THE STRATEGIC DIMENSION OF DESTINATION IMAGE.
AN ANALYSIS OF THE FRENCH RIVIERA IMAGE FROM THE ITALIAN TOURISTS' PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays the competition among tourist destination is fierce due to the increasing international tourism. Each destination has an image, and some can have a stronger image than others. In order to develop a competitive position, it is important to create and transmit a favorable image to potential tourists in target markets. The destination marketers need to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their tourism area, as it is important to the travelers’ images of that destination. Image is the raw material of the destinations to compete in the context of the global competition regarding tourism: it represents the way for destinations to position themselves and reaching a sufficient degree of recognition.

This approach of strategic destination image management is essential for attracting tourist flows and other resources capable of creating value-add for the destination. In this context, a valuable image represents a fundamental requisite for a destination, like the French Riviera.

The purpose of the study is to analyze the strategic dimension of a destination image as a strategic management tool for a destination, which could help to maintain and/or rejuvenate the tourist flows towards that destination. In order to reach this objective, it is necessary to understand the role of the image in tourists’ travel decision-making process and how a positive consolidated and shared image is significant in the mind of the consumers. For this reason, the study is based on the analyses of the image of the French Riviera in the Italian tourists market, in order to later discuss strategic options on how a positive image could represent a prerequisite for a successful marketing strategy.

Moreover, it has been possible to capture the distinctive elements of the French Riviera image and match them with Italian consumer behaviors; to bring out an image stereotype that the destination has built over the years; to understand if the positive image of the French Riviera is relevant in the Italians decision-making process and, also, if and how the image is important to develop a good strategic plan and eventually change a negative trend in the tourists demand.
1. BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM ANALYSIS

There are positive and negative associations with a destination, its people and its products, which are difficult to change (Brezovec, et al., 2004). Destination images influence tourists’ travel decision-making and behavior towards a destination as well as satisfaction levels and recollection of the experience. Therefore, perceived images are the basis of the evaluation or selection process and thus provide the link between motivations and destination selection (O’Leary, & Deegan, 2003).

To understand tourists’ differences in perceptions, images and motivations toward a destination is essential to comprehend and predict tourism demand and its impact on the tourism location. In fact, this understanding of destination image and visitors’ perceptions is critical to a destination and provides the basis for more effective and efficient future strategic planning of the destination. In practical terms, this implies that image studies are a prerequisite to a successful marketing strategy. In this way, it is very significant to understand when the image forms, and at what point the image influences consumers’ selection choice of a particular destination (Sirakaya, et al., 2001). A major objective of any destination positioning strategy should be to reinforce positive images already held by the target audience, correct negative images, or create a new image (Pike, & Ryan, 2004).

In this context, the importance of understanding destination perceptions of visitors becomes critical to a destination. In practical terms, this could be critical for a destination like the French Riviera, one of the most popular cosmopolitan areas in Europe and the France’s second most popular tourism destination. This region has several different scenarios, such as cultural attractions, the small villages in the country, the unique bays, or the mountains to ski in, which makes this destination particularly attractive for all kinds of tourists. In fact, in the last years, the Côte d’Azur’s worldwide market share has remained stable at about 1% (CRT, 2006).

The French Riviera continues to attract for several years tourist flows all around the world basing its offerings on a strong and positive image, consolidated and maybe stereotyped in the mind of the tourists. This destination instantly evokes images of one of the world’s most glamorous and luxury regions, synonymous with good living. In fact, the success of the French Riviera is evident given its important reference in the tourism world. Every year, about 20% of the tourists are people that never have visited the French Riviera (CRT, 2006). So, the strong image of this place has a fundamental role in decision making process of 2 million of new tourists. The tourists identify the French Riviera with the three “S”: Sea, Sun, and Sand, that represent the main attributes of the coast. Côte d’Azur is also synonymous of luxury and prestige, even if the destination is actually affected by other tourist market segments, not only the luxury target. But this image as a luxury destination, with its famous casinos (Monaco – Monte Carlo) and its hotels in the “Promenade des Anglais” in Nice or in “La Croisette” in Cannes, is by now in the mind of most of the tourists. Finally, tourists’ motivation to travel towards the French Riviera is stimulated by the cultural attributes of this destination, above all by the three international events: the Grand Prix of Monaco, the Festival of Cannes and the Carnival of Nice.

By the elements above, the following statements has been considered:

1) Making a comparison between the French Riviera and one of the several less famous, but not less beautiful, Italian coasts, like the very close Riviera Ligure, it looks that they both have the very similar natural and cultural attributes, but in the case of the French Riviera the image makes the difference in attracting visitors.

2) In opposite of a positive situation over the last years, in 2006, the Italian tourists’ demand towards the French Riviera, has decreased by an average of 6% (CRT, 2006). The Italians for many years have continued to choose the French Riviera as a destination to spend their

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1 Stretching along the coast between the Alps and the Mediterranean as far as the Italian border, the French Riviera or Côte d’Azur belongs to the Region of Alpes-Maritimes, including the Principality of Monaco. Its population of 1 million inhabitants includes 12% foreigners. The growth rate of the population is twice the national average. Nice, the regional capital, is the fifth largest city in France. The Riviera hosts close to 95,000 firms covering the full spectrum of economic activity and it has the largest Chamber of Commerce in France after Paris. Nice hosts also the largest airport in France after Paris (CRT, 2006).
vacation time, even if they could find similar natural and cultural attractions in their own country: they represent loyal consumers of the French Riviera and its principal foreign market.

From this observation, it’s evident the importance of studying the strategic dimension of destination image as a fundamental factor to develop a tourist location. In fact, even if the generalized image of the French Riviera is a positive, well kept image, it still needs to be maintained and reinforced carefully in order to attract more tourists. For this reason, a research study might be helpful to discuss strategic options on how to make a difference in the tourists’ perceptions and travel choices by the use of the image of a destination. The study of the French Riviera image will be based on the analysis of the tourists’ perception in its first foreign market, that means the Italian tourists target.

In order to reach the aim of the study, three simple questions have been addressed:

- Is the tourists demand influenced by the image of a destination?
- In which way the image of a destination can influence the tourists’ behavior and their travel choices?
- What is the strategic dimension of the destination image?

