

## The Role of Authenticity, Source Credibility, and Involvement in the formation of Destination Image on Social Media Platforms

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# **The Role of Authenticity, Source Credibility, and Involvement in the formation of Destination Image on Social Media Platforms**

## **1. Introduction**

For decades, one of the most popular concepts in tourism literature has been the destination image (DI), which has been found to influence tourists' consumption behavior (Beerli and Martín, 2004). As travel decisions can be complicated and risky, consumers engage in extensive information searches, considering multiple aspects of holiday places as they decide on a destination (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005; W.-K. Tan & Wu, 2016).

In this context, online information sources significantly influence tourists' knowledge and decisions (Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004; K. MacKay & Vogt, 2012; Pereira, Salgueiro, & Rita, 2016; W. K. Tan & Wu, 2016) and have made the DI development a more critical process (Hunter, 2016). Since tourism is an 'information-intensive industry' (Yoo and Gretzel, 2016), social media have become significantly relevant (Wang, Yu, and Fesenmaier, 2002; Hays, Page and Buhalis, 2013). While travelers share their perceptions and experiences on social media sites, DMOs (destination management organizations) brand and promote their particular destinations on the ubiquitous internet platforms to form distinct DIs (Luna-Nevarez and Hyman, 2012; Hays, Page and Buhalis, 2013; Molinillo, Liébana-Cabanillas, Anaya-Sánchez, & Buhalis, 2018). However, there has been a gap in the literature. Although most studies investigate online sources and DI representation (Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Tang, Choi, Morrison, & Lehto, 2009), there has been little research about the factors influencing the process of developing a DI as well as their impact on intention to visit, especially in the context of social media platforms (Kladou & Mavragani, 2015; Molinillo et al., 2018).

There are two critical areas where this study attempts to make an original contribution. Firstly, it attempts to address the gap in tourism literature by incorporating the context of social media platforms simultaneously with the concepts of source credibility, authenticity, involvement, intention to visit, and destination image studies. Secondly, it sets out to analyze the interrelationships between the attributes of authenticity, involvement, source credibility, DI, and intention to visit an island destination in the context of social media platforms integrated within the framework. This leads to two research questions-

RQ1: To what extent social-media influence the formation of the online destination image of the tourists?

RQ2: Do tourists' involvement with the social media site along with the authenticity and credibility of the site have any significant impact on the destination image and intention to visit?

## **2. Literature review and hypotheses development**

### **2.1 The concept of Authenticity**

The concept of authenticity plays a crucial role in the formation of online DI as tourists obtain information from online sources to stimulate the trip-planning process and to make informed decisions about destinations (Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Therefore, the quality of information influences the individual's rational judgment by reinforcing and modifying extant beliefs (Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006). Perception of authenticity is considered to be an antecedent of tourists' intentions to visit a destination (Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003) as well as tourists' destination image (Frost, 2006; Naoi, 2004).

This leads to two hypotheses:

**H1:** Authenticity has a direct and positive effect on the intention to visit.

**H2:** Authenticity has a direct and positive effect on the online DI.

Since a significant number of studies have validated the two-dimensional concept of DI (Hallmann, Zehrer, & Müller, 2015; Molinillo et al., 2018; Smith, Li, Pan, Witte, & Doherty, 2015; Zhang, Fu, Cai, & Lu, 2014), it can also be hypothesized that:

**H3:** Authenticity has a direct and positive effect on the cognitive image.

**H4:** Authenticity has a direct and positive effect on the affective image.

### **2.2 The concept of Involvement**

Involvement is the state of motivation and desire towards an activity or associated item (Gursoy & Gavcar, 2003), and it is a person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests (K. J. MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997). Studies argue that the level of involvement can vary based on the activities, products, and individual characteristics (Gursoy & Gavcar, 2003; Prayag & Ryan, 2011), and this applies to tourists' behavior and destination selection (Molinillo et al., 2018). Involved tourists are likely to make a more significant cognitive effort than the lesser involved ones and will search for more information that will

satisfy their cognitive and affective needs. Hence, involvement with the website positively affects the cognitive and affective image, and ultimately the overall image.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses were formulated:

**H5:** High levels of involvement with the website have a positive impact on the cognitive image.

**H6:** High levels of involvement with the website have a positive impact on the affective image.

### **2.3 The concept of Destination Source Credibility**

Source credibility tends to affect tourists' decision of how much weight should be given to the information within a source; destination source credibility often considered as a critical antecedent in the formation of social media-based DI (Jimmy Xie et al., 2011).

