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Destination image co-creation in times of sustained crisis

Abstract

Customer co-creation feeds from customer engagement, value recognition and experience appreciation. Tourists participation in the image communication of a destination in adversity is well documented along literature addressing their motivation and reliability as intelligence information. What remains still vague, is an exploration of the above dynamics in cases of destinations in sustained crisis hence, customer predispositions under an extended duration yet reduced intensity destination image challenge exposure. Using Lesbos (Greece) as a case study of a destination affected by refugee and immigrant mobilities since 2012, this paper explores those constructs affecting tourists' response and engagement in the formulation, promotion and hence co-creation of an affected destinations' cognitive and affective image. The theoretical contribution of the paper lies in the exploration of the conscious and unconscious tourist triggers that contribute towards the co-repair and co-restoration of a long-affected destinations' image, with managerial implications both for destination and crisis management.

Keywords: destination image co-creation; destination image recovery; sustained crisis; refugee crisis; Greece.

Introduction

Destination management and branding literature defines a destination's image along the set of beliefs, expectations and emotional thoughts tourists create of a place (Kotler et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2014). Destination images are inherently perceptual subject to the personality attributes (psychographics) of the tourist, but also strongly affected by the underlying circumstances of the visiting destination. Soenmez & Graefe's (1998) travel framework suggests that regardless of the personality characteristics, perceptions of destination risk and safety are amongst the key antecedents of travel intentions. The latest acquires particular interest for destinations in crisis, with an increasing body of literature exploring the image recovery implications after short-term crisis events such as natural disasters or terrorist attacks (e.g. Bauer, 1960; Coombs, 2015; Kozak et al., 2007; Nasir & Yilmaz, 2017). Yet, similar implications for destinations' in sustained crisis, like the ongoing mobility of refugees and immigrants through Mediterranean tourist destinations, have only been minimally addressed. After the first repercussions of the crisis outbreak on the image of affected destinations almost seven years ago, and with reduced media attention since then despite the continuation of the phenomenon, what remains to be explored is the process of image co-creation for destinations perceived to be in sustained crisis.

Perceptions over the refugee and immigrant mobility carries inherently a strong personal bias. The terms are mistakenly used interchangeably when, as summarised by Farmaki and Christou (2019, 671), their distinction lies in one's "*impediment to safely return to their home country*", which is however not always a clear line. In times of anthropogenic crises, such as those related to any populations' mobility, the international community engages directly or indirectly both in the generation and/or circulation of opinion statements and news (Tucker, 2016). Online information sharing platforms and social media facilitate the generation speed and volume of user-generated content (UGC), thus serving simultaneously as opinion sharing channels and information intelligence media (Wang et al., 2016; Williams et al, 2017), triggering consciously and unconsciously potential tourists' image perceptions and hence, visiting intentions for an undefined period of time.

The research develops on the island of Lesbos, the biggest island of the North Aegean region in Greece with a permanent population of 86,436 inhabitants according to the 2011 census. Lesbos is not a tourism destination in the traditional term of the context, nor has a distinctive tourism destination brand. It is a destination with loyal repeaters of an older age, and with a high number of second-home owners who often have a strong emotional affiliation and relation to the island. Refugee and immigrant inflows has been first recorded since 2012, yet Lesbos reached its pick in 2015 with a number of 271,156 arrivals only between January to August of the year (Tsartas et al., 2020). With the numbers subsiding over the years, the island currently and regularly hosts approximately 23,000 of immigrants in hotspots (Deutsche Welle, 2020) which correspond to a quarter of its population. This ongoing situation has generated over the years, frustration both from locals and immigrants and is often exhausted in demonstrations and riots (Deutsche Welle, 2020).

A number of authors have approached the particularities of the refugee crisis in the islands of the North Aegean emphasising on the supply perceptions of either the service industries (Farmaki & Christou, 2019; Ivanov & Stavrinoudis, 2018; Pappas & Papatheodorou, 2017) or other local stakeholders (Tsartas et al., 2020). Demand side approaches on destination image and visiting intentions were also performed, yet they either addressed implication at national level (Zenker et al., 2019) or indirect effects towards alternative destinations (Cicer-Costa, 2017). This literature addressed issues primarily during the pick of the response phase of the refugee crisis. With ongoing inflows of reduced intensity over a prolonged period of time, and with an inconsistent media and exposure attention, it is still necessary to explore the image implications and the image recovery process for destination consumers. In order to contribute towards the destination image formulation and recovery body of literature, the aim of the current research is to explore the conscious and unconscious tourists' response and engagement in the co-creation of the image of a destination in sustained crisis.