In other words, applying the above questions to the case studied: which destination attributes contribute to Italian’s perception of the French Riviera? Or what are the Italian tourists’ perceptions of the French Riviera? And, does it and how the image of the French Riviera influence their decision to travel towards this destination? Why is the Italian tourists’ demand decreasing?

2. DESTINATION IMAGE: THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Destinations depend on their image for their success in attracting tourists, even if the image is frozen in time and no longer represents a true picture of the place. Nearly 30 years ago, the World Tourism Organization (WTO) declared the importance of positive images to a country (WTO, 1979).

Hunt (1975) was the first to demonstrate the importance of the “destination image” in increasing the number of tourists visiting destinations as much as, or even more than, tangible resources. In fact, destination image is a key factor in the destination selection process of potential tourists; who, having a limited personal experience of the destination, act on the basis of their image of the destination, even if their perceived image does not necessarily coincide with objective reality (Gunn, 1988; Hunt, 1975). It is also a way to differentiate a destination from others with the same relative attributes and to enhance the destination competitiveness. This is the reason why destination image is one of the current issues in tourism marketing. Pike (2002) notes the quantity of academic literature about destination image reviewing 143 articles published between 1973 and 2000, highlighting the heterogeneity of content, dimension discerned and methodologies used.

2.1 Destination Image: A Brief Definition

“Place image” is the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that people have of a place (Kotler, et al., 1993). In other words, image is the mental structures (visual or not) that integrate the elements, the impressions and the values that people have about a specific place; and, it is based on a series of more or less material knowledge of those people, and on a series of perceptions of a more emotional and effective nature.

Other authors see image in terms of a picture in the mind. They suggest that destination image are the sum of all those emotional qualities like experiences, beliefs, ideas, recollections and impressions that a person has of a destination (Crompton, 1979; Reilly, 1990). In particular, a destination image is “the expression of all objective knowledge, impressions, prejudice, imaginations, and emotional thoughts an individual or group might have of a particular place” (Lawson & Baud-Bovey, 1977).
At the question “what is the image of destination” one of the 11 practitioners and academics from around the world; who met online and responded to 23 questions about destination image evaluation, says that “the image of a destination is the sum of all perceptions tourists and potential visitors hold of that destination” emphasizing its dynamism. He comments that “it evolves with time and events that are controlled, or not, by the destination”. Also, he highlights that destination image depends from internal and external environmental factors (Dimanche, 2003).

A review of tourist destination image concluded with a proposal of a theoretical model defining image in terms of four characteristics: complex, multiple, relativistic and dynamic (Gallarza, et al., 2002). Della Corte and Micera (2007) highlight the importance of the image in the actual demand of a destination, not only in the mind of the potential tourists, defining destination image as “the whole of beliefs, ideas and impressions a destination can generate in potential and actual tourists’ minds”.

Hose and Wickens (2004) define location (or destination) images as any visual, oral or written representation of a tourism location that is recorded and can also be transmitted to others. In this way, they include in the representations also the informal written comments on a postcard or the telephone conversation to those “back at home”. Image can be any individual freedom to structure the own perceptions of a tourism location. As absurd as it may sound, image can be considered also as a product, as well as with the conceptual differences associated with the positioning of products and the implications for consumer behavior, even the element of intangibility renders more difficult its perception. Milman and Pizam (1995) suggested that a destination image consists of three components: the product, for instance the quality of the attraction; the second one is the behavior and attitude of the destination hosts as an example; and thirdly the environment: weather, scenery, and facilities.

Therefore, there is a general agreement that destination image is a multi-faceted, composite construct, which consists of interrelated cognitive and affective evaluation woven into overall impression (Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2006).

2.2 The Stages of Image Formation

Destinations with recognizable images and tourists’ positive perceptions have more probability of being chosen. Also, the destination image perceived post-visit influences tourist satisfaction and intention to repeat the visit in the future, and their communication with friends and family (word of mouth). This certainly depends on the destination capacity in providing experiences that correspond with the image travelers held of the destination.

The stages of image formation are based on the different tourists’ perceptions, considering also the impact of all internal and external factors that can influence the tourists’ image of the destination, as the following analysis shows. Thus, it’s important to make a distinction between perception “a priori”, perception “in situ” and perception “a posteriori”:

- Perception “a priori” is the mental construction an individual makes of a place without having a physical connection with the place. This means that tourists have already “visited” a place before they physically visit it.

- Perception “in situ” is a key moment in the tourists’ experience, because it contrasts what they have imagined. Tourists never arrive with a null perception: they have a previous image of the place that can be confirmed or not.

- Perception ”a posteriori” indicates that tourists’ experience doesn’t end with the trip, but they consume some elements in their daily life. For instance, the role that photographs have in order to capture a moment of the trip or specific elements of the destination.

According to Gunn (1988), images are developed at two different levels. He cited organic level and induced level. The organic image develops internally because of actual experience or visitation, and the induced image forms because of externally received and processed information such as publicity,
advertisement, news reports or word of mouth. Basically image development is linked to many forms of information. However, image is also formed on the basis of an exchange value between the value sought and expected, and the efforts made to get this value. Always Gunn (1988) identifies the following multiple stages in the process of tourists image formation: (1) accumulating mental images of the destination – organic image; (2) modifying the initial image after more information – induced image; (3) deciding to visit the destination; (4) visiting the destination; (5) sharing the destination; (6) returning home and (7) modifying the image based on the experience. In this way, the third level of image formation is the experiential image that is the result of a visit (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). Given the differences in the ways these images are formed, the images are open to change to different extents and in different ways (Vaughan, 2007).

The most recent studies consider the image like a concept formed by three different interrelated components: cognitive, affective and conative (Baloglu, & McCleary, 1999a, 1999b; Gartner, 1993). Cognition is the sum of what is known about a destination, which may be organic or induced as told before (Gunn, 1988). Affect represents an individual’s feelings towards an object, which will be favorable, unfavorable, or neutral. Gartner (1993) proposed that affect usually becomes operational during the evaluation stage of the destination selection process. The conative may be considered as the likelihood of visiting a destination within a certain time period.