Roostika and Muafi (2014) have found that source credibility is critical in determining the extent to which a tourist perceives the claims made about a tourism destination to be truthful and believable. This adds substance to earlier claims that higher destination source credibility can increase tourists' positive perceptions regarding DI (Erdem & Swait, 2004) and that destination source credibility plays an essential role in building tourists' feelings and attitudes toward destinations (Roostika & Muafi, 2014).

Since the concept of DI has been operationalized as consisting of a cognitive component that captures knowledge and beliefs about a destination's attributes and an affective component that describes feelings toward a destination, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H7:** Destination source credibility is positively related to the cognitive image.

**H8:** Destination source credibility is positively related to the affective image.

### **2.4 Online Destination image**

The destination image is defined as the subjective interpretation of reality made by tourists ((Bigné, Sánchez & Sánchez, 2001; Kim & Richardson, 2003). DI is crucial for both of those who have visited and those who have not yet visited a particular place.

The importance of the internet as an image formation agent is being increasingly recognized (Choi et al., 2007; Djordjevic, 2013; Frías, Rodríguez, Alberto Castañeda, Sabiote, & Buhalis, 2012; Govers, Go, & Kumar, 2007; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). The online representation of a

destination's image ('online DI') is the online representation of the collective beliefs, knowledge, ideas, feelings, and overall impressions of a destination. There are multiple representations of a specific destination on different platforms on the internet: official website, Facebook page, online travel groups, YouTube, travel agents, online travel magazines, and others. The images presented by different platforms may differ according to what content and information are available (Frías et al., 2012; Jeong, Holland, Jun, & Gibson, 2012; Llodra-Riera, Martínez-Ruiz, Jiménez-Zarco, & Izquierdo-Yusta, 2015). Tourists' dependence on online sources for information has added a new slant to the online DI formation process: the type and amount of information, images, eWOM, etc. on an online platform can affect the ultimate DI (Gartner, 1994; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Prebensen, 2007)

#### **2.4.1 Cognitive Image**

The cognitive destination image refers to an individual's knowledge and beliefs about a destination (Beerli & Martín, 2004a). Cognitive component constitutes knowledge, awareness, or cognition: what someone knows about a destination. Researchers suggest that cognitive image has a positive impact on affective image and the affective responses are formed as a function of the cognitive responses (Gartner, 1994; Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015a; W.-K. Tan & Wu, 2016; Wang & Hsu, 2010). The cognitive assessment of destination image was analyzed in many studies (San Martín and Rodríguez del Bosque, 2008; Fakeye and Crompton, 1991).

#### **2.4.2 Affective image**

The affective component represents the feelings or emotional responses about this destination or experience (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). The affective component refers to the evaluation stage, concerning the emotions that the individual associated with the place of visit (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Gartner, 1994; Lijia, 2015). However, destination image, being a multi-dimensional phenomenon, goes beyond beliefs and knowledge of the destination (cognitive image) and includes feelings and emotions that the destination may evoke (e.g., pleasure, excitement).

#### **2.4.3 Online Destination image formation process and cognitive and affective images**

Although some studies (e.g., Tasci, Gartner and Tamer Cavusgil, 2007) follow Gartner's (1994) proposition that DI is the combination of three distinctly different but hierarchically interrelated

components (cognitive, affective, and conative images), the majority of studies support a two-dimensional concept: cognitive image and affective image ( Hallmann, Zehrer and Müller, 2015; Mano and Costa, 2015; Smith *et al.*, 2015).

