# EXPLAINING THE GAP IN THE IMAGE OF TOURIST DESTINATIONS THROUGH THE CONTENT OF AND EXPOSURE TO SECONDARY SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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**Explaining the gap in the image of tourist destinations through the content of and exposure to secondary sources of information**

**Abstract**

This work focuses on studying how secondary information sources that tourists have encountered before visiting a destination influence the gap in the image formed pre and post visit. For this purpose, (1) a classification of secondary information sources according to their greater or lesser information content, and whether the tourist actively searches for or is passively exposed to them, was proposed; and (2) a model explaining how different types of information sources and their perceived quality influence the image gap was empirically validated. The results show that the greater the number of high-content information sources consulted through active searching, the lower the gap in the cognitive image. In contrast, low-content information sources consumed through passive exposure generated a greater gap in the cognitive image. Furthermore, the degree to which these secondary information sources, actively sought, were perceived to be of quality negatively influenced the gap in the cognitive image, whereas the level of perceived quality of those sources to which tourists are passively exposed positively influenced the gap in the cognitive image.

## 1. Introduction

Tourists are constantly exposed to secondary information sources whose impact on the image of tourist destinations depends on many factors, such as the type of source, the level of attention paid to it, and the subject's emotional state. It is logical to assume that exposure to different secondary information sources shapes the image of destinations prior to the visit. A destination's image plays a significant role in the success of the tourist destination (Akhoondnejad, 2015), since a positive image represents a favorable competitive advantage in attracting first-time visitors, as well as generating a greater likelihood that the visitor will revisit and recommend the destination (Baloglu, Henthorne, and Sahin, 2014). A destination's image is central to the tourists' decision-making process and attracts the constant attention of researchers (Tseng, Wu, Morrison, Zhang, and Chen, 2015; Chen, Lai, Petrick, and Lin, 2016).

Over the last four decades of research into tourism, different concepts have been referred to under the common label 'destination image', without any consensus on how to define or measure it (Stylidis, Belhassen, and Shani, 2015). After an exhaustive literature review, Lai and Li (2016:1074) proposed a much more elaborate definition of tourist destination image: 'A voluntary, multisensory, primarily picture-like, qualia-arousing, conscious, and quasi-perceptual mental experience held by tourists about a destination. This experience overlaps and/or parallels the other mental experiences of tourists, including their sensation, perception, mental representation, cognitive map, consciousness, memory, and attitude regarding the destination'.

Acording to Martin-Santana, Beerli-Palacio and Nazareno (2017), there is widespread

agreement in the tourism marketing literature on considering the image as the result of three closely interrelated components: (1) cognitive, which is related to the beliefs of individuals about the attributes that characterise a destination; (2) affective, which refers to the emotional response to or the feelings that individuals express about the place; and (3) global, which corresponds to the overall positive or negative impression of the place The cognitive component influences the affective component, and both are antecedents of the overall destination image.

The process of finding information about a destination varies according to the type of information source used. The selection of a source is influenced by many factors, such as the characteristics of the trip, the cost of the information, or the ease of access to it (Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006).

There are a large number of studies that have analysed the relationship between secondary information sources used by tourists and the perceived image of destinations. However, these studies only analyse the relationship between different types of sources and the image before the visit to the destination and follow the scheme proposed by Garner (1993), which classifies secondary information sources as *induced*, *autonomous* and *organic*. Despite the interest that has been aroused by the concept of image in the literature, some authors have pointed out the scarcity of studies on the evolution of the image during the different phases of the trip: before, during and after the visit (Kim, Mckercher and Lee, 2009; Yilmaz et al., 2009; Lee, Lee, and Lee, 2014). These studies have shown the dynamic nature of tourist destination image and that the image of a destination can change not only during the trip, but also after the experience, which can affect the level of satisfaction and the likelihood that the tourist will recommend the

destination to others or repeat the visit themselves. In regards to this, Lee *et al.* (2012) highlight the need to study the antecedents of the gap in the image of tourist destinations. However, we have found no studies that have evaluated how the different secondary information sources influence the perceived change in the image of the destination before and after the visit.