In acknowledging the contribution of tourists as active creators rather than passive recipients of information, the research adopts the service-dominant logic (Lusch & Vargo, 2006) to conceptualise customer co-creation along the participatory process of formulating and evolving the core offering and experience itself. When focusing on a destination's image, and in line with Tasci and Gartner (2007), the process is extended to consider customer's active response and engagement in the cumulative interpretation of meanings, feelings and behaviours associated with a destination. Considering the sensitivity and the ethical limitations of the topic, a quantitative approach was deemed most appropriate to explore the theoretical constructs dictating tourists' predispositions and behaviour and holistically capture their implications for the destination image co-creation (Lee, 1993).

Building on the particularities of Lesvos as case study destination, this research aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on the implications of global population mobilities and the organic crisis response mechanisms at tourism destination level. Its theoretical contribution lies in the broader field of destination and crisis management, through the exploration of the conscious and unconscious tourist contribution to the image repair and restoration in destinations in sustained crisis. More specifically, the paper explores those constructs triggering tourists' engagement in the formulation, promotion and hence co-creation of the affected destinations' cognitive and affective image. From a managerial perspective, the paper contributes to the enhancement of destinations' resilience through the identification of catalysts of tourists' behaviour and the appreciation of their role in the recovery of its image.

Theoretical Constructs and Research Hypotheses

Refugee Crisis Perceptions

In times of crisis, refugees and immigrants, along national and international designated support (Red Cross, IOM) and control (Frontex, troop forces) groups could turn amongst the most prominent groups of people at destinations. According to the Group Threat Theory (Blumer, 1958; Croucher, 2013; Atwell Seate, & Mastro, 2015) members of the dominant locals ingroup might feel threatened by an outgroup, such as refugees and immigrants, when they cognitively or perceptually consider them invasive or threatening for their collective or individual interests including safety, security, resources and overall quality of life. An exploration of their effect on the image and brand of the affected destination, or the motivations of tourists to visit while and after the crisis remains limited and only gets attention in light of the current mobilities in the Mediterranean region (Seetaram, 2012; Simpson et al., 2016).

The predispositions and willingness to visit a destination comes down to the three major antecedents of the travel destination choice process, namely: external, internal and demographic factors (Soenmez & Graefe, 1998) with the first two acquiring particular importance in the context of destinations in crisis. The success of a tourism destination depends greatly on its ability to provide a safe and secure environment for visitors (Amir et al., 2016), with Khan et al. (2019) suggesting that even isolated incidents may have a strong effect on tourists' perceptions. When it comes to internal predictors of travel intentions though, the perceptual image of safety in a destination is muddled by the personal set of beliefs, attitudes, expectations and previous experiences (Tan & Wu, 2016).

Perceptions over the refugee and immigrant mobility carries inherently a strong bias from one's personal beliefs and attitudes. Other than one individual's psychographic profile (origin, age, gender, income, level of education), Simpson et al. (2016) suggest that the political ideology and orientation is very likely to influence visiting intention and destination image both due to the attitudes towards the refugees and immigrants, but also towards the security and control forces. Political orientation in the context of social and political issues extends in the spectrum from conservatism to liberalism (Bierbrauer & Klinger, 2002). In line with the Group Threat Theory, visitor political orientation in the context of a destination affected by refugee and immigrant mobility relates to perceptions of altruism or prejudice against outgroups, their correlation to risks and security issues at destination level (Fuchs et al., 2013), or even the preference for visiting destinations congruent with their own political ideology expressed on the way they treat outgroups (Legg et al., 2012). In order to further explore the relationship between personal beliefs and the perceptual image of a destination affected by outgroup mobilities, the paper proposed the following research hypothesis:

H1. Perceptions over the refugee/immigrant crisis will have a significant effect on the destination image prior to visitation.

Marketing Influence

Other than pure personal interest push factors, an individual's intention to visit a destination is traditionally triggered by promotional material, opinions of travel agents, the media, popular culture, the word of mouth (WOM) from family and friends (Molina et al., 2010) or increasingly the electronic word of mouth (eWOM). The messages behind the identifiable and anonymous promotional and branding activities conjure up a destination image that influences tourists' cognitive expectations and their final travelling intention. Marketing influence has thus a crucial role in comforting potential customers and reducing any uncertainty and risks associated with their visiting intention, as tourists would prefer destinations that inspire trust (Kock et al., 2016; Zenker et al., 2019).

Information intelligence is particularly important for tourists intending to visit destinations in crisis. Simpson et al. (2016) identify information from mass and social media as key image catalysts for destinations exposed to the frequency and intensity of crisis stories. Other than the broadly recognised speed and pluralism of circulating and openly commenting on information, research findings identify two variant trends. On one hand, official identifiable sources are perceived of higher credibility and hence a greater impact on public opinion (Tasci & Gartner, 2007; Takahashi et al., 2015), while on the other, anonymous eWOM appears also as highly influential due to its perceived experiential nature and lack of underlying incentives (Duverger, 2013; Filieri, 2015). In any of the cases, the post service and experience information intelligence are considered more reliable to reflect the actual exchange value, with the latest considered as a very accurate predictor of purchasing intentions (Chen & Chen, 2010).

