive data for the study sample

MONTHLY INCOME	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative Percent</i>
Below 1001 MDL*	38	27.3	27.3
1001-3000 MDL	29	20.9	48.2
3001-6000 MDL	37	26.6	74.8
6001-9000 MDL	14	10.1	84.9
Above 9000 MDL	21	15.1	100.0
Total	139	100.0	
AGE GROUP	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative Percent</i>
18-25	84	60.4	60.4
26-35	48	34.5	95.0
36-45	4	2.9	97.8
46-55	3	2.2	100.0
Total	139	100.0	
GENDER	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative Percent</i>
Male	40	28.8	28.8
Female	99	71.2	100.0
Total	139	100.0	
OCCUPATION	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Cumulative Percent</i>
Student	65	46.8	46.8
Employed	53	38.1	84.9
Self-employed	13	9.4	94.2
Unemployed	1	.7	95.0
Housewife	1	.7	95.7
Another	6	4.3	100.0
Total	139	100.0	

Note: MDL is the currency of Moldova (leu).

Furthermore, as regards gender, the majority of the respondents are females, representing 71%. It appears that women have higher interest in travelling and tourism activities in Greece. Monthly income of the respondents was almost evenly distributed, although the largest group of respondents belongs in the lowest income group, while the two smallest groups of respondents belong in the higher income groups. Finally, as regards occupation, the first rank is occupied by the students, with approximately 47%; afterwards follow by those that are employed - with 38% - and the self-employed at 9%.

Table 3: Factor Analysis Results of all the Variables

Attributes	Factor Loading	Communality
Factor 1 – Place & Architectural Structure		
X1 - There are many interesting places in Greece	.858	.736
X2 - There are lots of natural scenic beauty in Greece	.843	.711
X3 - There are many restful and relaxing places in Greece	.864	.747
X4 - There are lots of places of historical or archaeological interest to visit	.816	.666
X5 - Greece's cities are attractive	.757	.574
Factor 2 – Country's Citizens		
X6 - The local people are courteous	.855	.732
X7 - The local people are hardworking	.799	.639
X8 - The local people are honest	.918	.843
X9 - The local people are friendly	.905	.819
Factor 3 – Environmental Beauty & Convenience		
X10 - Highways and roads are in good condition	.763	.581
X11 - Greece has well-developed transport system	.805	.648
X12 - It is easy to get good service in restaurants and hotels in Greece	.779	.607
X13 - There are many gardens and parks in Greece	.818	.669
X14 - Greece is clean and green	.795	.632

Further, as regards reliability or internal consistency, it was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. It was run for six question sets, as in factor analysis. The results are summarised in Table 4. The lowest accepted Cronbach's alpha was 0.700. For the majority of the question sets, the results pointed out a good level of internal consistency. However, as regards the Intention to visit Greece items grouping, the item "*I plan to visit Greece this year*" was removed; consequently, the Cronbach's alpha for this variable increased from 0.704 to 0.790.

Table 4: Cronbach's Alpha Results

After completing the data requirements steps, i.e. validity and reliability tests, the actual analysis was performed. The answers from the question sets were averaged for each survey, in order to get a general score for every variable.

Objective 1

The descriptive statistics results for the five Greek image dimensions are detailed in Table 5; these statistics

Before undertaking the actual analysis, several validity and reliability tests were performed; as regards validity, each set of questions was tested using factor analysis. Taking into consideration the fact that all the questions loaded a factor above 0.650 (see Table 3), while the minimum required is 0.500, it can be concluded that the data matched the theoretical grouping of items into separate variables. The five dimension variables and the intention variable demonstrated an excellent fit, thus confirming the core dimensions of Greece's destination image.

X15 - Greece is an orderly country	.796	.633
X16 - Greece is a progressive country	.836	.700
X17 - Greece is a safe place to visit	.695	.482
X18 - Greece is a politically stable country	.672	.452
Factor 4 – Shopping & Tourist Accommodation		
X19 - Greece is a good place to shop	.811	.658
X20 - Good quality of products are available in Greece	.883	.780
X21 - There are a wide variety of products available in Greece	.878	.771
X22 - Good tourist information is available	.876	.767
X23 - Food is varied and exotic in Greece	.748	.560
X24 - Good tourist facilities and services are available	.852	.681
Factor 5 – Local Culture & Cuisine		
X25 - The lifestyles and customs in Greece are similar to those in my home country	.851	.725
X26 - The food in Greece is similar to ours	.879	.772
X27 - The architectural styles of the buildings are similar to those in my home country	.808	.654
Factor 6 – Intention to visit Greece		
X28 - I plan to visit Greece this year	.698	.487
X29 - My dream is to visit Greece & I intend to do it	.897	.804
X30 - I want to visit Greece	.853	.727