Then, Baloglu and McCleary (1999b) add that the affective image is one of the most influential factors, and that it should be used more often by destinations for better efficiency. They split it into both positive (arousing, exciting, pleasant and relaxing) and negative dimensions (sleepy, gloomy, unpleasant and distressing). These authors put forward the idea of “relative images” of destinations, which can be determined through the comparison of several competing destinations. This will lead to the identification of the destinations’ strengths and weaknesses, competitive advantages and distinctive competencies relative to the characteristics of each place compared to the competitors. Moreover, they argue that the image of a destination can be modified by the previous visitation or direct experience with the destination and also after visiting a particular destination. In this way, the satisfaction and the product quality during the travel experience will influence the last step of image formation. In particular, Weaver, et al. (2007) explored the impact of previous travel experience and trip related variables on destination evaluation, examining the relationship between two sets of variables: the first set is composed of five variables that are referred to as previous travel experience (number of countries visited, number of countries visited for pleasure) and trip characteristic (length of stay, number of people in the travel party, and travel mode); the second set of variables referred to as destination evaluation variables (satisfaction, service quality, value, and likelihood to return). In addition, Della Corte (2000), measuring the customer satisfaction using three levels of a pyramid model, considers the top level representative of the overall destination image. When destinations have an adequate level of positive attributes, visitors are expected to develop favorable attitude toward a destination. Negatively perceived attributes account for unfavorable attitude toward the destination.

In general, people “create” their own image of a destination, thanks to their general knowledge and feeling, or from an external influence, such as friends and relatives, the advertisements, the intermediaries, or, also, their own past experiences. In this way, the image projected by tourist destinations through the promotional activities as well as all sources of information to their potential tourists is a topic of crucial interest to tourist destination bodies. The comparison between the projected image and the perceived image by the tourist has to be efficient because it represents a critical link (Andreu, et al., 2000).

Therefore, destination image depends on the previous experience the traveler had in a specific destination, the degree of familiarity he or she has, his or her geographic origin, social and cultural background and most importantly the expectations one has about that tourism destination (Beerli & Martin, 2004b). Ryan and Cave (2005) revealed in their study of destination image the importance of the role of visitor familiarity with a site. Thus, previous experience will most likely affect consumers’ attitudes towards a destination and the activities performed there. Baloglu (2001) has also argued that “familiarity with a destination has appeared to be a significant determination of destination image”.
There is a link between high degrees of familiarity and positive images. The more the tourist is familiar with the tourism destination, the better the image he or she has of that destination is, even if the familiarity with a destination can be associated to the issues of “coziness” and romance.

Laws (1995) has stated that the majority of tourists have experiences with other destinations, and their perceptions are influenced by comparisons among facilities, attractions and service standards. For instance, the French Riviera is like any other glamorous tourism destination. Most of its attractions could be compared to some of those in Italy and have as much to offer. Therefore Italians show a certain interest in visiting the French Riviera.

An interesting approach comes out from the study of Ekinci and Hosany (2006) that indicated 3 dimensions of the perception of destination personality: sincerity, excitement, and conviviality. This study found that destination personality has positive impact on perceived destination image and intention to recommend.

Then, tourists will have a more favorable image perception of a destination when the correspondence between the destination’s visitor image and the tourist’s self-concept is more consistent. This is the definition of “self-congruity”, different from “functional congruity”, that is the link between what utilities a destination has to offer and what the tourists expect from that destination (Sirgy & Su, 2000). For instance, in the French Riviera’s case, tourists expect to find beautiful and clean cities, a lot of luxury, beautiful parks and gardens and then of course, many hotels, restaurants and casinos. On the other hand, lack of information about a destination is often the reason why people form a wrong image of a destination, sometimes more positive, sometimes more negative than the real one.

In this context, advertising plays an important role in promotion of tourism destinations, because it generates awareness of the destinations as possible places to visit, creating positive images of the destinations and motivating the tourists to travel to those destinations. Consumers’ images of a destination are built by a variety of influences. In addition to the advertising and travel brochures, also other factors influence on building destination image, such as word of mouth, independent tourism information, personal experience, etc. For instance, these are one of the main motivations of familiarization trips organized by Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) for travel media and sponsors. Finally, the special events represent the destination, being a positive attractive factor and product for a destination.

In particular, a good example could be the souvenirs or the holiday postcard – the most widely disseminated tourist icon received from friends and/or relatives – that can contribute to create the image of the destination (Yüksel & Akgül, 2007). Also, in the most recent years, another factor is emerging: internet, that is becoming a prominent medium in tourism marketing. It’s possible to consider an online induced perspective of the image of a destination (Stephenkova & Morrison, 2006). In addition, evidence from around the world confirms the power of film and television in contributing to form the image of a destination and stimulating tourism demand in showcased destinations, impacting, also, on the positioning and segmentation elements of the marketing strategy. For instance, the movies “Braveheart” for Scotland, or “Lord of the Rings” for New Zealand. Other very interesting examples are the TV series “Baywatch” or “Magnum PI” connected to Los Angeles city and the Pacific Ocean with its beautiful beach and people on their roller skates. And, also, how many people want to travel during the Christmas period to New York to see the Christmas tree shown in several movies in front of the Rockefeller Center? Consequently, photographs of scenery, landmarks, and icons have dominated all forms of tourism promotion, from travel brochures, films, television to internet advertisement forming the image of the destinations.

As a conclusion of the conducted analysis, the following table (1) summarizes all mentioned external and internal factors influencing the individual image formation:
Table 1 – Factors Affecting Image Formation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUTSIDE FACTORS</th>
<th>INSIDE FACTORS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Natural and cultural attraction of the destination</td>
<td>- Geographic origin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Political, economical and technological environment</td>
<td>- Social and cultural environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Quality of product and services</td>
<td>- Character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Satisfaction during the travel experience</td>
<td>- Motivation and expectation</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Intermediaries</td>
<td>- Personal feeling (favorable vs. unfavorable)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Information at the tourism destination</td>
<td>- Perceived risks</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Social (word of mouth, phone calls)</td>
<td>- Familiarity with a destination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Weather</td>
<td>- Previous experience in the destination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Presence of a brand</td>
<td>- Compared to previous travel experiences in other destinations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Media &amp; Internet</td>
<td>- Lack of information</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Marketing activities and advertising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Postcards and travel brochures</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Movies</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Events</td>
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2.3 The Role of Image in Tourists’ Travel Decision Making Processes

At what point do images influence consumers’ selection of a particular destination? Finding answers to this question is necessary to develop effective marketing strategies. Travelers have an image of many destinations and this image affects their decision to travel to that particular place. Destination image is an important notion in evaluating how the tourists select their own destination, thus having a better understanding of tourists behavior.