Based on this, this research aims to contribute towards improving knowledge about the gap that occurs in the image of a destination before and after visiting it as a consequence of the congruence between the information received from different sources of secondary information and the perception of the image after the visit. More specifically, the general objective of this research is to develop and empirically validate an explanatory model that determines how different secondary information sources influence the gap between the pre- and post-visit image. To do this, we begin this work by reviewing the literature on the effectiveness of secondary information sources on shaping destination image. Subsequently, a new classification of secondary information sources is proposed, based on their greater or lesser information content and whether they involve an active search or passive exposure on the part of tourists. After describing the methodology followed to validate the proposed model, the results are analysed and the hypotheses are verified. Finally, the main conclusions and both theoretical and practical contributions are discussed.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Effectiveness of secondary information sources in shaping the image of tourist destinations

In the tourism marketing literature, there is broad agreement on classifying secondary information sources into three categories: *induced*, *autonomous,* and *organic*, which, according to Gunn (1972) and Gartner (1993), give rise to the following categories of image: (1) **induced image**, which is formed from commercial information sources such as advertising brochures, advertising campaigns in the media, and information received from travel agencies and tour operators; (2) **autonomous image**, which is formed by the influence of factors that have an involuntary or indirect impact on the image, for example, tourist guides, articles, films, documentaries, etc., and (3) **organic image**, which is created from non-commercial sources, such as the opinions of friends and family. According to their characteristics and the information they provide, they can be catalogued as more or less objective, accessible, and/or credible (Marton and Choo, 2002; Beerli and Martín, 2004c; Loda, 2011).

Traditionally induced information sources have been widely used for developing successful marketing policies. However, the development of the internet has begun to replace these traditional forms due to it being relatively economical and its wide reach and coverage. The internet has changed the marketing practices of DMOs because they can now customise the information they provide and interact directly with tourists, who are increasingly using DMO websites and social media as sources of information (Song and Kim, 2016; Molinillo *et al.*, 2018). Currently, the internet stands out as a medium of communication because of its great capacity to offer personalised, accessible, low-cost, and real-time information (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2006; Yuan *et al.*, 2003; Li and Wang, 2011). In addition, it represents the most widely-used means of communication due to its ease of consultation, the richness of its content, the great variety of devices

that support it, and the low cost of access. That is why it may be assumed that tourists who use the internet have more information than those who merely use or rely more on other, more traditional media during the search phase. The internet represents a massive, yet active, medium since it is a medium of wide diffusion where the user has an important role in the search for information. The internet allows the user to be an active part of the process of searching for information about a tourist destination and, at the same time, the recipient of the extensive range of information issued by the tourism sector (Leung, Law and Lee, 2011). In this regard, the internet is having a powerful impact on the choice of tourism products, destination images, and travel intentions (Tseng *et al.,* 2015).

The capacity of the traditional mass media to attract demand has diminished when compared to other more innovative forms of communication, such as the internet. This is why advertising on traditional mass media seems to have lost ground in favour of new communication channels that rely on new technologies (Loda, 2011; Markel, 2012; Law, Buhalis, and Cobanoglu, 2014; Zhao, Zhu and Hao, 2018). In fact, these new channels, in addition to impacting on the cognitive sphere of the tourist, like other induced sources, also have the ability to influence the affective sphere thanks to their dynamism, accessibility, interactivity, and vast contents (Li *et al.*, 2009; Molinillo *et al*., 2018). Other authors have also emphasised the superiority of the internet for providing an image of the destination that is credible or very close to reality (Marton and Choo, 2002; Kerstetter and Cho, 2004, Loda, 2011). However, there are also studies that have shown the internet provides confusing information that disorients users due to the vast amount of information available (Ahuja and Webster 2001, Eveland and Dunwoody 2000, Tremayne and Dunwoody 2001; Rodríguez-Molina *et al*., 2015).

With regard to brochures, although their effectiveness has been questioned in some works (Gilbert and Houghtnon, 1991; Ashworth and Goodall, 1995), they are a widely used means of communication in the tourism sector. Molina et al. (2010) consider brochures to be sufficient in meeting the information needs of the tourist, although they often provide a distant picture of reality given their tendency to use very attractive images that do not always accurately portray the destination. However, the results of this work correspond to the pre-visit phase, and included among its limitations is the need to investigate the importance of this source of information after the experience of the trip.