Regardless of the source of information, crisis stories tend to spread faster and likely trigger generic or destination specific WOM which consciously and unconsciously affects potential tourists' expectations, image perceptions and hence, visiting intentions (Matzler et al., 2016). The overdramatization of information from the visitor side, often bears fears, anticipations and past experiences of their own and surrounding environment leading to perceptual rather than cognitive evaluations of the destination image (Simpson et al., 2014) which are often in the sphere of generic rather than destination-specific assumptions. It is then the strength of the reputation and the trust on the destination brand that could reverse negative connotations and potential damage. Considering the multiple marketing intelligence channels and their implications on the formulation of a destination image, the paper proposes the following research hypothesis:

H2. Marketing influences will have a significant effect on the destination image prior to visitation.

Destination Image

For a tourist, a destination's image is the amalgamation of subjective perceptions of reality and combination of pieces of information (Cai, 2002; Kotler et al., 1993). Even if destination trust and loyalty under regular circumstances are leading concepts on destination image and branding research, little has been written on their interrelationship and their ability to predict tourists' behaviours for destinations in crisis (Zenker et al, 2019). The point of interest is thus, whether the strength of the brand or previous image formulation of the destination are strong enough to overcome any cognitive or perceptual fear, risk and uncertainty of the impacted destination, hence proceed with the purchasing intention.

Research on destination image has been grounded on Gartner's (1994) cognitive, affective, and conative attribute typologies, which led most research on re-visiting intentions under regular destination circumstances (Chew & Jahari, 2014; Qu et al., 2011). In the context of destinations in crisis, each appraisal gets a more expansive meaning. More specifically, the cognitive image component relates to attitudes and informed evaluations of a destination's level of safety, security and ability to deliver to the expected standards, while the affective image bears a more emotional response to the underlying circumstances directly linked to the psychographic profile of the potential tourist. Both cognitive and affective components have a strong influence on the pre-visit destination image of a destination and the expected experience (Stylos et al., 2017). Finally, the conative image component, builds on the personal evaluation of the pre-visit destination image to actively consider the destination as travelling potential (White, 2014). This active consideration might be manifested both through the actual purchasing behaviour or even through the communication and engagement on positive or negative image content creation about the actual destination.

The differentiation and conceptualisation of the various image components for destinations in crisis is beyond the scope of this research. Recognising the challenges for their operationalisation though (Stylos et al., 2017), the focus of this current research is to explore their combined influence on the attitudinal behaviours of tourists either before or during their visit on the affected destination to actively engage in the co-creation of the overall (holistic) destination image. In fact, this need for a combined integrative approach becomes essential when needing to predict tourists' attitudinal outcomes for destinations in crisis due to the subtle differentiations in the mind of the potential customer. To explore the above dynamics further, this research proposes the following hypotheses:

H3. Pre-visit destination image will have a significant effect on the co-creation of the destination image.

H4. Pre-visit destination image will have a significant effect on the current (during the visit) destination image.

H5. Current (during the visit) destination image will have a significant effect on the co-creation of the destination image.

User-generated content (UGC)

Over the last years, social media and information sharing platforms have boosted the synchronous and asynchronous distribution of UGC, turning eWOM as a key influencer for destination perceptions and travel decision-making processes (Hudson & Thal, 2013; Williams et al., 2015). Tourist generated content, particularly while at destination, is perceived as more authentic and credible to encompass the multiple perspectives of a destination brand or tourism experience (Inversini & Masiero, 2014; Tussyadiah, 2016). Visiting a destination in crisis, can trigger UGC particularly in terms of the feeling of safety, security and perceptions of threat. Other than observing from the distance actual events, followers are primarily interested in the experiential communication of safety and security information from other people they could easily relate to or identify with. In that regard, tourist contribution in communicating information on the actual happenings and expressing solidarity to the involved stakeholders, even other tourists themselves, maintains a key role in the formulation of the destination's image and facilitate the recovery of its reputation (Ulmer et al., 2007; Ye et al., 2017).

The content generated by tourists is not just factual, but mainly carries emotional and moral predispositions towards the involved stakeholders and destination (Mair et al., 2016). In the case of refugee mobilities the sentiments of solidarity and empathy could be addressed either towards the refugees, or the affected locals or even towards both. Crisis communication is key in destination image recovery After a period of time though and in cases of sustained crisis, tourist UGC rarely entails the element of event surprise anymore (Ulmer et al., 2007). Instead it reflects more the actual experience at the destination and any other element of the trip that might confirm or contradict their initial expectations. Another common practice amongst tourists is to follow and be-friend the official and unofficial channels of destination promotion (NTOs, DMOs) to keep up to date with tourist activities and events during their stay. It is often the case, that they intentionally or unintentionally show empathy towards the published information and engage in the promotion of the destination through the reaction and attraction (sharing and liking) to relevant content (Usakli et al., 2017). Higher numbers of solidarity messages and destination promotion postings generate reactions of empathy and contribute more effectively in the image recovery of destinations in crisis (Oliveira and Huertas, 2019). Considering the dynamic generation of content through social media and information sharing platforms, as well as the enabling of real-time tourist-followers interaction, this research proposes the following hypothesis:

H6. UGC generated during the visit will have a significant effect on the co-creation of the destination image.

