

## TITLE: DESTINATION IMAGES OF NON-VISITORS

### ABSTRACT:

This article provides much needed understanding of destination images held by non-visitors. Recognizing the characteristics of non-visitor images and their formation is important in order to understand images more widely. This qualitative study assesses images of London. The views of three hundred people in the Czech Republic who have never visited London were obtained via an innovative open-ended research instrument. The study showed that non-visitors imagine destinations through comparisons with their own experiences of places. Findings indicate that images can be very persistent and that the first images formed of a destination endure over time. Although the research is based on people with no direct experience of London, the research highlights that a range of secondary 'experiences' influence image formation.

Keywords: destination marketing; place; city; image formation; Czech; London.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Many existing studies recognize the importance of destination image. How we imagine a place influences where we travel (Goodrich, 1978; Jenkins, 1999; Bigné, Sánchez and Sánchez, 2001; Gallarza, Saura and García, 2002), satisfaction levels (Pikkemaat, 2004; O’Leary and Deegan, 2005), as well as perceived loyalty to a destination (San Martín and Del Bosque, 2008). Destination image has become a well-researched aspect of tourism (Pike, 2002), but this study departs from existing work, as it analyses the reflections of participants on the characteristics of their destination image and the image formation process rather than assessing the content of images. It is also different because it focuses only on images held by non-visitors - those who have not visited the destination. This study is rooted in geography, but has obvious links to, and implications for, marketing. Destination images of non-visitors are linked to other fields including politics (D’Hautessere, 2011; Marzano and Scott, 2009), particularly public diplomacy (Anholt, 2006) architecture and urbanism (Castello, 2010), and literary analysis (Ziolkowski in Stambovsky, 1988). Imagination has been researched through the disciplinary lenses of history, geography, cultural studies, heritage studies, visual studies, cinematic studies, the arts, literary studies, philosophy, as well as psychology (Lean, Staiff, and Waterton, 2014).

The lack of literature on the images individuals possess of destinations they have never visited is highlighted by many authors (for instance, Beerli and Martín, 2004; Govers, Go and Kumar, 2007). Focusing on these ‘non-visitors’ allows the study to isolate the relative influence of different image sources and representations, as the influence of direct experience is not applicable.

Critics of current marketing research practice believe a much deeper understanding of how consumers really think is needed (Pike, 2008). As Tasci and Gartner (2007) point out, “Despite the overwhelming amount of research of destination image, there are still many facets of this complex construct yet to be investigated empirically” (p.424). Image formation is one of the least researched areas of destination image and needs more investigation (Baloglu and McLeary, 1999) whilst discussion of travel and imagination is neglected in the tourism literature (Lean et al. 2014). These noted gaps help justify the focus of our paper.

Images of London held by Czech non-visitors were explored to help understand how people imagine a place they have never visited. London was selected as it is one of the world’s most visited cities, and one of the world’s most widely known places. The city has a ‘rich image’ and it generates coverage for a wide range of different reasons, including events that take place there (Avraham, 2000). London is a complex as well as multi-faceted city (Raban, 1974; Stevenson and Inskip, 2008), a global capital that plays a special super-national role, for example in politics (Maitland and Ritchie, 2007). As Holcomb (1993) and Gilbert and Henderson (2012) remind us, London has been established as a tourist destination for a very long time.

The Czech Republic was chosen because the post-communist era provides a fascinating context for the study. As Williams and Baláž suggest (2001), there is a relative lack of tourism studies on the latter parts of the transformation period of the post-communist states. The extensive changes that followed the ‘Velvet Revolution’ (the change from communist to democratic regime) in 1989 impacted Czech society greatly. This political change radically influenced the way London was represented to individuals and provided an additional dimension to the study. Tourism was restricted in the Czech Republic in the past as, until

1989, outbound tourism beyond Eastern Europe and other countries of the economic alliance was very limited (Williams and Baláž, 2001). The Czech Republic is a member of the European Union since 2004 and in 2007 became part of the European Union's Schengen area, enabling free movement of persons and long-term stays of the Czechs in the UK without visa restrictions (Europa, 2014). At the present time, the Czech Republic is an important market for London tourism, something that helps to further justify analysing Czech images in this study. In 2012 325,000 Czech tourists visited the UK, with approximately 45% coming to London (Visit Britain, 2013).