help in completing the first objective of this study, which is to evaluate the Greek image dimensions as a tourist destination. The dimension assessed the highest by Moldovan consumers is Place and Architectural Structure, with a mean score of 6.02. It is no surprise that Moldovans consider Greece as a country with beautiful nature, relaxing places and attractive historical and archaeological places of interest, taking into consideration the fact that Moldova does not have these kinds of natural and historical beauties. This result is confirmed by WTTC (2016) and Nations Online (2016). Moreover, the minimum score for this dimension was 3.40, which is the highest minimum in comparison with the other dimensions, which once more confirms

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha Value
1. Place & Architectural Structure	.884
2. Country's Citizens	.886
3. Environmental Beauty & Convenience	.914
4. Shopping & Tourist Accommodation	.913
5. Local Culture & Cuisine	.801
6. Intention to visit Greece	.704

Moldovans' strong positive perceptions of this dimension

of Greece's image. As shown in Table 6, out of five items that are grouped into this dimension, Greek cities were evaluated the lowest, which explains the fact that this

dimension of the Greek image didn't get the maximum score of 7.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics – The Greek Image Dimensions

	Dimension	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
1	Place_and_Architectural_Structure	139	3.40	7.00	6.0187
2	Shopping_and_Tourist_Accommodation	139	2.17	7.00	5.1631
3	Environmental_Beauty_and_Convenience	139	1.78	7.00	4.6683
4	Country_Citizens	139	2.00	7.00	4.4910
5	Similarity_of_Local_Culture_and_Cuisine	139	1.00	7.00	3.1463
	Valid N (listwise)	139			

The second on the list is Shopping and Tourist Accommodation Dimension, with a mean score of 5.16. On average, Moldovans somewhat agree with the fact that Greece has a variety of good-quality products available, varied and exotic food, that in Greece there are available good tourist facilities, services and tourist

information (see Table 7). The lowest mean score from this grouping was obtained by the item "Greece is a good place to shop", with a mean of 4.53, which shows a neutral towards positive tendency. Hence, the shopping experience of the tourists should be improved.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics – Place and Architectural Structure Items

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Many_interesting_places_in_Greece	139	3.00	7.00	6.1439
Lots_of_natural_scenic_beauty_in_Greece	139	3.00	7.00	6.1295
Many_restful_and_relaxing_places_in_Greece	139	3.00	7.00	6.0216
Lots_of_places_of_historical_or_archaeological_interest	139	3.00	7.00	6.1871
Greek_cities_are_attractive	139	2.00	7.00	5.6115
Valid N (listwise)	139			

Further, Environmental Beauty and Convenience Dimension is placed third, with a mean score of 4.67, which is neutral towards positive. Moldovans somewhat agree with the statements that highways

and roads in Greece are in good conditions, that the transportation system is good, that it is easy to get good service in the restaurants and hotels

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics – Shopping and Tourist Accommodation Items

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Greece_is_a_good_place_to_shop	139	1.00	7.00	4.5252
Good_quality_of_products_are_available_in_Greece	139	2.00	7.00	5.0432
There_are_a_wide_variety_of_products_available	139	2.00	7.00	5.1727
Good_tourist_information_is_available	139	2.00	7.00	5.4029
Food_is_varied_and_exotic_in_Greece	139	2.00	7.00	5.3741
Good_tourist_facilities_and_services_are_available	139	2.00	7.00	5.4604
Valid N (listwise)	139			

. However, the respondents reveal a slightly neutral perception of Greece as an orderly, progressive and safe country to visit. The Moldovan perceptions that Greece is somewhat politically unstable (mean score of 3.27) have

significantly lowered the overall score for this dimension (see Table 8).

