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Gap analysis between online destination image and perceived destination image

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## Abstract

# The gap between projected and perceived destination image

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**Keywords:** *perceived destination image, projected destination image, destination image elements, visitors, non-visitors,*

**Background of the study** Destination image is well recognised as a key construct in the destination selection process and as a fundamental factor for attracting tourists and boosting the economy of a destination in a number of studies (Iordanova, 2015; Kim and Perdue, 2011). It manifests in numerous studies that the term "destination image" is applied to describe a) the projected/desired image of a destination through the purposeful distribution of promotional materials about it and b) the perceived image, which is accessed based on visitors' beliefs and expectations and their perceptions of the place (Komppula, and Laukkanen, 2016; Mazanec and Schweiger, 1981). Scholars also argue that destinations' perceived images should resemble their projected image (Crompton, 1979; Mackey and Fesenmaier, 1997), where any significant differences should be kept to a minimum albeit the existence of some discrepancies due to the complex nature of the image formation process (Choi et al., 2007; Andreu et al., 2000).

**Purpose of the study** The study aims to capture the complete destination image of Margate, a seaside resort located in the South-East of England, by incorporating a comprehensive approach of data collection and analysis. The research uses secondary data to capture Margate's projected image, and consequently juxtaposes it with its perceived image. With regards to the projected image, the study reviews destination's main website and images on it, along with publications and the strategic destination plan in order to identify not only Margate's projected image. The perceived image is obtained through the analysis of qualitative primary data collected from visitors and non-visitors of Margate.

**Methodology** Margate's perceived destination image was captured through focus groups with visitors and non-visitors and semi-structured one-to-one interviews (16 participants), while for the projected images textual and visual methods were used. These methods were adopted to fully capture the cognitive, affective image elements of Margate, as well as to allow participants to discuss their own experience and concerns in regards to the destination's amenities. Pictures from Margate were shown to participants to enhance their responses in an attempt to increase the richness of the collected data. The collected primary data was content analysed, where the focus was on capturing similarities and differences between visitors' and non-visitors' perceived image of Margate in terms of its cognitive, affective, common/ unique dimensions and functional/ psychological elements.

## Results

### Projected image of Margate

Margate is described as a very historic, British and artistic place. Great prominence is given to the Turner Contemporary Gallery and "the UK's Original Pleasure Park" –Dreamland, Margate's Old Town and the Harbour Arm. Surprisingly, the pictures chosen to represent Margate are very "romantic" and artistic, conveying tranquillity and mystery. On the other hand, Dreamland is described as a very exciting and colourful amusement park, where families can experience one of the oldest British amusement parks. Furthermore, Margate was described as a place full of creativity, culture and history.

The resort is seen as very traditional, family-orientated but, by some, also a little cheap and tacky. Most travellers chose Margate because of its traditional amusement arcades and scenery, fish and chips, and water sports. In fact, walking and cycling along the coastline were also preferred activities, whereas shopping and sightseeing were not seen as very exciting.

#### Visitors' and non-visitors' perceived Image

The atmosphere in Margate was described as very relaxing, quiet and old-fashioned. Respondents mentioned its beautiful and sandy beaches on which they relaxed, walked around and had fun with families and friends. Despite the fact that some respondents shared the view that the variety of attractions is limited, visits to the Turner Contemporary Gallery, Dreamland, vintage shops and restaurants near the promenade were enough for a day trip or a short- break.

With regards to the attractions and pictures showed during the conversation, non-visitors were really fascinated by the sandy beach and the antiquity of Dreamland. The Turner Contemporary Gallery was described as a good-looking building but not very appealing as participants did not consider arts as their main interest. The shopping area was not considered as an essential element but several non-visitors showed a particular interest in the vintage and handmade products.

**Conclusions** Margate is perceived as declining and underdeveloped even if it has gone through several positive changes such as the opening of the Heritage Amusement Park, rejuvenation of the Old Town and the existing Turner Contemporary Gallery, but the changes happening in Margate have also provoked interest and curiosity in respondents' answers. The current study suggests that there are differences not only between Margate's projected and perceived destination image, but also between its visitors' and non-visitors perceived image. Visitors regarded Margate as underdeveloped and considered Turner Contemporary and Dreamland as not very large and engaging. The non-visitors' perceptions were very positive mainly as a result of the pictures of Margate that were shown to them during the discussions. Most non-visitors could not position Margate on the geographical map.

**Research implications and limitations** The population of this study was limited to the participants who were willing to volunteer and contribute to the research. The number of questions and the measurement of certain attributes allowed the researchers to examine several destination components. As a result, the findings were limited and mainly concentrated on the chosen attributes to be studied. Non-visitors' lack of knowledge of the destination resulted in less data gathered from them during the interviews.

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