## 2. DESTINATION IMAGES OF NON-VISITORS

Authors use a variety of terms to describe the images held by people who have not visited a destination (Hughes and Allen, 2008). The term 'secondary image' is sometimes used but this is usually considered to be one constructed before a planned visit to the destination (Phelps, 1986 in Lopes, 2011). Some existing studies make comparisons of pre-and post-visit images (Jani and Hwang, 2011). Others explore images of potential visitors, defined as those likely to visit the destination (Kolb, 2006). However, Pike's (2008, p.206) definition of 'non-visitors' is important, as he includes "those who would like to visit, but have not yet been able to for various reasons, as well as those who have chosen not to visit".

The term 'naïve' images used by Selby (2004) also deserves consideration. Naïve images are created without a direct experience of a locality and are held by the vast majority of people. These are seen as simplistic compared to the more complex, nuanced and realistic images held after a visit (Chon, 1990 in Jenkins, 1999). The simplicity of naïve images means they share similarities with stereotypes. Naïve images and stereotypical images are usually understood as widely shared or collective images, with people's perceptions shaped by

networks of socially constructed meaning. Jenkins (2000) suggests that destination images exist at a collective level, where people of one culture share images. This contrasts with much of the existing work on destination image which is grounded in behavioural geography / environmental psychology and which, therefore, privileges experience over cultural imagery and social representations.

Relph (1976), an eminent geographer, discusses attitudes to places not visited, something he calls “vicarious insideness”, arguing that “it is possible to experience places in a second hand or vicarious way, that is, without actually visiting them, yet for this experience to be one of deeply held involvement” (Relph, 1976, p.52). Importantly, he emphasises that our imagined experience of a place depends on the qualities of representations as well as on our ability to imagine. For Relph (1976, p.53) “vicarious insideness is most pronounced when the depiction of a specific place corresponds with our experiences of familiar places”.

Massey (2007), another renowned geographer, also recognizes some characteristics of place image that are rarely identified in the existing literature on destination image. She claims that our imagined geographies of individual places may sometimes be in conflict with each other. Imagination involves individual and social constructions of places, not merely perceptions of real places; and is something particularly relevant to studies of non-visitors. Massey suggests that geographical imaginations are inevitable, meaning that if someone has heard of a place then they are likely to have imagined what it is like.

Place of residence can be relevant in image formation. Prebensen (2007) highlights variance amongst images held by participants of different countries: something that could be attributed to the “cultural distance” between the residents’ culture and the imagined culture. Cultural

distance can be defined as ‘‘the extent of cultural difference between the host culture and the visitors’ culture’’ (Ivanovic, 2010, p. 100). This notion is explored in our study of Czech images of London, alongside ‘‘environmental distance’’, the contrast between the environment of the resident and the imagined environment.

A number of studies that assess general characteristics of destination images can be applied to destination images of non-visitors. For example, Echtner and Ritchie (2003) suggest that image components can vary from common features to unique features (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). They suggest that there are common functional attributes that can be compared across different destinations, for example climate or accommodation, as well as unique functional attributes of the destination like icons or special events.

Distinction is often made between designative (cognitive) and appraisive components of destination images, even though they are sometimes classified using different terminology (Richards and Wilson, 2004). The appraisive component can be further divided into evaluative and affective aspects (Gartner, 1993 cited in Richards and Wilson, 2004). The cognitive (or designative) aspect refers to their knowledge about a place, whilst the affective aspects refer to their feelings about it and evaluative aspects refer to evaluations. Some authors add a third dimension: the conative. The latter means behavioural intentions regarding the destination (Urbonavicius, Dikcius and Naviskaite, 2011).