Travel agencies have traditionally had a great influence on the formation of the image of destinations (Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001) and, among the induced sources, they are considered as the most truthful and credible (Beerli and Martín, 2004a). The most significant drawback, however, is the possibility that they will generate expectations which are not in line with the reality of the destination in order to reach their travel sales targets (Frías, Rodríguez and Castañeda, 2008). Frías *et al.* (2008) demonstrated that the image of a destination provided by travel agencies tends to be more positive than that provided by other information sources such as the internet, which can cause confusion in consumers due to the large amount of information that exists, thus impacting negatively on the image.

Among the autonomous sources, travel guide books are characterised by their high level of credibility, high level of diffusion in the market, and detailed information - although they have the disadvantage of cost -, which can improve the image and promote the

destination from a responsible perspective (Rabotic, 2010). These information sources, together with word-of-mouth, are considered as the most objective and, therefore, have a higher level of credibility (Hanlan and Kelly, 2005; Lee, Busser and Yang, 2015). Although technological developments have provided more innovative tools for promoting tourism or providing information, travel guide books continue to play an important role in cognitive function since they are considered by tourists as an objective and credible source (Lee, Busser, and Yang, 2015). In addition, agents of the traditional mass media, such as cinema, television and literature, promote, confirm and reinforce images of places to their audiences and play a significant role in the formation of a destination's image and the tourist's decision-making process (Gkritzali, Gritzalis, and Stavrou, 2018).

Finally, organic information sources are considered as the most objective and credible information sources, especially when information is requested in person (Beerli and Martín 2004a, Hanlan and Kelly, 2005). Nowadays, the classic word-of-mouth modality has become more technological, where information is no longer disseminated through and solicited from close acquaintances, but via apps, blogs and websites that can host comments, voice chat, email, instant messages, texts, photographs, and videos. Travellers' blogs are one of the crucial channels for providing tourism information, especially in relation to affective destination image (Li *et al.,* 2015). The success of the blog phenomenon in the tourism sector is mainly due to the combination of two aspects: a greater diffusion of information, thanks to the personal computer platform, and a greater credibility associated with this medium of communication in its traditional form (Schmallegger and Carson, 2008). However, the message loses credibility in comparison to traditional word-of-mouth because it lacks the strength of interpersonal

communication (there is generally no personal relationship between the information seeker and the source) and because, very often, bloggers are used as spokespersons for a commercial message (Sen, 2008; Ishida, 2011).

In general, information sources can generate two types of gap that affect the perceived cognitive image of tourists: (1) the incongruence between the perceived image pre-visit, and the perceived image post-visit; and (2) the incongruity between the projected images of the same destination by the different sources (Camprubí, Guia and Comas, 2008; Marine-Roig and Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). This work focuses on the first kind of incongruence, which can be positive when the percieved image of visitors to a destination is better than the image they formed from secondary information sources before the trip, and negative when the opposite is true. In according to Marine-Roig and Ferrer-Rosell (2018), NTOs and DMOs need to calculate the incongruence between projected and perceived images in order to improve promotion of the destination.

## 2.2. Towards a new classification of secondary information sources based on information content and active searching for information

Although the classification of the different information sources proposed by Gartner (1993) has been widely accepted in the academic literature, the use of the internet introduces some confusion when classifying secondary sources, since the internet as a means of communication can be used at an induced, autonomous, or organic level. Thus, for example, the websites of public bodies responsible for the promotion of destinations should be considered as induced sources. However, an independent internet publication with high information content regarding a destination could be considered

an autonomous source. Finally, social networks, blogs or forums should be considered as organic sources. In the internet age, no image can be truly "organic" anymore (Smith et al., 2015).