Tourist Interactions at Destinations

Building on Plog's (1974) traveller profile spectrum, tourist behaviour ranges along a continuum from dependable psychocentric to venturer allocentric travellers. Their differentiation revolves around various personality traits that manifest through perceptions and responses to risk, threat, and comfort zone, hence affecting the overall perception of a destination's image. Even if mainly discussed in the context of destinations under "normal" circumstances, an exploration of how they relate to destinations in sustained crisis is still limited. Literature suggests that tourists encounters in a destination will relate to both the local population (the tourist–host interaction) and other tourists (tourist-to-tourist) interaction (Huang & Hsu, 2010; Pearce, 2005). Within the context of this research, interactions will include a third group, the outgroup of refugees and immigrants. All interactions are discussed in the context of their individual and aggregated impact in shaping the image of the host destination.

Tourist-to-tourist interactions might be either direct interpersonal in the context of shared activities, events, or service providers or indirect in the broader destination environment all contributing to the co-creation of the trip experience and hence the destination image (Loi & Pearce, 2012). Other than the quality of those encounters (generated feelings of enjoyment or frustration), Yang (2016) identifies their intensity and frequency to equally influence the destination image formation. The impact of tourist-to-tourist interactions has been generally discussed in the context of intense incidents or subtle encounters in destinations under "normal" circumstances, yet little has been written in the context of destinations in crisis.

Tourists interact with local hosts either directly through the consumption of tourism services or in the context of their broader encounters. Regardless of the characteristics of the destination or the product, host-guest interactions are amongst the most frequent and authentic ones, hence dictating a great deal of the destination experience. Positive experience feedback on host-guest interactions induces a higher level of affective attachment, cohesion and empathy which link directly to an affective image of a destination and favourable WOM intentions or repeat visit tendencies (Xu, 2019). On the other hand, frustration or the general feeling of distress and unrest from local's end, might make tourists feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in a destination. This often does not come as a surprise for destination in sustained crisis, where the ongoing societal turbulence might have impacted the wellbeing and resilience of the local hosts and their ability to maintain the standards of hospitality. For crises related to ingroup mobility, it might be possible for tourists to be treated aggressively or unfairly in public places, since they might be confused with members of the ingroup (refugees or immigrants).

Group threat theory suggests that ingroup mobility distracts multiple aspects of the destination balance. Ingroups are often associated with criminal or malcontent activity which puts in jeopardy the feeling of safety and security at destinations and generates the feeling of unrest and distress (Soenmez et al., 1999; Simpson et al, 2016). Tourists may experience this either indirectly through their interactions with hosts in the broader tourism experience

environment or through their direct encounters with the outgroup. Depending again on the quality and the intensity of these interactions and their psychographic characteristics, tourist perceptions might range in a continuum from solidarity to fear, both reduced to their perceived safety and level control at destination level (Woosnam et al., 2015). This triggers the intentional or unintentional generation of destination content and WOM which only communicates their experience at the destination. What is interesting in the case of ingroups and tourist interactions though, is that they could potentially affect the whole service experience and process, as tourists could potentially envision on them the direct threat and cause of their anxiety (Stephan, 2014). Coldwell et al. (2015) discussed how the direct experience of tourists with immigrant camps in Mediterranean destinations during their pick of the crisis, has affected their image of a destination and impacted their predispositions to return and recommend the area to others.

All the above interim encounters constitute components of the overall interactions at destination level. Research on their specific delineation and interlinkages of their underlying dynamics in destinations in crisis is increasing, as are their implications for the destination image. Still what still remains interesting to explore is the duration and intensity of that impact, meaning the amount of time that image stays with the tourists and the amount of time it takes to recover, which obtains particular importance for destinations in sustained crisis. Building on crisis management literature (Papas, 2019; Paraskevas & Arendell, 2007) consistent law enforcement initiatives and the attainment of a feeling of stability and control is what primarily recovers image perceptions in crisis destinations. Still as main catalyst remains the psychographic profile of the tourists and its interpretation of happening and experiences while at destination. To further explore the dynamics of interactions in destinations in sustained crisis as well as their impact on the co-creation of its image, this research proposes the following hypotheses:

H7. Tourist to tourists' interactions during the visit will have a significant effect on the co-creation of the destination image.