The concept of a travel destination image according to Fakeye and Crompton (1991) is that “images are of paramount importance because they transpose representation of an area into the potential tourist’s mind and give him or her a pre-taste of the destination”. This is true because a traveler will be more likely to choose a specific destination based on its image and on what he or she will be discovering.

The relationships between cognition, affect and conation, analyzed before, might apply in a decision making process, that is similar to the AIDA model (Need Awareness, Interest [develop alternatives/cognitive], Desire [evaluate alternatives/affect], Action [choice/conation]) (Pike, & Ryan, 2004). In fact, one significant modification of the AIDA model was its reduction to three steps (CAB): cognition (Awareness or learning), affect (Feeling, interest or desire), and behavior (Action).

The decision to buy a trip and the choice between different destinations is a complex process: the image of the destination may influence the consumers in their choice. In fact, thinking for a moment about how a tourist comes to learn about a particular destination that he/she wants to visit, the image of the destination in his/her mind will be an important factor that will influence his/her decision making process. Therefore, image can be considered a push and a pull factor to motivate people towards a specific destination:

- Image can push people to desire to go on a vacation in a destination.
- Image, as a strategic management tool, can pull people to choose a destination.

Baloglu (1999) proposed a model and hypothesized relationships of visitation intention formation, where perceptual/cognitive evaluations of tourism destinations are determined by variety of information, type of information sources used, and socio-psychological travel motivation. Then, perceptual/cognitive evaluation and socio-psychological travel motivation form together affective evaluation of a destinations. The formation of visitation intention is dependent on the different roles played by the informational, motivational and image elements in the process: image is the major concept to predicting travel behavior.

Tapachai & Waryszak (2000) established a concept based on five value dimensions: functional, social, emotional, epistemic and finally conditional, and one of several of these values generally influence the tourist’s decision to explore a specific travel destination. This is what they call a “beneficial image”. In their study on Thailand’s and the United States’ images, based on open-ended questionnaires sent to...
people who had not visited any of these countries, they actually found that respondents had images present in their minds even when they had not been in a destination. Moreover, even if all the image’s five values were important, they each influence tourist behavior with diverse degrees: “not all image attributes have an influence in tourists’ decision-making process”. Individuals usually form their own images of a destination based on “the benefit or exchange value” they hope to get from the products and services during the trip.

Croy (2003) says that destination image is crucial and plays many roles in the decision-making process, because all decision-making factors, such as time, money, and family, are based on the image of each destination to satisfy the decision maker’s motivation. Also, the familiarity and the complexity of the images held plays a large role in this decision-making process.

As a conclusion, the consumer’s decision making process is complex and it’s very difficult to identify the role that image plays and it’s not the main factor influencing the choice. But, studies indicate that the image of a destination influences tourist behavior. And the stronger the relationship between the image of the destination and customer needs and desires, the more likely they are to have purchase intentions for that destination (Dimanche, 2003). Also, if the consumer has a strong image of a destination, it will probably have a significant role either for good or for bad, like an example, a strong negative perception would probably mean the destination is not even considered. The image dimensions could be critical in the choice of all potential tourists, especially in those who usually have limited information about the attributes of a destination not previously visited. Finally, following Gartner (1993), there is the conative response to the images held. If the images are the overall mental pictures which result from the cognitive and affective images, they are essentially stereotypes of the destination, which may be positive or negative, and are crucial in the decision making process by potential tourists as identified earlier. The conative response as a result of these images might be to visit, to postpone a visit to a later date, or to decide not to visit.

2.4 Destination Image Measurement: Quantitative or Qualitative Approach

Especially in the beginning, most of the research and studies that have been conducted on evaluating destination image were mainly done by quantitative methods. For instance, Baloglu and McCleary (1999a) have proposed “dimensions of image” from a not typical testable quantitative model based on the premise that destination images are a specific subset of attitudes comprising of cognitive, affective and “global impression about an object or destination”.

It is also very common to use the Likert Type scale or even semantic differential scale to measure destination image. Studies employing structured methods usually measure the various common image attributes through a set of semantic differential or Likert scale, thereby producing ratings on each attribute. Example for this concept are the studies of Hunt (1975) concerning four US states, Andreu, et al. (2000) concerning Spain or Sönmez and Sirakaya (2002) concerning Turkey. Many of these scales are the result of exploratory qualitative studies which identified the important attributes and determinants of the tourist destination image perceived by individuals (Beerli & Martin, 2004a). However, these methods have their limitations like any other models: sometimes respondents might be forced to respond to characteristics that do not necessarily comprise the image they have of the destination being studied (Tapachai & Waryszak 2000).

Up until 1993, Reilly (1990) was the only one to use open-ended questions in his destination image measurement study. After that, Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993) suggested that destination image construction consists of three dimensions: attribute-holistic, functional-psychological, and common-unique. This different components should be envisaged in three dimensions and they represent a successful tool in capturing all of the components of destination image (table 2).