With respect to the influence of secondary information sources on the gap between the image before and after the visit to a destination, it is obvious that the image formed before the visit is a consequence of exposure to multiple information sources. These combined sources will create an image before the visit that will differ from the image after the visit, depending on the greater or lesser information content provided by sources and the coherence between the projected image and the reality of the destination (Govers, Go and Kumar, 2007, Campubrí, Guia and Comas, 2008). On the other hand, the image that can be had of a destination before visiting it is shaped over time, both by the information to which an individual is exposed passively and by the information obtained as a result of an active search. In short, the image must be understood as a continuum that is formed by information transmitted by different agents or sources that act independently to form a unique image of a destination in the minds of individuals (Beerli and Marín, 2004c). People form an image by means of networks of associations that are built over a period of time as a consequence of stimuli that accumulate gradually. Therefore, it is unfeasible to analyse the influence of each of these sources of information in isolation.

In the previous section, we have analysed the effectiveness of the different information sources in providing objective, credible, and accurate information. One of the aspects that influences the greater effectiveness of the source is the interest shown by the potential tourist that leads to an active search for information and active participation in

its processing, unlike the messages that reach the consumer without solicitation and which they process passively (Beerli and Martín, 2004c). Smith et al. (2015) proposed that the image a potential tourist has of a destination goes through two phases: tourists first construct their 'baseline image' from passive or ongoing information gathering, which then becomes an 'enhanced image' after an active and intentional search for information. Along this line, Coromina and Camprubí (2016) propose that information sources can be classified according to whether the consumer is actively involved in the information search or not - that is, whether the search for information is active or passive. In particular, their findings prove that an active search for information is comprised of search engines, official websites, tourism blogs and brochures, whereas a passive search for information is comprised of recommendations from friends and relatives and mass media sources.

Based on the above, a new classification of information sources is proposed, according to the greater or lesser information content they provide, along with the active or passive role of the tourist in obtaining the information: (1) sources of high information content and active search, (2) sources of low information content and active search, (3) sources of high information content and passive exposure, and (4) sources of low information content and passive exposure. The different information sources that integrate each typology are collated in Figure 1.


[Figure 1 near here]

According to the proposed classification, secondary sources that may be considered as highly informative and actively sought by potential tourists are (1) tourist guides, (2) the institutional websites of the destination, and (3) the informative brochures obtained at

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the destination. As we have shown in the previous section, these information sources are highly effective, not only because of the high information content they provide, but also because they require the active processing of information.

Secondly, we find information sources with low information content, but whose use is the result of an active search by the tourist. Although they contain a low level of informative content on the destination, they have great importance in the projection of the image of the destination. Such sources may be (1) of an induced nature, such as travel agencies or tour operators, or (2) organic, such as requested word-of-mouth information, social networks, blogs, and internet forums. In general, these sources are considered to be quite effective, especially travel agencies and social networks, although their lower information content makes them less effective than those that provide more information and are processed as the result of an active search.

Thirdly, among the sources of high information content and passive exposure, we have included the sources of autonomous information that correspond to documentaries on the destination broadcast over media such as television or articles published in magazines (such as airline magazines), which project an image of the destination with high information content, but result in passive or casual exposure. Logically, these organic agents contribute towards projecting an image of a destination with high information content and have a high level of credibility and impact, especially on the change in the image of a destination among the people who form an image of it with little information. However, the fact that exposure to these sources is casual and passive makes them lose effectiveness in comparison to sources that are consulted as the result of an active search.

Lastly, sources of low information content and passive exposure are the least effective when projecting a complete image of a destination. Within this category, we have included (1) the induced source related to the promotional material provided through traditional mass media, (2) the organic source relating to unsolicited word-of-mouth information, and (3) the autonomous source corresponding to news of a destination issued by traditional media like television broadcasts, the print press and radio (publicity).

On the other hand, the effect of the effort devoted to the search for secondary information, in terms of the range of sources consulted, on the gap between the pre- and post-visit image could be affected by the perceived quality of the sources used by the tourist. In this way, the individual will seek and use the information from those sources that they consider most relevant in terms of quality (Osti, 2009). Thus, the potential tourist, during both the pre- and post-visit phases, selects the information received - that is, they filter the information, taking into account the quality they attribute to the source provided. In this way, the higher the perceived quality of the source, the greater the interest in consulting the information provided.