H8. Host to tourists' interactions during the visit will have a significant effect on the co-creation of the destination image.

H9. Refugees to tourists' interactions during the visit will have a significant effect on the co-creation of the destination image.

H10. Overall tourist interactions during the visit will have a significant effect on the co-creation of the destination image.

Destination Image Co-creation

On the basis of experience economy, research and practice have acknowledged the importance for the tourist consumer to actively participate and contribute in the delivery of the purchased experience, hence co-create its quality, value and meaning (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Suntikul & Jachna, 2016; Waligo, 2013). In contrast to a destination's brand which reflects its attributes from the provider's perspective (Kapferer, 2008), a destination image is formulated in the mind of an actual and potential customer and resides in its perceived or expected experience value and satisfaction at the destination. Whether cognitive, affective or conative, a destination image is strongly associated with the cumulative interpretation of perceived meaning, hence, a destination's image co-creation relates to a tourist's active engagement and internalization process of the perceived exchange value created and quality of experience generated from visiting the destination.

The implications of perceived safety and threat on a destination's image are well-documented in the international literature (George, 2010; Yüksel & Yüksel, 2007), as is tourists' expectation to be treated with respect and hospitality. The more authentic and engaging their experience, the higher tourists' perception of exchange value creation at the destination (Choo & Petrick, 2014). Regardless of the behaviour and psychographic traits that influence their co-creation engagement while at the destination, what remains still unclear is their implications for destination commitment and loyalty, which translates into positive (e)WOM, repeat visit tendency and a positive affective image of the destination overall (Nasir & Yilmaz, 2017).

The conceptualization and operationalization of the attitude construct as a cognitive and affective perception of visiting intentions has been early documented by Soenmez & Graefe (1998). Yet, tourist predispositions towards destinations with specific underlying characteristics such as sustained crises have not been adequately addressed in the context of destination image co-creation. Ortiz, Frias-Familena & Garcia (2015) amongst others, suggests that tourists often alter their perceptions and attitudes of a destination image after acquiring additional organic information intelligence, which often changes their overall travel behaviour and intentions. Once the breakout of a crisis is over what is essential for destinations is to convince tourists to overcome the perceptual fear and inclination towards a destination and proceed with their visit in order to build personal exchanges and encounters, hence an evidence-based cognitive image. The antecedents of their behaviour and engagement remain subject to their experience at the destination.

Proposed Destination Image Co-creation model

The theoretical grounds of the proposed model (Figure 1) build throughout on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Perceived Risk Theory (PRT) to suggest that tourism engagement in the image co-creation of destinations in sustained crisis is dependent on the formulation of the pre-visit and during visit destination image, the overall quality and intensity of interactions they had at destination, as well as their predispositions to generate and share content in the form of information intelligence. For the specifics of destinations affected by refugee and immigrant mobility, overall interactions are conceptualized along encounters with three primary groups: other tourists, local host and refugees, while the formulation of pre-visit destination image is considered to be influenced both by tourists' personal beliefs and attitudes on refugee mobility as well as the impact of marketing and promotion to their purchasing behavior and visiting intentions.

[Figure 1 around here]

TPB supports the identification of purchasing behaviors (here visiting intentions of a destination in crisis) based on a set of perceptual assumptions that dictate tourists' motivations and intentions (Ajzen, 1991). In an era of technological advancement and high dependency on e-image and online competition, TPB is widely used to explain and predict consumer purchasing intentions through the evaluation of the underlying factors influencing customer decision making (Pappas, 2016). More importantly, TPB has been applied in the study of tourist purchasing intentions under uncertainty (Quinta et al., 2010), hence it is considered appropriate to support the exploration of tourism behavior, intentions and perceptions formulation for destinations in crisis. Similarly, PRT suggests that risk aversion is relevant to the perceived loss, with customers tending to develop risk reduction mechanisms to cope with decision making under uncertainty (Bauer, 1960). Enhancing information intelligence as an uncertainty and risk reduction strategy is well documented in the international literature of many academic and managerial disciplines. In the current digital era, what remains still under discussion is the impact of the plethora of available information, the speed of content generation and sharing and the credibility of the source of information. In the context of destinations in crisis, Kaplan's et al. (1974) components of tourism intentions and perception of risk are adapted to cover primarily safety (physical) risk and product value (product performance), while the financial (price) and privacy-time loss risks are not deemed so relevant.