The concepts of induced images (conveyed deliberately through marketing) and organic images (conveyed in an unintentional manner) which influence the overall image a person holds of a destination (Gunn, 1972) are cited within many studies of destination image. These are further classified by Gartner (1996) to take into account more nuanced ideas about the

intentions and perceived intentions of destination imagery. These ideas help us to understand the effects of different types of imagery, but they are not necessarily that helpful in determining how this imagery relates to people's existing impressions of a place. Our paper aims to address this deficiency as well as tackling other gaps in the image literature. There are a number of papers on destination images of pre-visitors and some on non-visitors, but these rarely go beyond assessing the attributes of images. This paper goes further as it aims to investigate the characteristics of destination images, not their attributes.

### *2.1 City images*

For many urban researchers the city is best understood as an 'imagined environment' even for those who experience that environment on a daily basis (e.g. Donald, 1999, Raban, 1974). As Pike (1996, p. 246) states, the city is itself "by any definition, a social image". The very idea of 'the city' has been created through practices, representations and the meanings that are generated by human cultures. According to Donald (1999, p.8) "the city is an abstraction which claims to identify what, if anything, is common to all cities". Therefore, it is impossible to examine city images without recognising the importance of urban representations, particularly iconographic representations distributed via film, television and painting. Distinct from perspectives relating to the cognitive personal and psychological perception of the urban landscape, cultural analyses of place image emphasise the importance of mythic places, imaginary places, and places constructed through the production of discourse. Studying city image in this manner allows us to understand influences on image that are usually 'taken for granted', to understand the power dynamics of image production and to appreciate the historical development and contexts of urban images.

The most obvious manifestation of discourse relating to the city is the vast amount of literature that includes representations of urban environments. For example, literary landscapes can be as colourful as ones experienced in person, as they may include all types of sensual imagery as identified by Ziolkowski (in Stambovsky, 1988). In Harrison's (2004) book *Fantastic Cities*, artists were asked to express their feelings about a city of their choice *they had never visited* – for example, the artist Papaconstantiou (2004, p. 25) wrote ‘Prague is one of the most romantic and beautiful places in Europe... I have always imagined Prague in the sound of music and the autumn rain ...’. This description highlights the potential richness of place images formed without direct experience of a city. For this reason, our study avoids the term ‘naïve image’ instead using the term ‘non-visitor images’. The aim of our study is to further understanding of destination images and their formation. This is achieved by analysing the images of Czech non-visitors - Czech residents who have never been to London.

## 2.2 Study methods

To enhance understanding of non-visitor images, an exploratory qualitative enquiry was conducted. Even though this is a qualitative study, in an attempt to increase reliability of the findings, the primary research involved a large number of participants who were broadly representative of the adult Czech population. Extensive research was conducted in the Czech Republic, where three hundred individuals took part in a qualitative study. Inspired by the techniques developed by Govers, Go and Kumar (2007), people in three case study areas were asked to respond in writing to open-ended questions about London. The three case study areas were Prague 8 (metropolitan area), Kolín (urban area) and Dačice and surrounding area (small towns and villages). This geographical diversity allowed the research to minimise one potential source of bias (where people lived) and helped to increase the representativeness of

the sample. The research instrument was developed and administered in two stages. In the first instance, questions were included in a piece featured in local magazines with respondents invited to reply. This approach did not generate enough responses, so follow-up work was undertaken in public libraries where the same research instrument was administered in person. The responses from these two exercises were amalgamated.

Two pilot studies were conducted. The first was conducted on a snowball sample of 48 participants and a second pilot was undertaken through KNIHY - a Czech magazine that is distributed nation-wide. Amendments to the research instrument and its administration were made as a result of the pilot studies.

A quota sampling procedure was used in an attempt to gain a representative sample of residents. Even though many do not recognize sampling as relevant to qualitative studies, others see it as crucial, for example Wilmot (2005). The sample was broadly representative of the adult Czech population in terms of education (ČSÚ, 2011) and mirrored the age profile of adult Czechs (ČSÚ, 2009). Age quotas were identified and achieved in all three case study areas (see Table 1). Gathering a representative range of ages was important given the very different political contexts experienced by Czechs during the past century.