Researchers suggest that a cognitive image has a positive impact on an affective image in that affective responses are emotional responses to cognitive knowledge of a destination (Kim and Stepchenkova, 2015b; W. K. Tan and Wu, 2016). In other words, what is in tourists' heads ultimately leads to what will be in their hearts. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were formulated:

**H9:** A favorable cognitive image has a positive impact on the affective image.

Also, the combination of these two components of the image gives rise to an overall DI that refers to the positive or negative evaluation of the destination (Stylidis, Shani, & Belhassen, 2017). Accordingly, the following hypotheses were formulated:

**H10:** A favorable cognitive image has a positive impact on the online DI.

**H11:** A favorable affective image has a positive impact on the online DI

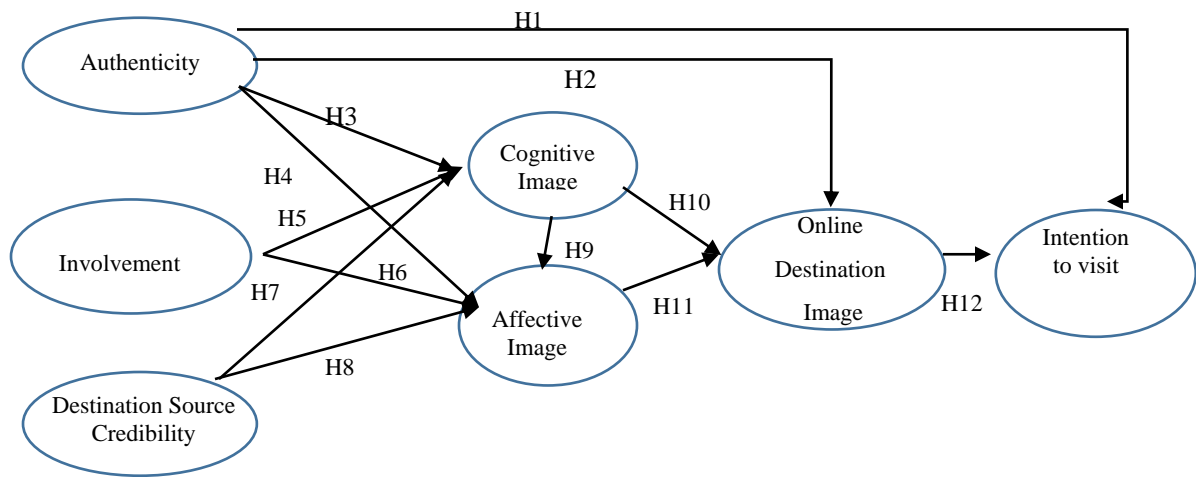
### **2.5 The effect of online destination image on the intention to visit**

Destination image is the reflection of that destination in tourists' minds; the choice of a destination and the intention to visit will depend on how the destination is positioned in tourists' minds and hearts. Destination image determines tourists' behavior in all the phases: pre-visit, during the visit, and post-visit (Josiassen, Assaf, Woo, & Kock, 2016; Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015b; W. K. Tan & Wu, 2016). A destination with a positive image is more likely to be selected, whereas a negative image can lead a destination to be eliminated (W.-K. Tan & Wu, 2016).

**H12:** A favorable online DI has a direct and positive impact on the tourist's intention to visit.

### **3. Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework is shown in Fig 1. The model graphically illustrates the relationships proposed in the twelve hypotheses.



**Figure 1:** Conceptual framework adapted and modified from DMO online platforms: Image and intention to visit (Molinillo et al., 2018)

#### 4. Methodology

The mixed-method approach was adopted in this context, as qualitative and quantitative findings together increase the accuracy, quality, and reliability of the data (Babbie, 2004). The context was St Martin's Island, located northeast of the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh, and one of the most popular tourist destinations in Bangladesh (3500 visitors daily in the peak season (Fakir & Fakir, 2017)).

##### 4.1 Sample and research design

First, a qualitative study was conducted on a convenience sample of 50 respondents who had either already visited or were intending to visit the destination. This qualitative study identified the online sources tourists typically prefer for travel-related inquiries and information as well as to improve the composition of some of the questions in the quantitative questionnaire. Data were collected by one-on-one interviews (face-to-face and telephone). The average length of the interview took 20 minutes. Open-ended questions were asked based on factors involved in decision making regarding their choice of a holiday destination, and responses were analyzed

using narrative analysis method. A semi-structured interview method was chosen to encourage open discussion. The primary purpose of conducting this preliminary qualitative study was to i) gain an understanding of how and why specific social media platforms were chosen and preferred for travel-related information and ii) to learn which online factors play a dominant role in decision-making and image building. The three most popular online sources were found to be Facebook (39.95% or 40%), travel blog sites (30.33% or 30), and YouTube (29.71% or 30%) dominant. This technique not only extracted core insights from the spoken words of the respondents but also contributed to the quantitative study: (i) it facilitated quantitative survey's structure (ii) it helped identify the selection of basic constructs, and (iii) it helped to analyze and explain quantitative conclusions by indicating the perceptions and beliefs of the larger sample.