Research Method

Participants

The research was conducted on a sample of 550 domestic and international tourists who visited the island of Lesbos, North Aegean Region of Greece during August and September 2019. Considering the sensitivity and the ethical limitations of the issues in question, a quantitative approach administered through a closed structured questionnaire was deemed as most appropriate tool to collect anonymous data on sensitive issues without compromising on the response rate (Lee & Sargeant, 2011). Face to face questionnaire collection was preferred to the online version in order to capture tourists' behaviours and attitudes while still at destination. The questionnaire was administered in the English language. Participants were randomly approached in public spaces in Mytilene (the capital of the island) an area which has attracted a lot of media attention due to being affected by refugee and immigrant mobilities since 2012. Participants were selected merely on the basis of being on the island; no further age, digital literacy or familiarity to the destination exclusion criteria were applied in the sample. Missing data were excluded listwise to allow the smoother analysis of the sample; a total of 513 (93% response rate) completed questionnaires were used for the analysis.

Sample Size

The sample size was calculated by means of Raosoft considering a population size (tourist arrivals in Lesbos) of over 80,000 tourists for the year 2018, which suggests an appropriate sample size of over 380 participants. The sample size recommendation doesn't change much for larger populations (Raosoft, 2020), leaving the 513 sample as more than sufficient to extract reliable conclusions on a <5% (4.32%) margin of error and a 95% confidence level. The proposed model fit was tested by means of the χ^2 , while the components validity and reliability was tested through loadings and Cronbach's Alpha. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was then employed to explore the linearity of relationships amongst the studied multivariate constructs.

Measures

The questionnaire is based on nine key constructs delineated in 53 control statements. Other than three questions on participants age, income and level of education, the control statements were developed along a 1-5 Likert scale (1: Strongly Agree; 2: Agree; 3: Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4: Disagree; 5: Strongly Disagree and 6: Not relevant/applicable in my case). Their validity and reliability abide by the recommendation of Gross and Brown (2008). The statements were identified in seven previous studies; none of them has been reverse coded for the purposes of this study. More specifically, the statements on refugee and

immigrant crisis perceptions were based on Simpson et al. (2016) while that on marketing influence on Pappas (2019). The formulation of pre-visit and current destination image was based on the work of Ramseook-Munhurrin (2015). UGC tendencies were inspired by the work of Oliveira and Huertas (2019). Yang (2016) proposed a scale for the assessment of interactions amongst tourist; to enhance the consistency and coherence of the research the same scale of statements was applied to assess both the constructs of interactions with locals and refugees as well. The assessment of the aggregated construct on overall interaction was based on the same research, yet on set of statements. The engagement and predispositions towards the destination image co-creation comprised from three statements (DIC 1-3) on interaction through status (high esteem) and information adapted from the works of Choo & Petrick (2014) and another three on destination loyalty (DIC 4-6) based on Nasir & Yilmaz (2017). Finally, demographic profile scales were developed according to Kani et al. (2017).

Results

Table 1 summarises the socio-demographic characteristics of the studied sample according to the key categorical variables considered: age, income and level of education. On a first reading, the majority of participants were in the age group 36-50, with a medium income scale (25,001-45,000 Euros) and a higher level of education.

[Table 1 around here]

The descriptive statistics of the 513 (N) sample of participants are summarised in Table 2 along the mean, standard deviation, kurtosis and skewness of the sample. Participants seem overall positively inclined towards refugees with the disapproval on acts of discrimination identified as key aspect on their perceptions (RCP 4: 2.77). In terms of marketing influence, tourists who visited Lesvos in the summer of 2019 appear to be drawn mainly by promotional activities undertaken by either tourist agencies or operators (MI 4: 2.33) as well as the perceived brand of the island and its tourism product (MI3: 2.38). Perceptions of safety nor security were leading tourist perceptions on Lesvos destination image prior (PDI 1: 2.79) nor after (CD 1: 2.39) their visit. While on the island tourists shared primarily content on their tourism experience (UGC 4: 1.98) which served directly or indirectly as a type of tourism promotion (UGC 5:1.98). In terms of their interactions, participants identified encounters with other tourists (IT 2: 2.29) and locals (IL 2: 1.87) as primarily friendly. In terms of their encounters with refugees, participants identified their interactions as frequent (IR 4: 2.86) yet harmonious (IR 1:2.83). As for their experience of their overall interactions, participants experienced Lesvos overall as a friendly (OI 1: 2.05) and exciting (OI 4: 2.05) destination, with the latest probably attributed to their whole experience in the island. Finally, the most important constructs of destination image co-creation in terms of locals-tourists interaction

was the provision of useful information on tourism services such as transport, attractions, restaurants and accommodation (DIC 2: 2.01) and local culture/lifestyle (DIC 3: 2.2).

[Table 2 around here]

Model Fit

In order to ensure the goodness of model's fit to the collected dataset, a series of validity indices were calculated. Kline (2010) recommends (a) χ^2 , (b) the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), (c) the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and, (d) the Standardised Root-Mean-Square Residual (SRMR) as the most appropriate metrics of goodness of fit.