Demographic variable	Demographic group	Composition in this study	Composition in the Czech Republic	Differences between the sample and the Czech population
Age	18-34	31 %	31 %	0%
	35-54	34%	34%	0%
	55 and over	35%	35%	0%
Education	Basic education	1%	18%	17%
	A-level, colleges, NVQ	63%	64%	1%
	University degree	18%	13%.	5%
	Did not state	18%	5%.	13%

Table 1: The profile of the participants compared to the profile of the Czech adult population

The final research instrument posed six questions. The first and the fourth questions covered experiential images and main sources of image and were inspired by questions asked by Govers et al. (2007). The second question asked respondents if they thought their residence in the Czech Republic influenced their views of London (and if yes, how and if not, why not). Further questions were also included to establish which sources influenced participants' images of London.

Responses were written in Czech by hand, and were collected and subsequently translated into English by the lead researcher. They were then analysed using thematic framework analysis as described by Ritchie and Spencer (1994). Thematic analysis is normally used with the qualitative studies of destination images, for example by Hughes and Allen (2008). Six stages of data analysis were undertaken: familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). Some of the stages, in particular familiarization and identifying a thematic framework stages were conducted repeatedly in order to ensure rigor. During this process, smaller themes were put together to form broader themes. Data were coded manually by the lead researcher. A 'self-reflexivity' approach was used, meaning that participants reflected on characteristics of their own destination images and this data formed basis for the thematic analysis. Engaging participants as co-analysts, using their reflexivity in analysing own responses, is normally used in psychology (Smith, 1994). The final choice of themes and their naming were then discussed and agreed on by all the members of the research team.

The study generated a large volume of data. The fact that participants were asked to write down their responses meant that they had sufficient time to answer the questions at length if

they wished. As a result, many contributions were highly reflective of the nature of their own images. Some responses were incredibly rich and complex, whereas responses from other participants were - perhaps inevitably - very short as some individuals did not have any images of London. Contributions by participants were also highly diverse in terms of their content. However, the aim of our study was not to reveal what people thought of London, but to examine these images to reveal more about their characteristics and how they were formed. In the analysis below, the six key themes that emerged from the data are discussed. Quotes are used to illustrate these themes, with participant numbers referring to where these images were collected (1-99 city; 100-199 town; 200-299 a more rural area).

### *2.3 Comparison of images with own experiences*

This study found that non-visitor images tend to be based on comparisons with participants' own experiences. In this sense, their images were inherently relative. As participant 245 wrote, when thinking of London 'it is impossible to avoid comparing with the life in the Czech Republic'. Although individuals were not specifically asked for comparisons they mentioned them constantly. People who found it difficult to imagine London cited the lack of a comparable city as an obstacle to their image formation. Participant 101 wrote, 'we do not have a city in the Czech Republic that would be close to London in terms of its size or multicultural aspect. So it is not possible to make a comparison'. In this sense, cultural distance seems to affect non-visitor images.

Specific traditions were also compared. As participant 215 reflected, 'we have different cultures and customs'. Imagined traditions were thought to be different and distant from Czech traditions. For example, participant 116 imagined that, 'if in the Wenceslaus's square someone would take off his shoes and socks and took out his lunch and read some book,

everyone would look at him with astonishment”, implying that in a public square in London this would be fine. The language barrier - a key feature of cultural distance - was often evident in the images of London held by non-visitors. Participant 215 wrote, “we do not speak English here and I am not particularly strong in English”. Food and drink were also frequently imagined and compared in the responses. For instance, participant 104 wrote, “[in London] I would be focusing on tasting different kinds of beer, barley, upper fermented, that are rare in the Czech Republic”.