For the quantitative part of the study, the convenience sampling method was chosen. 320 questionnaires were personally distributed. The specific characteristics of the quantitative sample were: (1) They intend to visit the site but have not visited yet. The participants were screened to account for a prior visit to the destination, and those who already had visited were excluded due to the possibility of confirmation bias in their responses. (2) They all have accounts in popular social media sites and are regular users of them (Facebook, YouTube) (3) They all actively engage in discussions and seek for information regarding traveling in the social media via online posts, vlogs, blogs, and articles. After checking for quality, 310 complete responses were used for quantitative analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with the help of Smart PLS 3 software.

Before launching the final questionnaire, a pre-test was conducted involving 15 university students in order to determine the time and quality of the question composition. Minor changes were made to the wording of the survey based on the pretest.



## **4.2 Measurement of exogenous and endogenous constructs**

The research had three exogenous constructs (involvement, source credibility, and authenticity) and four endogenous constructs (Online DI, cognitive image, affective image, and intention to visit). A structured, five-point Likert-scale questionnaire was developed to assess the constructs. All of the variables were measured using scales and attributes adapted from previous studies, including (Ram, Björk, & Weidenfeld, 2016; Styliadis et al., 2017; Veasna, Wu, & Huang, 2013). For example, involvement included questions such as: how much attention did you pay to the website information? How much did you concentrate on the website information? Furthermore, it was measured using a 5-point, five-item Likert scale (None/Not at all...a lot) (Andrews, Durvasula and Akhter, 1990; Muehling, Laczniak, and Craig Andrews, 1993; Frías, Rodríguez and Castañeda, 2008). Details on the sources where each of these constructs were adapted from are provided in a table in the Appendix section.

## **5. Results**

The study used structural equation modeling (SEM) for analyzing quantitative data with the help of Smart PLS3 software. This technique can run multivariate path analysis for the evaluation of complex models and is useful when the sample size is small (F. Hair Jr, Sarstedt, Hopkins, & G. Kuppelwieser, 2014; Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Henseler, 2010).

### **5.1 Assessment of the measurement model: validity and reliability**

The measurement model was developed to test the relationship between the latent variables and their indicators. To assess the measurement model, it was necessary to evaluate its reliability and validity (Bajpai & Bajpai, 2014; Malhotra & Dash, 2013).

Individual reliability of items is evaluated by examining simple correlations between the indicators and their respective variables. According to Hair et al. (2014), factor loading estimates should be higher than 0.5, and ideally, 0.7 or higher. All the reliability indicators met the factor loading threshold of 0.5, and five out of seven indicators met the ideal threshold of 0.7. As loading estimates are not obliged to be higher than 0.7 (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011), the measurement model was reliable. Thus, the model passed the reliability tests.

The variable's reliability allows us to evaluate the accuracy of the items. Convergent validity was

tested with the help of three statistical measurements: Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE). The values are considered to be acceptable when AVE is more significant than 0.5, CR is greater than 0.7, and Cronbach's alpha is above 0.8 (Fornell&Larcker, 1981; Hair, Ringle&Sarstedt, 2011). All the constructs had acceptable CR and AVE. The constructs cognitive image, online destination image, and authenticity had slightly lower Cronbach's Alpha value than recommended; however, a lower alpha "is not likely to point to a validity issue" (Hamari, Sjöklint&Ukkonen, 2015), especially as the values of the other validity measures were satisfactory. The CR and AVE of all the constructs met the critical values, indicating that the measurement model had good convergent validity.

Discriminant validity analysis (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988), was conducted to reconfirm the validity of the model, ensuring that the square roots of the constructs were higher; therefore, the results are considered valid (Fornell&Larcker, 1981). (Complete results can be obtained from the author if required)

## **5.2 Assessment of Structural Model**

The bootstrapping method has been used to test the significance of the path coefficients and the loadings of the structural model (Ali, Kim, & Ryu, 2016; F. Hair Jr et al., 2014).