The quality of the information sources is defined by a series of information filters that the tourist uses to determine the extent to which the information collected is reliable, relevant or credible. In this sense, during the process of searching for external information during the pre-visit phase, the potential tourist evaluates the quality of the source in terms of relevance (first filter) and credibility/reliability (second filter) (Marton and Choo, 2002; Gursoy and McCleary, 2004; San Martín Gutiérrez and

Rodríguez del Bosque, 2010). According to Marton and Choo (2002), the relevance of a source lies in its ability to provide information closely related to the search, and credibility/reliability refers to the confidence that a user has in terms of the completeness, accuracy and reach of the information provided by the source.

There are few studies on the influence of the quality of information sources on the image of a destination. Some have evidenced the role of credibility/reliability, mainly in the phase prior to the visit or during the process of searching for information. San Martín Gutiérrez and Rodríguez del Bosque (2010) have concluded that the reliability attributed to information sources is more relevant than the number of sources in the formation of the cognitive and affective image of a destination.

On the other hand, the quality of the information source is related to the coherence between the reality of the destination and the image emitted by the operators. It is clear that the congruence between the actual characteristics of the destination and the transmitted image avoids the discrepancy between the image perceived by the tourist before the visit and the one perceived during the visit to the destination (Camprubí, Guia and Comas, 2008).

In short, the purchase of an expensive service, such as a holiday, brings with it emotional and financial risks. Therefore, consumers try to obtain information that is as credible as possible (Fisk, Grove and Jhon, 2000).

Credibility, as an indicator of the quality of the source, directly influences the pre-visit cognitive image (San Martín Gutiérrez and Rodríguez del Bosque, 2010). However, no

works have been found that show how the quality of the source influences the image of a destination after the visit. During the post-trip phase, the tourist will contrast the information provided by the sources with the reality of the destination, which may lead to a change in the perception of the image.

Based on the above considerations, and taking into account the differences found in the effectiveness of the different secondary information sources and the perceived quality of these sources, the following hypotheses are considered:

*H1: The greater the number of secondary information sources with high information content-active search, the smaller the gap in the cognitive image, pre- and post-visit is.*

*H2: The greater the number of secondary information sources with low information content-passive exposure, the greater the gap in the cognitive image, pre- and post-visit is.*

*H3: The perceived level of quality of secondary information sources, when actively sought, generates a smaller gap in the cognitive image than the perceived level of quality of secondary information sources encountered through passive exposure.*

## 3. Materials and Methods

The empirical research was based on a personal survey completed by tourists in the geographical setting of Tenerife, Canary Islands, Spain, a leading European destination which is host to almost 16 million tourists a year. The profile of the respondents was similar to that of the population of tourists visiting Tenerife for the first time from

abroad and from the rest of Spain. The sample selection was made using the empirical method of quotas relative to the dimensions of nationality, sex and age, proportional to the number of tourists in each one of the dimensions established. A structured questionnaire, translated into the tourists' native languages (English, German, Italian and Spanish) was used after each version had been pre-tested. The sample was obtained from the tourists who ended their stay in Tenerife and returned to their countries of origin the day after completing the questionnaire in order to ensure that their experience was both complete and recent. The total number of tourists that made up the sample was 411.

The measurement scales used in this investigation have been designed based on the existing literature. Thus, to measure the gap in cognitive, affective and global image, we based on Beerli and Martín (2004a) and used a Likert scale of 7 points. The gap was assessed in how cognitive, affective and global image had been better, the same, or worse than expected using a scale ranging from -3 to +3, -3 being much worse than expected, 0 the same as expected, and +3 much better than expected. Table 1 shows the used scales. The scale of cognitive image was developed and validated in Martín-Santana, Beerli-Palacio and Nazzareno (2017) and is made up of four dimensions: 'Natural Resources' (NATRES), 'Artificial Resources' (ARTIFRES), 'Tourism Activities' (TOURACT), and 'Environment' (ENVIRONMENT). The fit of model was satisfactory (CFI=0.89, RMSEA=0.08] and the measurements of internal consistency indicate that this model was reliable (CR>0.70, AVE>0.50). To establish the different secondary information sources, we based our research on the work of Beerli and Martín (2004a), also taking into consideration current information sources (official and non-official web pages, blog and social networks). We used 14 information sources (see

Figure 1). As measurement scales we used (a) a dichotomous question - YES/NO - to

assess whether tourists used each of the sources before their trip to Tenerife and (b) a 7-

point Likert scale to assess the utility and reliability of each of the sources used.