Table 8:

Descriptive Statistics – Environmental Beauty and Convenience Items

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Highways_and_roads_are_in_good_condition	139	1.00	7.00	5.1871
Greece_has_a_well_developed_transport_system	139	1.00	7.00	4.9712
It_is_easy_to_get_good_service_in_restaurants_and_hotels	139	2.00	7.00	5.2230
There_are_many_gardens_and_parks	139	2.00	7.00	5.1079
Greece_is_clean_and_green	139	1.00	7.00	4.8993
Greece_is_an_orderly_country	139	1.00	7.00	4.3885
Greece_is_a_progressive_country	139	1.00	7.00	4.2374
Greece_is_a_safe_place_to_visit	139	1.00	7.00	4.7266
Greece_is_a_politically_stable_country	139	1.00	7.00	3.2734
Valid N (listwise)	139			

Country Citizens component is the fourth on the list, with an average score of 4.49. It appears that Moldovans reveal a neutral towards partial agreement with the statement that Greeks are courteous, honest and friendly (see Table 9). The lowest score was obtained by the item that evaluates Greeks' diligence, with an average of 3.91.

Table 9: Descriptive Statistics – Country Citizens Items

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
The_local_people_are_courteous	139	2.00	7.00	4.8633
The_local_people_are_hardworking	139	1.00	7.00	3.9137
The_local_people_are_honest	139	2.00	7.00	4.4604
The_local_people_are_friendly	139	2.00	7.00	4.7266
Valid N (listwise)	139			

Finally, the lowest score was obtained by Similarity of Local Culture and Cuisine Dimension, with a mean of 3.15. As shown in Table 10, Moldovans consider the Greek and Moldovan culture and cuisine as somewhat different, especially the architectural styles of the buildings. However, the difference in culture and cuisine shouldn't be always considered an obstacle in creating a positive image of a tourist destination. On the contrary, it should be one more reason for the Moldovans to have the desire to visit Greece and to explore its different cultural aspects.

Overall, the Greek image as a tourist destination among Moldovan consumers is partially positive. The perceptions of the destination image dimensions were evaluated in the descending order as follows: place and architectural structure, shopping and tourist accommodation, environmental beauty and convenience, country's citizens and similarity of the local culture and cuisine with the Moldovan one.

Table 10: Descriptive Statistics – Similarity of Local Culture and Cuisine Items

Item	N	Min.	Max.	Mean
GR_lifestyles_&_customs_are_similar_to_those_in_MD	139	1.00	7.00	3.5612
The_food_in_Greece_is_similar_to_ours	139	1.00	7.00	3.4317
Architectural_styles_of_the_buildings_are_similar_to_those_in_MD	139	1.00	7.00	2.4460
Valid N (listwise)	139			

Objective 2

The second objective of this research study is to measure Moldovans' intention to visit Greece. As shown in Table 11, Moldovans display relatively high intentions

to visit Greece, with a score of 5.8 out of 7.0. The highest contribution to this overall score was given by the item "I want to visit Greece", with a mean of 6.23. Thus, it appears that the partially-positive Greek image as a

tourist destination among Moldovans has positively influenced the intentions, or at least the desires, of the respondents to visit Greece. Hence, the chosen model is a good one and can be used in future research studies. At the same time, the applicability of the chosen model will also be tested further as part of the third objective of the study, by correlating each of the five tourism destination image dimensions and the demographic factors with the intention to visit Greece, in order to identify significant relationships between the independent and the dependent variables.

If analysed separately, the items of the Intention Variable reveal interesting information. For instance, as illustrated in Figure 3, the distribution of the results “My dream is to visit Greece and I intend to do it” has a negative skewness of -0.928. The data are moderately to highly skewed, showing that the majority of the values are concentrated to the right of the mean. In simpler