According to them, “holistic and unique image are particularly important in determining how a particular destination is categorized (stereotype holistic impressions) and differentiated (unique attractions, auras) in the mind of target market”. The continuum that refers to “attribute-holistic” proposes that destination image should be composed of perception of individual features, or attributes,
and in terms of more gestalt, or holistic impressions. The “functional-psychological” continuum considers the functional image as directly observable or measurable, in contrast to psychological attributes that are more intangible or difficult to observe and measure. The third “common-unique” continuum is based on the premise that destination images can vary from those that are based on “common” characteristics, to those that are based on the most “unique”. In order to capture all of these components, a combination of structured and unstructured methodologies is necessary to measure destination image (Echtner, & Ritchie, 1993). With knowledge of this fact, Echtner and Ritchie developed a system of measurement using quantitative and qualitative methods, that is, a set of scales to measure the common attribute-based components of destination image along both functional and psychological dimensions, and a series of open-ended questions to capture the holistic components of destination image along both functional and psychological dimensions, as well as the presence of distinctive or unique features or auras. In particular, their study of the components of image provided a list of thirty-five destination attributes measured by the scales, that was generated using two methods, literature search and focus groups, that contributed with additional inputs. It represents a complete set of destination attributes.

An increasing number of researchers have incorporated this approach as a feature of their image study, because it has been considered very helpful in order to identify the true image of tourist destinations. For example, Murphy (1999), asking backpackers to list up to ten countries that they had visited, adopted the diagrammatic representation suggested by Echtner and Ritchie (1991) in order to cluster the words of imagery they had used to describe a country. It developed a comprehensive concept of the destination image that has been partly adopted for this study. In fact, the most important of the thirty-five Echtner and Ritchie (1991) attributes and their three open-ended questions, have been used in this research in order to capture the richness of the French Riviera image according to all three continuums of their model.

In addition to this approach, some papers reported the use of qualitative methods to evaluate destination image (i.e., content-analysis of brochures) (Pike, 2002). For example, some recent analyses have used the pictures that tourists take with their cameras (Gartner, 2003) or the words used by respondents of questionnaires (Ryan, & Cave, 2005). Prebensen (2007) explores tourists’ perception of relatively unknown destination images by applying three different methods: (1) word associations, (2) picture associations, and (3) college technique. But this kind of methodologies can be criticized as only offering limited possibilities for statistical analysis and, therefore, are subject to more
interpretational bias. Espelt and Benito (2005) propose a new methodology based on quantitative and qualitative analysis of the images (illustration, photos and texts) that appear in the tourist guide books.

As per stated above, it’s possible to conclude that the quantitative and qualitative methods are complimentary and necessary. In fact, in general, the academics agree applying both of them in the destination image studies.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research questions, a cross-sectional research design, or more commonly called a survey research design, is used, meaning that a sample of 150 Italian tourists visiting the French Riviera was taken at a certain point of time (02/16/2007 – 03/04/2007).

3.1 Data collection

This study has first reviewed destination image theories and practices used in the tourism industry in order to pre-select a set of main attributes to evaluate destination image and find an appropriate instrument to measure it. According to Reilly, (1990) to fully capture the components of destination image – attribute, holistic, functional, psychological, common, and unique – a combination of structured and unstructured methodologies should be used.

In this sense, with the help of a questionnaire, the primary data collection was conducted, and the Italian tourists’ perceptions obtained. A series of open-ended question that capture the holistic components of destination image, and a reliable and valid set of scales to measure its common attribute based components, have been pre-selected by the literature review.

The surveys have been conducted by performing face to face questionnaires during the 2007 “Carnival of Nice” edition event, in different street-based locations selected from the program of the event. The sampling was random during all two weeks of the manifestation either in the morning, in the afternoon or in the evening (many events are in the evening too). In fact, from February 16 to March 4, many parades and shows opened their doors for the public in occasion of this event. The event took place in the streets and it was possible to interview different kinds of tourists. Moreover, during the same period there were numerous different attractions/events in the towns nearby Nice in the French Riviera, giving a chance for more options to find Italian tourists. Naturally, these events attracted all kinds of tourists. So, this event represents a valid and reliable occasion to conduct a survey. For these reasons, the Nice Carnival was an obvious choice, not only because of the convenience to the researcher but to the respondents as well (people had some time to spare while waiting for the events in the street).

The procedure employed to select sampling units among the persons present at the above-mentioned places at a specific time, was a non-probability sample selected in a subjective manner. The respondents who fulfilled the characteristics of being Italian were asked to answer the questionnaires, which were filled out by the researcher. The total number of interviews was 150, and the actual sample distribution can be seen as follows:

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<tr>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>Female (56%), Male (44%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AGE</td>
<td>18 ≤ 30 years (20%), 30 ≤ 50 years (53.3%), &gt; 50 years (26.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORIGIN</td>
<td>North Italy (76%), Middle Italy (16.7%), South Italy (7.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LENGTH OF STAY</td>
<td>1 day (30%), 2 days (20.7%), 3 days (21.3%), 4 ≤ 7 days (11.3%), &gt; 7 days (16.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 Instruments to Measure Image: The Questionnaire

According to Echtner and Ritchie’s (1993) framework for measuring image, the questionnaire is a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions, in order to achieve a through picture of the French Riviera image.
The questionnaire has been divided in the following three parts:

- Tourists’ profile (tourists’ behavior), focused on the characteristics of the purpose of the visit, in order to define the visitors’ profile (purpose of the visit, how they got the information of the French Riviera, where they stay, etc.).
- The French Riviera Image (tourists’ perceptions of the visitors), related to their knowledge about the destination and the image of the French Riviera in their mind.
- Socio-demographic information of the visitors, focused on the characteristics of the visitors themselves.

About the closed-ended attribute questions, a standardized scale was used to measure the attribute-based and common components of the destination image. The main holistic and common attributes of a destination were pre-selected with the help of the literature review. In order to make the list of attributes being tailor-made to fit each study’s own purpose and objectives (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993), the list was complemented by a pilot investigation conducted with Italian travel intermediaries who participated in the annual trade show “ITB Berlin” in March 2007. Also, Italian friends and relatives of the researcher were interviewed by email. The only question this pilot enquiry sought answer to, was: “What comes to your mind when you think about the French Riviera?”. The only objective of this pilot investigation was to provide relevant attributes of the French Riviera in order to formulate the questionnaire. As a result of the pilot investigation, a list of 18 attributes was created, which was later used on the questionnaire to ask to the interviewees to grade on a scale between 1 (very bad) and 5 (very good).