[Table 1 near here]

## 4. Results

To test the hypotheses, structural equation models (SEM) were used, employing the

maximum likelihood method. Figure 2 shows the results of the model proposed to

analyse the influence of the range of information sources used by the tourist, as well as

the perception of the quality of the information provided, in terms of utility and

reliability, on the gap in the cognitive image. Based on the classification of information

sources in the four typologies, according to the dimensions 'high vs low information

content' and 'active vs passive search', four variables were included in this model as

antecedents of the cognitive image gap, which correspond to the number of sources used

by each tourist in each of these four typologies of sources. Likewise, the quality of the

information provided by the sources, as perceived by the tourist, was also included as an

antecedent of the gap in the cognitive image, differentiating between active search

sources and passive exposure sources. This variable of perceived quality corresponds to

the arithmetic mean of the valuations given by each tourist to the sources used for each

typology.

[Figure 2 near here]

The results indicated that the fit of the model was relatively satisfactory, since CFI y

RMSEA values were close to those recommended by the literature [$\chi^2(42)=206.06$

$p$=0.000; CFI=0.89; RMSEA=0.09] and had a high explanatory power for the affective

image gap ($R^2$=0.609) and the global image gap ($R^2$=0.555), although to a lesser extent for the cognitive image gap ($R^2$=0.159). The results of the model allow the following conclusions to be drawn:

- The range of secondary information sources with high information content and active search generated a smaller gap in the cognitive image, since the standardised regression coefficient was negative and significant ($\beta$ = -0.161, $p$ = 0.006), unlike the other types of information sources, for which it can be observed that the number of sources used was directly related to a greater gap in the cognitive image, as the standardised regression coefficients ($\beta$) were positive and significant. Therefore, H1 is accepted.

- The range of secondary sources with low information content and passive exposure, contrary to what it was expected, were not the types of information sources that generated a greater gap in cognitive image. As can be seen in Figure 2, the standardised regression coefficient ($\beta$) for this type of information sources showed a positive value which is smaller ($\beta$ = 0.157, $p$ = 0.007) than for secondary sources with low information content and active search ($\beta$ = 0.241, $p$ = 0.000). Therefore, the sources of low information content and active search were those that generated a greater gap. However, there were few differences in the gap generated by sources of passive exposure, both of high and low information content. Therefore, H2 is partially confirmed.

- The perceived quality of information provided by active sources had a negative relationship with the cognitive image gap ($\beta$=-0.117, p=0.066), while that for passive sources had a positive relationship ($\beta$=0.179, p=0.011). Thus, according to these results, H3 is accepted.

**5. Discussion, conclusions and implications**

The typology of the information sources used by the tourist and their perceived quality, in terms of utility and reliability, are two factors to consider, given the influence they exert on the cognitive image gap according to the results of this research. Of the four types of information sources, into which the fourteen sources are grouped according to their information content (high vs low) and search type (active vs passive), the results show that the greater the number of high-content information sources used during an active search, the smaller the gap in the cognitive image. In contrast, the greater the number of low-content sources used during an active search, the greater the gap between the pre- and post-visit images. The sources of 'passive exposure' information generate a positive gap in the image, there being no significant difference related to the level of content (high or low). These results, therefore, confirm that the use of sources of high information content combined with an active search generates a perceived image of the destination before the visit which is very close to reality. Therefore, the institutions responsible for the promotion of destinations should promote the use of official websites for the destinations, as well as the dissemination of information in tourist guides and specialised magazines. Likewise, printed brochures obtained at the destination tend to project an image in accordance with reality. The fact that actively-sought sources of low information content generate a greater gap in the pre- and post-visit image leads to the recommendation that institutions responsible for the promotion of destinations closely track the information provided by travel agencies, as well as their own websites and other portals, so that the information they provide is in line with the reality of the destination. In general, we can conclude that, with the exception of

actively-sought, high-content sources, most sources of information - either because they lack information or through passive exposure to the information - generate a poor image which is far from reality, as can be seen in the case of Tenerife, which is much more attractive and pleasantly surprising to the visitor than its projected image would suggest.