First, the  $R^2$  of each of the constructs was analyzed, and all the values in the proposed model (AI:0.380; CI:0.244; DI:0.641; ITV:0.267) are above the limit 0.1 (Falk and Miller, 1992). The standardized regression path weights (Table 1) show that eight of the twelve hypotheses were supported.

Also, the size of the effect ( $f^2$ ) verified the suitability of the proposed model. Values of  $f^2$  from 0.02 to 0.15, 0.15 to 0.35, and 0.35 or higher indicate that an exogenous latent variable has a small, medium, and substantial impact on an endogenous latent variable (Chin, 1998; Monecke and Leisch, 2012). The model shows a near-zero impact of involvement on affective images ( $f^2=0.001$ ) and cognitive images ( $f^2=0.002$ ) and a minimal impact of authenticity on affective and cognitive images. On the other hand, both affective images ( $f^2=0.306$ ) and cognitive images ( $f^2=0.387$ ) have substantial impact on online DI. Online DI has a medium impact on the intention to visit, and source credibility has an impact on both affective image and cognitive image.

Lastly, the standardized root means square residual (SRMR) values under 0.08 are considered acceptable—the proposed model has a value of 0.078.

### 5.3 Results of the hypothesis tests

A total of twelve hypotheses were tested in this study. The results supported eight hypotheses.

**Table 1: Results of hypotheses tests**

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path Coefficient	P-value	T-value	Support
H1	Authenticity → Online Destination image	0.127	0.026	2.238	Supported
H2	Authenticity → Intention to visit	0.143	0.030	2.178	Supported
H3	Authenticity → Cognitive Image	0.137	0.133	1.504	Not supported
H4	Authenticity → Affective Image	0.115	0.124	1.539	Not Supported
H5	Involvement → Cognitive Image	-0.048	0.535	0.621	Not supported
H6	Involvement → Affective Image	0.031	0.613	0.506	Not supported
H7	Destination Source Credibility → Cognitive Image	0.409	0.000	4.629	Supported
H8	Destination Source Credibility → Affective Image	0.320	0.000	3.678	Supported
H9	Cognitive Image → Affective Image	0.288	0.000	4.180	Supported
H10	Cognitive Image → Online Destination Image	0.439	0.000	7.679	Supported
H11	Affective Image → Online Destination Image	0.405	0.000	7.465	Supported
H12	Online Destination Image → Intention to visit	0.432	0.000	6.722	Supported

## 6. Discussions and conclusions

The findings of this study provide an exceptional understanding of the online destination image in the context of the internet. The conceptual model identified the factors influencing the formation of online destination image and the intention of the tourists to visit that destination in the context of online social media platforms for Saint Martin's Island, Bangladesh. The results suggest that destination source credibility has a significant effect on both cognitive and affective Image. Similarly, both cognitive and affective image strongly influences the online destination image. Correspondingly, the destination image is strongly and positively related to the intention to visit. In contrast to prior findings, no evidence of the impact of authenticity and involvement on both cognitive and affective images was found.

The study shades light on how the concept of authenticity is relevant in forming online DI in the context of social media platforms. Contrary to expectations, this study failed to find any significant relationship between cognitive image and authenticity or affective image and authenticity. Despite previous studies suggesting the opposite, it seems possible that these results are due to the protean nature of the internet as a source of information (Doyle and Hammond, 2006). Chhabra(2005) suggested that authenticity is not a tangible element but rather a judgment of value placed on the site or product by those who observe it. Online communities mean different things to different people. Skeptical tourists might consider the unstable nature of the internet as a factor while processing the information obtained from it (Preece, Maloney-krichmar and Abras, 2003). As one respondent put it:

*"The imagery and information about Saint Martin's Island or any other tourist spot I find on the social media platforms are either retouched or enhanced most of the time. The dramatically blue ocean and white sands are definitely a visual delight, but the reality might be different. Unless and until I am personally acquainted with the post provider or the source is peer-confirmed, there is always doubt about the authenticity of the information"– (Anonymous, 25, Student).*

Hypothesis posited that high levels of involvement with the website have a positive impact on both the cognitive and affective images. A non-significant value was obtained in both cases, thus indicating that tourists' involvement with online social media platforms does not have any significant impact on the development of the cognitive and affective image. This contradicts most studies in the literature, which have shown that tourists' degree of involvement provided a substantial influence on tourists' travel intentions and destination image (Molinillo et al., 2018). There were also studies arguing that the level of involvement can vary based on the activities, products, and individual characteristics (Gursoy and Gavcar, 2003; Prayag and Ryan, 2012). As Zaichkowsky (1985, p. 342) defined involvement as: "A person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values and interests," a possible explanation for this result might be that, in context of online social media platforms, involvement is comparatively not as relevant as it supposed to be in developing destination image. As one respondent said:

*"I am not a heavy user of social media. I use them occasionally to connect and share experiences with my friends and peers as well as for mere entertainment purposes. When it comes to selecting a destination for my next vacation trip, I prefer not to rely on the information solely I get from social media platforms" – (Anonymous, 35, Job Holder).*

The study elucidated the source credibility as a critical antecedent in the formation of social media-based development of DI, in other words, online DI. The findings are in sync with prior studies (Veasna, W.-Y. Wu and Huang, 2013) that demonstrated the effect of destination source credibility on destination image. The study findings indicate that higher source credibility of the social media platforms directly influences the tourists' cognitive and affective image. Therefore, it can be concluded that the credibility of information sources plays a fundamental role in predicting tourist behavior.

The findings of this study corroborate the hypotheses and are in line with the finding of earlier studies suggesting that cognitive and affective images are critical antecedents of the destination image. The cognitive component, specifically, exerts a significant impact on DI and simultaneously acts as an antecedent of the affective component (Kim and Stepchenkova, 2015b; W.-K. Tan and Wu, 2016; Molinillo et al., 2018). And finally, posits that preferable online DI affects intention to visit. The study found out a significant relationship with the perceived online

destination image with the tourists' intention to visit supporting the previous literature (Molinillo et al., 2018).

### **6.1 Implications and future research directions**

This study also incorporated the Cognitive-Affective-Conative(CAC) Model of destination image(Agapito, Oom do Valle & da Costa Mendes, 2013).Apart from research conducted by S. Molinillo et al. (2018), there is also a general lack of empirical investigation to understand the relationship between tourists' involvement and the cognitive, affective image dimensions of DI on the social media platforms. Therefore, this study also aimed to contribute to the literature in this regard. This research extended the model by incorporating and measuring the role of two additional constructs: destination source credibility and authenticity in the formation of DI on Social Media platforms. The results of this study can assist destination marketers in developing a positive destination image through online platforms and influencing tourists' intention to visit that destination.

Although the study offers insights on the combinatory mechanism of the seven constructs, the findings of this report are subject to at least three limitations: i) the boundaries of convenience sampling; ii) budgetary restrictions; iii) Data were collected from one site in Bangladesh. Further research could be undertaken for a better understanding of the influence of involvement under the context of social media platforms since the findings of this study are not consistent with prior research on the impact of the involvement on DI and intention to visit. To obtain a greater understanding of the precise mechanism of DI in the social media context, further studies can include the concept of e-WOM and perceived risk in the structural framework. Also, the study incorporates a multitude of objectives for critical analysis, which could be operationalized into a continuous string of future studies to achieve a more profound knowledge of each construct in the supposed context.

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## Appendix

<b>Variables and its measures:</b>		
<b>Variables</b>	<b>Type of Scale</b>	<b>Reference:</b>
Authenticity	5-point scale from low to high	Y. Ram et al. / <i>Tourism Management</i> 52 (2016) 110- 122 D. Styliadis et al. / <i>Tourism management</i> 58 (2017) 184-195
Involvement	5-point scale from low to high	S. Molinillo et al. 2018
Destination Source Credibility	5-point Likert measurement scale.	S.Veasna et al. / <i>Tourism Management</i> 36 (2013) 511-526
Cognitive Image	5-point semantic differential scale	Beerli& Martin, 2004; Chi & Qu, 2008; Baloglu&McCleary, 1999; Wang & Hsu, 2010; Chen & Phou, 2013 P. Ramseook-Munhurrun et al., / <i>Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences</i> 175 (2015) 252 - 259
Affective Image	5-point semantic differential scale	Hosany et al., 2006; Lin et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2015
Destination Image	5-point scale from worst to best	S.Veasna et al. / <i>Tourism Management</i> 36 (2013) 511-526 Lin et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2015.
Intention to visit	5-Point scale from highest disagreement level to highest agreement	Van Der Veen & Song, 2014, Alvarez & Campo, 2014