Regarding the open-ended questions, starting from those that Echtner and Ritchie (1993) suggest, three new but similar open-ended questions were formulated. Because with the translation into Italian it could not be possible maintain the same questions. For this reason, the final set of questions used to measure the holistic and unique components of the French Riviera image were designed as follows:

- The first open-ended question was designed to capture distinctive or unique attractions of the destination (unique components)
- The second was designed to let the respondents think freely about the destination and to describe their impression of it (functional-holistic components)
- The third was added to describe the atmosphere or mood of the destination (psychological-holistic dimension)

4. THE ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

The results of the investigation will be presented in this paragraph and they will be shown ordered by different sections, that match those of the questionnaire. Only the socio-demographic distribution (third part of the questionnaire) has been presented previously, but eventually the differences noted which originate from any of the background variables (gender, age, place of residence or duration of the trip) will be considered in the following analysis. In fact, in general, the tourists’ image of a destination is not influenced by these variables.

4.1 The Tourists’ Profile

As shown in the theoretical background, the tourists’ profile, such as the previous experience in a destination or the source of information can influence their destination image formation. For this

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2 The questionnaire was be pre-tested on a sample of thirty tourists in order to modify its eventual errors.
3 The attributes that have been selected by the pilot investigation are: Historic sites/Museums, Beaches, Fairs/exhibits/festivals, Natural attractions, Climate, Nightlife and entertainment, Shopping Facilities, Local infrastructure/Transportation, Accessibility, Facilities for tourist information, Accommodations, Restaurants, Crowdedness, Cleanliness, Personal safety, Restful/Relaxing, Hospitality/ Friendliness/Receptiveness, Quality of services.
reason, based on the result of the first section of the questionnaire, the tourists’ characteristics have been analyzed highlighting the main inside and outside factors related to the tourists’ profile and that affect the tourists’ destination image formation\(^4\), as the following table (4) shows:

Table 4 – Factors Affecting Image Formation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose of the visit</th>
<th>Leisure reasons (36%)</th>
<th>Nice Carnival (47%)</th>
<th>Other reasons (8%), in particular for education</th>
<th>Business (5%)</th>
<th>To visit family and friends (4%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of previous visits and familiarity with the destination</td>
<td>First time (20%)</td>
<td>Second/third times (23%)</td>
<td>More than three times (42%)</td>
<td>Habitual holidays repeater (15%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of information</td>
<td>Personal Knowledge (37%)</td>
<td>Advice from friends (24%)</td>
<td>Internet (20%)</td>
<td>Travel Agency &amp; Tour Operator (14%)</td>
<td>Traditional Advertising (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of accommodation</td>
<td>Commercial accommodation (40%)</td>
<td>Secondary homes (20%)</td>
<td>Family &amp; Relatives (14%)</td>
<td>No night spending (26%)(^5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Nice Carnival (50%)</td>
<td>Reputation (12%)</td>
<td>Mild climate (10%)</td>
<td>Activities offered (5%), Other reasons (23%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main response for purpose of the visit obtained from the sample has been that it was for leisure reasons (83%), out of which, 56% was for the Nice Carnival event. In fact, in the questionnaire, the participation in the Nice Carnival has been separated as a specific leisure purpose of the trip.

Only 20% of the sample was visiting the French Riviera for the first time. The 65% was visiting this destination for the second/third times (23%) or more than three times (42%). So, 80% of the sample is familiar with this destination.

A 37% of the sample didn’t need to get information about the French Riviera, apparently their personal knowledge was enough to travel toward the destination. This information can confirm the familiarity of the Italian tourists with the French Riviera and their high number of repeated visits. Also, advice from friends represents an important source of information (24%): word of mouth is one of the main outside factors in the destination image formation and in the motivation to travel. The disparity between the influence of internet (20%) and the traditional advertising (3%) is evident. Differently, the travel agencies and the tour operator still represent a good source of information (14%).

The Nice Carnival represents the main reason for choosing the French Riviera as a tourist destination (50%). As told before, this high percentage confirms the strong influence of the Nice Carnival event on the tourist flows. 23% chose the French Riviera for other reasons: in particular, 35% of these people stated that they like the French Riviera and this had been the reason why they selected it; also, between the other reasons there are education (24%), finding a job (12%), friendships (9%) and closeness (6%).

\(^4\) The complete list of the main inside and outside factors influencing the destination image formation has been presented in the second paragraph.

\(^5\) The high number of excursionists (26%) could influence the results, but only the 6% of the people that were not going to spend the night, were visiting the Riviera for the first time. So, the tourists image formation can be considered reliable, because people had more than one occasion to create the image of the destination in their minds.
4.2 Different Dimensions of Image

The second part of the questionnaire regarded the image of the French Riviera. Following Echtner and Ritchie’s (1993) conceptual framework, there were different kinds of questions. First, the Italian tourists graded from one (very bad) to five (very good) each attribute selected for the French Riviera; secondly, they answered three open ended questions in order to identify the holistic components of the French Riviera image.

The following table (5) summarizes the results for each dimension of the French Riviera image.

Table 5 – French Riviera attributes’ grades (1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Null</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tourist Information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crowdedness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleanliness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Safety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restful/Relaxing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendliness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is evident that the percentage of the null answers has been very low, except for the commercial accommodation services, because of the high percentage of people that were not spending the night in the French Riviera or were spending the night in other places (second homes or family and friends’

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6 The complete list of attributes has been presented before.
houses). Considering that only a few people were visiting the Riviera for the first time, their grades can be considered reliable and all of them could easily mark each attribute. This means that tourists don’t have a limited knowledge neither any particular perceptions for the French Riviera.

Looking at the two above charts it is also evident the low percentage of “grade 1”, except for some attributes: cleanliness, personal safety, friendliness and restaurants. In the other cases “grade 1” is almost absent. Basically, these four negative grades refer to a negative part of the image of the French Riviera that is frequent in the mind of visitors. French people are known all around the world for not being friendly, such as another common and negative attribute is their un-sufficient cleanliness: these negative attributes are stereotyped in people’s mind.

It’s interesting to notice the presence of a negative grade for the restaurant facilities, that in particular, is referred to the as the quality of the food. This is probably because of the high number of touristic restaurants, above all, Italian restaurants, that don’t represent a particular attraction for the Italian tourists. Also, a negative grade appears for the personal safety that is a very big problem for the development of tourism.