Summarising Pappas (2016):

- (a) for big sample sizes (in this case N: 513), the goodness of model's fit is assessed as the ratio of the χ^2 statistic against the degrees of freedom (df). Good model fit is supported when $0 \leq \chi^2/df \leq 2$.
- (b) The CFI indicates better fits when is closer to 1.0
- (c) The RMSEA indicates close fits for values lower than .5
- (d) The SRMR as the square root of the discrepancy between the sample vs. the model covariance matrix indicates higher fits for values lower than .8.

A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was then employed to identify the most important components of the proposed research model. The CFA results turned a χ^2 value of 711.322 with 378 df ($p < .01$), hence a χ^2/df ratio of 1,882 indicating a good model fit. In terms of the remaining metrics, CFI=.908; RMSEA=.492 and SRMR:.642 ($p < .01$) all suggesting a high model fit. CFA loading coefficients are summarised in Table 3, with absolute values suppressed to the .4 value as recommended by Norman and Streiner (2008). The internal consistency of the model was further assessed through Cronbach's Alpha, giving an overall model reliability value of .789. For individual model constructs, the respective metric values ranged between a min .701 for Overall Interaction to max .954 for Refugee Crisis Perceptions, which are all above the min accepted .7 value (Nunnally, 1978). Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for all individual constructs was over .5 suggesting adequate convergent validity levels (Kim, 2014), while all constructs Composite Reliability (CR) was again above the recommended .7 acceptance level (Huang et al., 2013).

[Table 3 around here]

Hypothesis Testing

Figure 2 summarises the hypotheses testing of the model, where all but H4 have been confirmed by the dataset. More specifically, refugee crisis perceptions have a strong positive impact on the pre-visit destination image (H1: $\beta=.274$; $p<.01$). Pre-visit destination image is still positively but only mildly affected by marketing influences (H2: $\beta=.087$; $p<.01$), but significant impact on destination image co-creation (H3: $\beta=.195$; $p<.01$). Yet, the latest is strongly affected by the actual destination image tourists formulate during the visit at the destination (H5: $\beta=.315$; $p<.01$) and even more importantly by the UGC they produce during their stay (H6: $\beta=.398$; $p<.01$). The construct of overall interaction is affected by all three identified group encounters. Tourist to tourist interactions have a mild yet positive contribution (H7: $\beta=.092$; $p<.01$) to overall interactions, as well as interactions with locals which score higher and still positively (H8: $\beta=.120$; $p<.01$). Interactions with the third ingroup of refugees score the highest in terms of significance amongst the other groups, yet with a negative contribution to the overall image (H9: $\beta=-.287$; $p<.01$). Finally, the perception of overall interactions on destination has the strongest significance towards the destination image co-creation (H10: $\beta=.402$; $p<.01$). Interestingly enough, the only hypothesis not confirmed by the data on Lesvos was the one suggesting that pre-visit destination image has a significant effect on the actual destination image tourists formulate during their visit (H4: $\beta=.227$; $p>.05$).

[Figure 2 around here]

Discussion

The research focused on the perspectives and attitudes of tourists who actually decided to proceed with their visit (not mere intentions) and their contribution towards the co-creation of a destination's image, regardless or in addition to all other efforts taken by other stakeholder parties (locals, DMOs, TOs etc.). Research findings suggest the importance of convincing tourists to proceed with their purchasing (visiting) intention as, expectedly, their pre-visit destination image has the lowest significance to their image co-creation formulation. Okuyama's (2018) analysis on the timing of demand recovery policies seems to resonate even for destinations in prolonged crisis.

Amongst the pre-visit perceptions' exploration statements, the affective image of Lesvos as a friendly and helpful host community (PDI 3-PDI 4) were the ones who possibly triggered visitation regardless of tourist's safety and security concerns. In regard to the constructs actually informing the pre-visit image of a destination affected by ingroup mobilities, findings suggest a strong positive attitude bias from tourists' perception on the refugee crisis overall. The latest confirm Legg et al. (2012) and Simpson et al. (2016) suggestions that ideological beliefs other than influencing ones' viewing of the world have very strong implications for their purchasing behaviors particularly during times of political and social

crises. Marketing influences had a much lower contribution to the pre-visit destination image, with the actual strength of the brand (MI 3) and promotional activities from TOs (MI 4) leading on their intentions. This is somehow expected under “normal” destination circumstances (Morgan & Pritchard, 2004), yet it was interesting to observe in destinations in sustained crisis. The latest probably suggests that tourism behavioral tendencies bounce back after a certain period of familiarization with a crisis and minimization of the elements of relates surprise. Findings confirm Pappas (2019) suggestion of the trust on the brand value yet differ on the importance of eWOM towards purchasing intentions. The reliability and credibility of the information sources does not seem to play an important role in times of sustained crisis as it could be considered biased, hence official promotional activities from destinations didn’t seem to contribute much on the formulation of destination image prior to the visit. It is interesting to see that direct marketing activities (MI 1) and eWOM (MI 2) scored the lowest amongst the constructs explored, due to probably being considered as biased and unreliable (Kotler et al., 2014).