The perceived quality of information sources influences the cognitive image gap, and actively-sought sources generate a smaller gap in the cognitive image than those encountered through passive exposure. Thus, when tourists carry out an active search for information sources, they tend to consider them more useful and reliable than the sources to which they are passively exposed. Therefore, the institutions responsible for the promotion of destinations should pay more attention to information from actively-searched sources, both of high and low information content.

This research is intended to contribute to a greater knowledge in the field of 'tourist destination image', especially in relation to the influence that information sources have on the image *after* a visit to the destination, both in the academic and professional fields. From an academic point of view, a conceptual framework has been attempted that would allow continued advancement in the development of the topic of destination image, and a better understanding of how it is influenced by secondary information sources in terms of the evolution of the image. In that sense, it is intended to respond to the need, highlighted by various authors, to study in greater depth how information sources influence the change in the perceived image of destinations. This is necessary given the small amount of empirical evidence on the subject, which we seek to address by covering the gap in the academic literature. From a practical point of view, the understanding of the influence of different information sources on the formation of the image gap will help operators in the sector and public institutions to project an image

that is as close as possible to reality, since multiple studies show that the gap in image before and after the visit to a destination influences the satisfaction of tourists. In this regard, those responsible for the promotion of destinations should use multiple means and channels of communication to reduce the effect of uncertainty on the gap. In order to reduce the gap in the image that exists before and after the visit, and also to improve the tourist's experience at the destination, it is important to use mainly sources of high information content that are actively-sought (destination's official website, tourist guides, specialised tourism magazines, printed brochures, etc.). In any case, the usefulness and reliability of the information provided should always be taken into account, given the relevance of the source typology and its perceived quality in the formation of the gap. On the other hand, it is also important to use other active sources, even if they are of low information content (information provided in person by travel agencies, tour operators, social networks, online blogs and forums related to tourism, etc.), since *all* active sources are perceived as useful and reliable and their use reduces the gap in the image.  At the same time, the commitment to attractive contents that are perceived as useful and reliable is a communication strategy that would have a positive impact in terms of the time a tourist would dedicate to their reading.

Although we have done our best to carry out a research work following criteria of scientific rigor, with the objective of providing empirical evidence that contributes to a greater knowledge and understanding of the process which leads to the formation of the gap in the image of tourist destinations, we are aware of some limitations, both conceptual and methodological. From a conceptual point of view, the research is limited to the context of its own objectives and, in addition to the information sources, there are other factors that influence the change in the perceived image of a destination that may

also affect the process of image change - which have not been included - such as, for example, variables typical of the information search process or the personal charactristics of tourists. From a methodological perspective, this work, like any other empirical research, presents limitations that affect the generalisation of its results, since the scope of the investigation only permits the results of the analysis to be generalised to the population from which the sample was taken and to the destination in which the research was conducted – in this case, the island of Tenerife –, which also shows a positive gap in image in its three dimensions. It would therefore be advisable to replicate this research in other contexts and to analyse the factors that influence the perceived image of alternative tourist destinations.

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*Table 1: Definitive items of the scale of attributes of the destination*

| DIMENSIONS | CODE | ITEMS |
|---|---|---|
| **COGNITIVE IMAGE** | | |
| **Natural Resources** | NAT1 | Climate |
| | NAT2 | Beaches |
| | NAT3 | Natural resources (landscape, natural parks, and fauna…) |
| **Artificial Resources** | ARTIF1 | Cultural heritage (historical monuments, museums, cuisine, concerts, festivals...) |
| | ARTIF2 | Tourism infrastructure (accommodation, restaurants, shops, golf courses …) |
| | ARTIF3 | General infrastructure (motorways, airports, public transport, health service, internet...) |
| **Tourist Activities** | TOUR1 | Recreation and leisure (theme parks, adventure tourism, golf, *wellness…*) |
| | TOUR2 | Nightlife (bars and pubs, discos, casinos…) |
| | TOUR3 | Sporting Activities (sailing, windsurfing, cycling, water sports…) |
| **Environment** | ENV1 | Environment (cleanliness, air quality…) |
| | ENV2 | Security |
| | ENV3 | Quality-price relationship |
| **AFFECTIVE IMAGE** | AFF1 | Pleasant and friendly place |
| | AFF2 | Entertaining, exciting and fun place |