The most frequent positive grade has been number three, while number two and number four appeared as “opposite” people chose “grade tree” or a number between “grade two” and “grade four”. The high percentage of “grade three” could mean that the Riviera has a positive image in the mind of tourists, but it doesn’t have particular characteristics. Only the climate attribute and the presence of natural attractions represent a very special distinctiveness that most of the interviewees highlighted, rating them with “grade five”. The same “grade five” has been given, in part, for the festival and exhibition attribute, because of the influence of the Nice Carnival, when the investigation has been conducted. Table 6 summarizes the grade averages for each attribute.

Table 6 – French Riviera attributes’ grade average

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Grade Average</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Grade Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>Nightlife and entertainment</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Attractions</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>Facilities for Tourism Information</td>
<td>3.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crowdedness</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>Quality of services</td>
<td>3.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairs/Exhibits/Festivals</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>Accommodations</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping Facilities</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>Restful/Relaxing</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>Restaurants</td>
<td>3.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historic sites/Museums</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>Hospitality/Friendliness/Receptiveness</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beaches</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>Personal Safety</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Infrastructure/Transportation</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>Cleanliness</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL AVERAGE</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.31</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As told before, Italian tourists liked the good climate and the natural attractions of the Riviera. In the case of the crowdedness, the interviewees attributed the highest rate to the highest numbers of people. This means that the French Riviera appears full of people (in a negative point of view), but it has been considered that the interviews have been conducted during the Nice Carnival in the street.

All attributes have a good grade average, between 3 and 3.5, that is a good result for the French Riviera. But, this positive position doesn’t appear so strong in the long time. In fact, considering that the total average is 3.31/5.0, more than a half, this doesn’t appear as a significant result: the Italian tourists rated with “grade 5” the climate and the natural attractions which are independent from the human influence. All the other attributes that people could manage in a better way, were considered sufficient but not excellent.

4.4 The Holistic Components of the French Riviera Image

In order to complement the result analysis, it’s important to consider the tourists’ answers to the three open-ended questions.
The first open-ended question was concerning attractions to see or do in the French Riviera. In general, it can be said that the majority of those who responded gave their answers in very specific terms, as many specific places were stated. Also the response rate decreased after listing the first two attractions: 38% of interviewees, in fact, didn’t mention the third attraction. The major tourist choices can be divided in the following three categories:

- Places (Monte Carlo, Promenade - Nice, Casino, etc.): 42%
- Natural attractions (sea, climate, beaches, etc.): 34%
- Events (Festival of Cannes, Nice Carnival): 24%

The presence of the several mentioned natural attractions and the climate confirms the highest judgments given in the close-ended question to the same attributes. It’s interesting to notice the high number of places, such as Monte Carlo, the Promenade, Nice, that are icons of the Riviera such as the two most mentioned events, the Festival of Cannes and, of course, the Nice Carnival, during which the investigation has been conducted.

The response-rate to the second open-ended question, regarding Italian tourists’ image of the French Riviera was high, except for the third adjective: people after listing two adjectives often were not able to define a third one. Because of this high percentage of answers, the French Riviera image held in the Italian tourists’ mind should be very clear and they should easily describe this destination. However, studying the answers in depth, the French Riviera image appears quite vague. The majority of the responses were given in very general terms, such as “beautiful”; and not very detailed information was given, as table 7 shows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7 – Image of the French Riviera</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adjectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautiful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mild</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bright/Sunny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaotic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exciting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyful/Colorful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disappointing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inhospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touristy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmopolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Empty)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several positive words have been used to describe the French Riviera. “Beautiful” is the most common used word (19.4%), followed by “mild” (10.93%). Also in this case there is a reference to the good climate of the French Riviera, confirmed by the other adjective used: “bright/sunny”. The French
Riviera is fun, but at the same time relaxing and pleasant. The word “loving”, then, probably indicates that Italian tourists are affectionate to this destination: as showed in the precedent analysis, most of the tourists had visited the Riviera at least one time before.

In opposite to this picture, some tourists have described the Riviera as chaotic and exciting, highlighting another aspect of the image of this destination that should be full of nightlife activity. Casinos and nightclubs, as people usually imagine it. Only a few Italian tourists have used negative words: for them the Riviera is disappointing (1.64%), inhospitable (1.64%) and dirty (1.09%).

In general, it can be said that the French Riviera has a positive image in the mind of Italian tourists, even if this image is vague and not specific enough. Only in the case of the climate attribute, as well in the first open-ended question, the responses are clear and explicit.

The last open-ended question, concerning the atmosphere or feeling expected when visiting the French Riviera, in opposite to the Echtner and Ritchie’s (1993) conceptual framework, has been modified, because the rate of responses was decreasing during the surveys. For this reason, five choice options to verify the match between tourists’ expectation and tourists’ experience were been included in order to accelerate the interviews. These options are: not at all, not very much, to some extent, quite a lot and totally. Only in the cases an interviewed person gave a negative answer (“not at all” or “not very much”), he/she should explain the reason behind his/her negative choice. The results of the questions are summarized in table 8.

No answers were given for a totally bad experience compared with the expected atmosphere. The most of the Italian tourists matched quite a lot their own expectation with their own travel experience and 33% of tourists was totally satisfied. Almost 20% of tourists have looked disappointing, which 8.67% didn’t like their trip. The reason behind these negative choices have been crowdedness, cleanliness, personal safety, restaurants, nightlife and entertainment, and shopping facilities. As a confirmation of the conducted above analysis, the same negative aspects of the French Riviera image that have appeared in the first section of this chapter are confirmed by the negative perceptions that tourists had about the crowdedness, the cleanliness, the personal safety and the restaurants in the French Riviera.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience vs. Expectation</th>
<th>Times Mentioned</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quite a lot</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>58.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totally</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To some extent</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very much</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. CONCLUSION