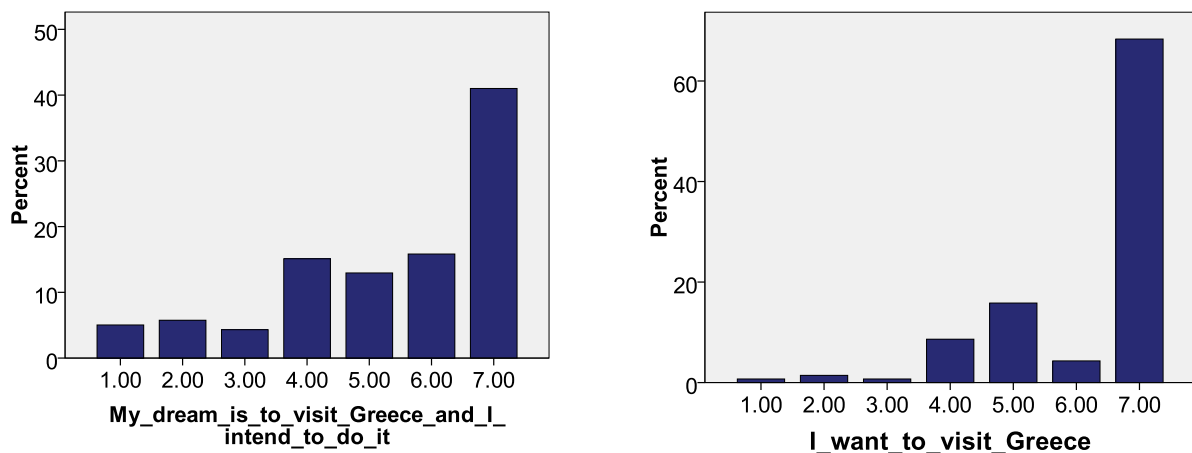
terms, this means that the majority of the respondents have an intention higher than 5.37. Similarly, Moldovans’ desire to visit Greece is very strong, as shown by 72% of the respondents who affirm strong desire to visit Greece, evaluating their wishes with either a 6 or 7. Moreover, the skewness of this distribution is substantial, negative and far from symmetrical of -1.658, which is one more indicator of the Moldovans’ strong desires of visiting Greece.

Obviously, intentions do not always translate into actual behaviour. But, if the optimistic scenario is observed, then Greece has a very high potential of being visited by a significantly large number of Moldovan tourists, proven by the fact that the number of Moldovan tourists in Greece has been constantly increasing, as reported by National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova (2016).

Table 11: Descriptive Statistics – Intention to Visit Greece Variable

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Intention_to_Visit_Greece Variable	139	1.50	7.00	5.8022
1. My_dream_is_to_visit_Greece_and_I_intend_to_do_it	139	1.00	7.00	5.3669
2. I_want_to_visit_Greece	139	1.00	7.00	6.2374
Valid N (listwise)	139			

Figure 3: Frequency Charts for Intention Items



Objective 3

The next objective is the identification of significant relationships between destination image dimensions and intention to visit Greece and then between demographic factors and intention to visit Greece. As shown in Table 12, all the *destination image dimension* variables are significantly and positively correlated with the *intention to*

visit Greece variable. Therefore, this study confirms that destination image plays a strong influence on the tourist behavioural intentions. Similar findings were reported by Bozbay & Ozen (2008), Ghada Abdalla (2007), Lee (2009) and Jeeyoon, Joon Ho & Yu-Kyoum (2014). Hence, this result confirms once more the validity of the selected model.

Table 12: Correlations between the Destination Image Dimensions Variables and Intention to Visit Greece Variable

Independent Variables	Approximate significance value	Correlation value
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Place architectural structure	and	.000	.646**
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Country Citizens	.000	.501**
Environmental beauty and convenience	.000	.641**
Shopping and tourist accommodation	.000	.635**

Similarity of GR culture and cuisine with MD	.032	.182*
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** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Additionally, this research study intends to test if there is any significant relationship between demographic factors and intention to visit Greece. As revealed by Table 13, the significance value for all the relationships was found to be larger than 0.05. Hence, there is no statistically-significant relationship between demographic factors and intention to visit Greece; it appears that gender, age, income and occupation have no impact on the Moldovans' intention to visit Greece.

Table 13: Correlations between the Demographic Factors and Intention to Visit Greece

Independent Variables	Approximate significance value
Gender	.130
Age	.134
Income	.346
Occupation	.415

Objective 4

The final objective of this research study is to identify significant differences in perceptions between those Moldovans having already visited Greece and those that have never visited Greece. The results show no significant difference in perceptions of the Greek image dimensions between these two groups (see the mean score for each dimension by previous experience in Table 14). It seems that Moldovans, no matter if they visited Greece or not, perceive the Greek image dimensions similarly. Only one dimension is an exception – environmental beauty and convenience (with a p value of 0.025), showing that those who haven't visited Greece evaluate this dimension as higher than those who visited Greece.

Also, there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups (Moldovans who visited Greece and those who didn't visit Greece) as regards their intentions to visit Greece, with a p value of 0.002. The Moldovans who haven't visited Greece show a higher intention to visit Greece than those who have already visited Greece. Obviously, this finding is explained by the fact that the consumers who have already visited Greece have satisfied their interest in Greece and their need to explore Greece and thus, they might have a higher intention to visit other countries. However, even those who visited Greece still intend to visit it again, confirmed by the mean score of 5.34.