While at the destination, their cognitive image and possibly overall experience seems to have enhanced their appreciation and empathy for the local host community (CD 3-CD 4) and reassured their concerns of threat and turbulence, resulting to much higher (in comparison to pre-visit) significance of contribution towards image co-creation. These findings complement previous research from Tasci and Gartner (2007) on the functionality of relationships in destinations and Tucker’s (2016) on tourism empathy. Even more significant for the destination image co-creation turned to be tourists’ contribution and engagement with UGC during their visit, primarily anything related to tourist’s experiences in the island (UGC 4) promoting consciously or unconsciously the destination (UGC 5) and without necessarily referring to any actual events taking place or the implications for the involved stakeholders (UGC 1-2). These findings differ from previous research on the communication and generation of information intelligence during disasters (Sigala, 2011; Takahashi et al., 2015) yet, align more with the post-crisis discourse (Okuyama, 2018; Ulmer et al., 2007). It seems that as long as there is no obvious or imminent crisis tourists perceived as rather past. Such attituded trigger tourist destination image co-creation via sharing positive feedback of their experience on the destination, still they don’t seem strong enough to convince them necessarily to repeat the visit (DIC 6) nor directly recommend the destination (DIC 5).

Overall interaction was the most significant construct directly related to destination image co-creation, indicating the importance of interpersonal encounters to generate empathy and affective attachment to the visited destination (Tucker, 2016; Yang, 2016). In exploring the significance of the categorical demographic attributes of age, income and education, findings of this study suggest age as the highest underlying contribution for engagement in the destination image co-creation, followed by income and later education. These findings are overall in line with smart technologies usage trends (Wang et al., 2016).

Conclusions

This research builds on a sample of domestic and international tourists who visited the island of Lesbos (Greece) seven years after the beginning of the refugee and immigrant mobility in the Mediterranean region. The study aimed to explore their cognitive and affective predispositions towards the affected destination and to identify attitudinal patterns and triggers for engagement in destination image co-creation. Findings suggest that any perceptual fears prior to the visit, which are usually triggered by one's personal ideological beliefs on ingroup mobilities overall, are relaxed once they decide to visit the destination. It is then both the cognitive image of the actual situation as well as the affective one generated through their encounters at destinations that leads their empathetic behaviours towards both the ingroup and outgroup stakeholders and engage them into sharing their perceived value of their overall experience. At this point of the crisis cycle, tourists preferred to share on their actual experience and attributes of the destination rather than on actual crisis-related events or opinions on involved stakeholders. The latest is optimum for the indirect marketing of affected destinations, that continue to demonstrate their product and service experience through organic and experiential channels. Regardless of the duration of the crisis, research findings confirm the importance of tourists' engagement in a destination image co-creation which remains subject to safeguarding and ensuring the actual visitation intensification.

The concept of co-creation has been applied along the service-dominant approach which allows for the exploration of the multiple attitudes and experience facets that trigger tourists' response and engagement in the co-creation of a destination's image. In that regard, it contributes to the advancement of its conceptualisation through the exploration of additional control variables (UGC, overall interactions). In view of the research body on crisis cycles and their implications for a destination's recovery though, the research contributes to the exploration of the intensity and duration effect and triggers of the image of destinations in sustained crisis. The managerial implications of this research hence relate to the response and recovery phase of destinations' crisis management, and primarily to the identification of the optimum timing and channels of interventions, which only acquires particular importance in the context of the ongoing population mobilities at global level.

Findings reflect the particularities of Lesbos as a destination and should be analysed bearing in mind both the actual refugee/immigrant management initiatives in the island over the last years (location; pressure; carrying capacity) and the characteristics of tourist product and island clientele. Lesbos is not a tourism destination in the traditional term of the context, nor has a distinctive tourism destination brand. Findings of the research are useful to enhance the underlying dynamics of tourist behaviours and attitudes at similar destination, yet they should be cautiously generalised within the specifics of the tourist population of the island.

Future research should consider more in detail the implications of client profile on the image co-creation process, by including attributes of eg. familiarity to the destination (second housing, VFR, second generation Greeks living overseas); nationality (media coverage); tourism product; or ideological orientation. The current research didn't consider necessary to

fragment the analysis, as the research aim revolved around the identification of external (destination-induced) rather than internal (psychographic and behavioural) triggers to response and engagement. Obviously, such a delineation would offer another layer of perceptual analysis and adaptation fit to other destinations. The paper here adds a small stone in this larger endeavour. Moreover, the discussion over the ingroup's management is beyond the scope of this paper, yet any future relevant research should better differentiate between perceptions over war refugees and undocumented immigrants.

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