Most of the interviewees knew the French Riviera and its famous attractions and events (e.g. Nice Carnival, Festival of Cannes, etc.). They had a strong image of the Riviera in their mind and a very obvious perception “a priori”. Most of them came from the closest Italian Region (Liguria, Piemonte and Lombardia) and they already had a common mental picture of this destination, probably a stereotyped positive, and sometimes negative, image. The Italian tourists’ perceptions were clear and defined. They knew the Riviera, they often had visited those places for more than 2 times; they also knew about the negative aspects that they highlighted, but they continued to come by themselves to spend their leisure time there. Basically, considering that tourists can have a positive or a negative feeling towards a destination, being favorable or unfavorable (affective components), it can be said that the French Riviera has a positive, overly-attractive image (Kotler, et al., 1993), well known in the mind of the Italian tourists that are regular visitors of this destination. They have a positive image perception, they also know and highlight the negative aspects of the destination, and they are affectionate towards the Riviera. This positive shared image begets a significant difference in the
Italian tourists’ perceptions of the Riviera and in spite of the negative attributes, tourists continue to travel toward this destination for several years. It can be said that in general, a shared positive destination image determines a significant difference in the tourists’ perception and their travel choices.

Images are the general mental pictures resulting from the cognitive and affective image components; they are essentially stereotypes of the destination, crucial in the tourists’ decision-making process. This is the case of the French Riviera that with its characteristics and attributes (such as the mild climate and its sea and beaches) represents for the Italian tourists, a “beautiful” destination. However, in the author’s opinion, the constant use of the adjective “beautiful” indicates not only the general positive image of the Riviera, but also a common description of this destination. About saying beautiful is too common and is an easy adjective that in reality does not describe either good or bad, but just neutral: it looks like Italians go in the Riviera just to go somewhere different, not because it is extraordinary. Thinking for a moment about the tourists’ origin and their behavior, it’s clear that the Riviera is not attracting new flows and new types of Italian tourists for the last years, but only the people that are familiar with it and regularly spend time in this destination. Also several of them own a secondary home. They have a positive stereotype image of the Riviera, but they are also fond of this destination. “Loving” is one of the holistic impressions of the Riviera, such as “beautiful”, that came out from the analysis of the result.

In fact, using the quantitative approach of Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993), all of the components of the French Riviera image have been captured (attribute-holistic, functional-psychological, and common-unique), in order to determine how this destination is categorized or differentiated in the mind of the Italian tourists. The analysis of the results has shown:

- a quite good average in the attribute grade description (3.31/5.00)
- the presence of several unique mentioned attractions that are possible to categorize in natural attractions (sea, climate, beaches, etc.), places (Monte Carlo, Promenade - Nice, Casino, etc.) and events (Festival of Cannes, Nice Carnival).
- the use of several positive words to describe the Riviera, such as beautiful, mild, bright/sunny, loving, etc.

It has also been considered that the grade average, between 3 and 3.5, out of 5.00, in the author’s opinion, doesn’t appear so strong in the long time, because it depends, as told in the precedent chapter, principally from the climate and the natural attractions and not from the human factors. In fact, several attributes related to the human influence are negative, as the cleanliness, the personal safety, the hospitality and the quality of the restaurants. Also these negative perceptions are common negative stereotype images related to France and the French people, but they don’t influence the Italian tourists’ behaviors. It’s evident that a destination can’t differentiate itself only by the use of the natural attractions. This is because mild climate and natural environment exist naturally in several locations. For this reason, all resources have to be organized and used to add more value to the destination.

Considering that the conative image which is the probability to visit the destination in a certain next time, comes out from the cognitive and affecting image formation, there is a high risk for the French Riviera that in the medium/long time the above elements will not be distinctive enough to create an image that will influence the tourists’ travel choices.

In fact, the distinctive elements of the French Riviera image, match with Italian consumer behaviors, but apparently they are not sufficient to attract new tourists. The positive image of the French Riviera influences the Italian tourists travel choices, but it is not enough relevant in the Italians’ decision-making process, except for Italians that live close to the Riviera and usually spend their vacations in this destination. For this reason, it’s possible to associate the Italian tourists decreasing demand to the absence of new tourists and to the fact that the traditional customers of the Riviera are continuing to invest in second houses.
The Riviera should pay attention to the use of its tourists’ resources in order to rejuvenate its image and to maintain and better its quality of services and the tourists’ satisfaction. Basically, the French Riviera should use its positive dimension of affective image (arousing, exciting, pleasant, and relaxing) to better its efficiency (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999b).

The destination image is the focal point in the development and delivery of tourism products and the implementation of tourism policy. The aim of developing a strategic dimension of destination image is to reach competitiveness and success of the destination.

Natural and/or man-made resources available in the destination, such as physical resources, historical and cultural resources, etc., can guarantee a comparative advantage, while the ability of the destination to use or mobilize these resources over the long term determines a competitive advantage. Therefore, a destination has to effectively use and enhance its resources to compete with success: the image is the most important intangible resource from which tourists’ perceptions and travel choices depend.

In the case of the French Riviera, decline signals, especially with the Italian market, are evident: the number of visitors and the average of their expenditure are decreasing as well as the changes that are happening in the market segments. The French Riviera, in opposition to those destinations that have unique and famous attractions, like Paris, Rome, etc., should “identikit” itself because simply good beaches, pleasant hotels and mild climate is no longer good enough by itself to compete over other destinations. The image has to be used by the tourist actors with the aim to have sufficient added-value to attract new tourists and retain the loyal ones. Destination image can represent the strategic tool to (re-)image and rejuvenate the destination in order to attract more and different tourists.

The strategies to manage image are multiple, but they all must be designed to contribute consistently to the image of the destination. They could be based on communication (promotion, advertising, events, etc.), product development, pricing, and distribution. Focus, time and effort are needed. The strategic dimension of image should represent the major objective of a Tourism Office. And, considering that image is not static, an image management strategy is for managing changes that consist in a very difficult and long processes. But several destinations have successfully changed their image modifying their customer mix and communication strategies in a long term strategy.

As a conclusion, a clear understanding of travelers’ image is crucial for developing successful marketing strategies in promoting and positioning a destination. In particular, the studies regarding the image are fundamental to help destinations to compete with success over other destinations; and also to suggest the correct actions and tools, such as events, to maintain and renovate/reinvent a positive image, or to reconstruct a weak and/or negative one.

REFERENCES