Table 14: Group Statistics – Image Dimensions Evaluations according to Previous Experience

	Previous Experience	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Place and Architectural Structure	Yes	55	5.9491	.98147	.13234
	No	84	6.0643	.85878	.09370
Country Citizens	Yes	55	4.4045	1.20136	.16199
	No	84	4.5476	1.11903	.12210
Environmental Beauty and Convenience	Yes	55	4.4242	.99245	.13382
	No	84	4.8280	1.04750	.11429
Shopping and Tourist Accommodation	Yes	55	5.0485	1.12248	.15135
	No	84	5.2381	1.08670	.11857
Similarity of Local Culture and Cuisine	Yes	55	3.0970	1.25490	.16921
	No	84	3.1786	1.28262	.13994
Intention to Visit Greece	Yes	55	5.3364	1.62462	.21906
	No	84	6.1071	1.20259	.13121

5. Conclusion

Tourism has become one of the largest economic sectors in the world and its significant contribution to regional and national economic development has been widely acknowledged. Hence, tourism destination marketers are forced to build effective marketing

strategies, in order to face the tough competition in attracting tourists. In this context, destination image is the key concept, which must be properly handled. It is an essential determinant of motivation to visit a place.

As Greece is one of the favourite destinations of international travellers, its image as a tourist destination

is crucial to the success of Greek tourism. Due to the fact that the number of Moldovan tourists in Greece has been constantly increasing, it is essential that Greek marketers ensure that Greece's image as a tourism destination is perceived as positive in the minds of the Moldovan tourists, since the image influences their behavioural intentions.

Therefore, this research study had the goal to evaluate Greece's image as a tourist destination among Moldovan consumers. The study used Bozday & Ozen (2008) model, which considers that destination image has five dimensions: (1) environmental beauty and convenience, (2) country's citizens, (3) place and architectural structure, (4) shopping and tourist accommodation and (5) similarity of the local culture and cuisine.

In this context, the investigation used structured measurement techniques. Overall, 139 usable and complete questionnaires were collected. The empirical study was conducted in the capital of the Republic of Moldova in February-May 2016 among Moldovan citizens interested in tourism activities. It was noted that the majority of the respondents were young people (95%), due to their high interest in travel and tourism.

Before undertaking the actual analysis, the researcher performed the validity and reliability tests, in order to ensure the data requirements. The research study was split into four small objectives.

The first objective was to evaluate each of the five Greek image dimensions. Taken as a whole, the Greek image as a tourist destination among Moldovan consumers was found to be partially positive. The perceptions of the destination image dimensions were evaluated in the descending order of: (1) place and architectural structure, (2) shopping and tourist accommodation, (3) environmental beauty and convenience, (4) country's citizens and (5) similarity of the local culture and cuisine with the Moldovan one.

The second objective was to measure Moldovans' intention to visit Greece. It was found that Moldovans are highly interested in visiting Greece. Hence, as stated by the model used, the partially-positive image of the Greek destination influenced positively the intentions of Moldovans to visit Greece.

Afterwards, the study investigated significant relationships between the dependent variable, i.e. intention to visit Greece and the independent variables, more specifically, destination image dimensions and demographic factors. As regards demographic factors, this investigation found no significant relationship between intention to visit Greece and demographic variables. However, it was found that all the destination image dimensions are significantly and positively correlated with the intention to visit Greece. Thus, this study was able to confirm that destination image plays a strong influence on the tourist behavioural intentions. Hence, these findings confirm that the choice of the used model was a good one.

The final objective was to identify significant differences in perceptions between Moldovans that had already visited Greece and those that had never visited Greece. The results showed no significant difference in perceptions of the Greek image dimensions, except environmental beauty and convenience dimension. As regards intention to visit Greece, it appears that previous experience of visiting Greece had a significant impact on

the intentions to visit Greece, i.e. the Moldovans who hadn't visited Greece showed a higher intention to visit Greece than those that had already visited Greece.

Recommendations

This study offers valuable information, both for academics and practitioners in setting the right marketing strategies for attracting Moldovan tourists in Greece. As regards theoretical implications, this is the first study that evaluates the Greek destination image among Moldovan consumers. Also, the model used in this study could be used in evaluating the destination image of other countries. Concerning managerial implications, Greek destination marketers should put significant efforts into creating and enhancing a positive destination image and into overcoming an unfavourable destination image among Moldovans. Based upon the findings, managerial implications are discussed, providing suggestions to tourism marketers.