**INFORMATIVE CONTENT**

| | LOW | HIGH |
|---|---|---|
| **PASSIVE** | - Promotional material through traditional media in the country of origin (TV, radio, newspapers, brochures, etc.)<br>- Unsolicited word-of-mouth information<br>- News about the destination issued by mass media in the country of origin (*publicity*)<br>- Films | - Destination-specific documentaries broadcast on TV in the country of origin |
| **ACTIVE** | - Information provided in person by travel agencies, tour operators, or other tourist companies<br>- Solicited word-of-mouth information<br>- Social networks<br>- Online blogs and forums related to tourism (Tripadvisor)<br>- Tourism fairs<br>- Other websites (tour operators or traditional/on-line travel agencies, accommodation, travel portal, airlines, etc.) | - Tourist guides<br>- Specialised tourism magazines<br>- Destination's oficial website<br>- Printed brochures obtained at the destination |

*(left axis label: **RECEIVER PAPER**)*

Source: Original

*Figure 1. New classification of secondary information sources*
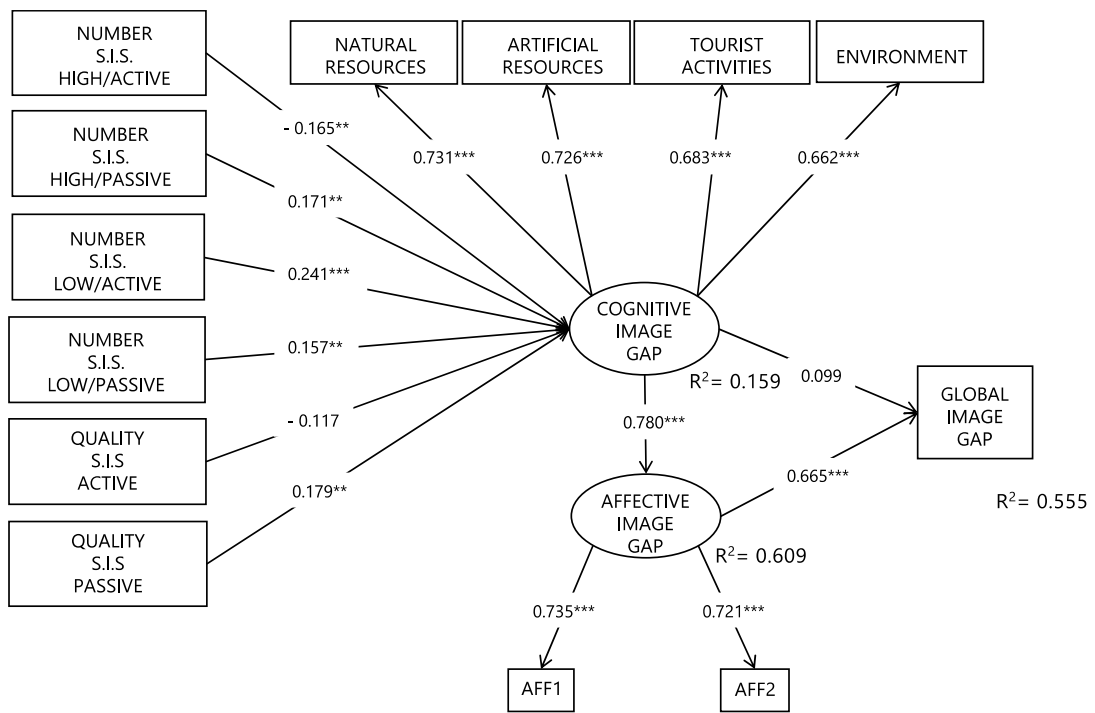
Figure 2. Results of the influence model of the secondary information sources used in the image gap