First of all, based on the demographic profile of the respondents of this study, it is recommended that the tourism marketers create different touristic packages with reference to pricing, as Moldovans showing interest in travel and tourism activities come from all income groups. Second, focus should be put on the young people, especially on the students, as they show high interests in travel and tourism activities.

Furthermore, due to the fact that Place and Architectural Structure Dimension is evaluated the highest, marketers must use it in advertising in a heavy manner, by mentioning in the promotional campaigns the beautiful nature, relaxing places and attractive historical and archaeological places of interest from Greece. However, significant efforts must be put in improving the image of the Greek cities, as their image among Moldovans is partially-positive. How? Greek local city authorities should work on improving the cities' cleanliness, beauty, design, etc.

Another recommendation is suggested regarding Shopping and Tourist Accommodation Dimension. The shopping experience of the tourists must be improved by making sure that the products sold are of good quality and diverse. In addition, stores should be open longer hours, also during the weekends and during several holidays, as these are the days when the tourist inflows in Greece are the highest.

As regards Environmental Beauty and Convenience Dimension, the Greek media and the Moldovan tourism agencies should spread more positive information about the Greek political environment, safety and progress, as it affects significantly the Greek destination image. Also, the advertisements should include the message that Greece is an orderly, progressive, safe and politically-stable country.

Furthermore, as infrastructure is an essential element in the tourism development, Greeks must pay more attention to their transportation systems. For instance, the information about public transportation should be more accessible, simpler and more comprehensible for tourists. Also, vis-à-vis international travel to Greece, flights Moldova-Greece should be operated also towards Thessaloniki, not only towards Athens, as most Moldovans go for vacation in Khalkidhiki peninsula,

which is close to Thessaloniki. Also, flights should be offered at lower prices.

Further, it appears that Moldovans do not consider Greece as very clean and green. Hence, the local authorities and population must spread a culture of cleanliness for public places, as cleanliness is a sign of aesthetics and beauty. Cleanliness should be a fundamental duty of every Greek citizen.

Additionally, the findings show that Greek citizens are slightly perceived by the Moldovans as courteous, honest, friendly and hardworking. Thus, in order to change their perception, an appropriate strategy would be the wide use of small video advertisements showing Greek citizens as simple, friendly and hardworking people.

In the last position, destination image dimensions rank the similarity of the Greek and Moldovan cultures and cuisine. It appears that even though the two countries have different cultures and cuisines, Moldovans have a great interest in visiting Greece, perhaps because of this significant difference in the aspects discussed above. A recommendation to the marketers in this sense is to emphasize the variety and uniqueness of the Greek food, culture, lifestyle, customs and architectural styles of the buildings in marketing campaigns.

With reference to suggestions based on intentions, due to the Moldovans' high intention to visit Greece, the tour operators should make the availability of touristic packages wider to different consumers, belonging from different age, gender, income or occupation segments. Information on the possibility to visit Greece should be spread more intensely through all the distribution and advertising channels possible.

Also, due to the fact that Moldovans that have already visited Greece show high intentions to repeat their behaviour, thus to become loyal customers, the resorts and the tourism agencies should offer additional services to the return customers, e.g. a free mini-cruise, a free trip

to a destination in the area, etc. Furthermore, due to the fact that Moldovans who haven't visited Greece evaluate environmental beauty and convenience as higher than those who have visited Greece, marketers should put emphasis in the advertisements on the environmental beauty of Greece and its convenience, thus increasing the potential to enhance the Moldovan customer base. Finally, in order to be more competitive on the Moldovan market, Greek destination marketers should concentrate their efforts on all the destination image dimensions, due to the fact that all of them significantly influence the Moldovans' intentions to visit Greece, independent of their past experience.

As with other research studies, this study has some limitations. Since it was undertaken only in the capital of the Republic of Moldova and because most respondents are young and female, the findings of this investigation do not absolutely reflect the perceptions of all Moldovans. Additionally, because the number of respondents is small, it is not representative of the whole Moldovan population. Hence, the results might not be very realistic and accurate. Beyond these limitations, this study provides insightful theoretical implications and practical recommendations in creating marketing strategies that would help in managing and improving Greece's destination image among Moldovan tourists.

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