The mix of cultures in London was compared, with some respondents imagining a “bigger diversity of residents in London” (participant 87). Personal characteristics were also compared - as participant 202 stated, “I think that in the Czech Republic we have a different mentality”. Residents of London were imagined for instance as “calmer ... more balanced” (participant 245). These images of London are diverse, but they share a common characteristic - they are comparative.

Apart from cultural distance, another form of distance expressed in the images of participants was the comparison of environments, in other words ‘environmental distance’. Individuals compared the environment of their place of residence, to the imagined one in London. For example, comparisons of the weather and climate were mentioned. Participant 97 recognized the differences in weather suggesting that, “the weather in London will probably be different than ours. In the summer it will be colder”. Citizens of Prague compared the imagined environment of London to that of their city. For example, participant 21 imagined, “I think that even though Prague is also a metropolis at the heart of Europe, I imagine London to be much bigger than that”. The rivers of the cities were compared by participant 209 who wrote,

“bridges over the wide Thames where the water (of neutral colour, similar to the one in Vltava in Prague) lazily travels in the direction of the sea”.

Where participants live seems to affect environmental distance. The comparisons evident in the data differed according to whether non-visitors lived in a city, a town or a rural area. For example, participant 210, from a rural case study area, made the following comparison, “and there will not be such tranquillity and well-being, but rather bustle, stress and problems. However, London also offers sights and possibilities that cannot be found here, that is why we can enjoy the possible stay”. Non-visitors from Prague conversely compared the imagined environment to that of their city. For example, participant 18 wrote, that “[I] probably imagine London more or less like Prague”.

The assertion that images are based on comparisons with what one knows can be linked to ideas in geography and psychology literatures. As Massey (2007) mentions, individuals use the background information that they have about the world in general to form their images. On a similar note, Echtner and Ritchie (2003) link destination images with Gestalt theory from psychology, suggesting that destination images are formed using known information to turn vague, partial images into something more complete. Some comparisons are mundane - for example the weather is different; imagined individuals speak English - and it is perhaps unsurprising that participants use comparisons to construct their images. It seems that the perceived differences between the two cultures are manifested in the place images; highlighting the significance of cultural distance in individuals’ thinking (Hall and Hall, 1990; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010) and thus in their destination image formation. The concept of environmental distance also seems to be important: non-visitors compare their own environment to the imagined one. These findings are in line with those discussed by

Prebensen (2007, p. 749) “cultural differences together with varying geographical distance to a certain destination can cause significant varieties in knowledge, attitudes and behavior towards that destination.” The comparisons can also be seen as examples of evaluative images (Richards and Wilson, 2004).

#### *2.4 Persistence of destination images*

Non-visitor images seem to persist in the minds of individuals for a long time and appear to be resistant to change. ‘First images’ are those that individuals form about the destination when they first become aware of it, and can be derived from a diverse range of sources. First images seem to have a special significance for non-visitors. For example participant 22 wrote, ‘I was first captivated by London as a child in books by A.C. Doyle’s ‘Sherlock Holmes’...so the image of London as a gloomy city probably cannot be erased by anything from my mind anymore’. Similarly, participant 260 stated, ‘all the information and images about London I have since my childhood. As I wrote already, when I was little, I got a postcard from Piccadilly with red double-deckers’. These examples emphasize that images created in childhood persist into adulthood. The first images different individuals hold are diverse in content, but what they have in common is the fact that they are retained for very long periods of time. ‘School’ was identified as one of the key sources image sources (identified by 70 participants) reaffirming the importance of early sources and their persistence. As participant 222 mentioned, ‘the image of London is created from the earliest years, probably from the primary school, there first time I heard about something called London’.

Persistence is also evident in the anachronistic nature of images. People were aware that their images might differ from the present reality, but they still retained them. Participant 121

wrote, ‘‘certainly the first image is mainly from the literature, where London is ... But probably it is not like that anymore’’. Destination images of non-visitors seem to exhibit a certain time lag. This remnant from times before the Velvet Revolution is reflected in the perceived (shortened) geographic distance between London and the Czech Republic: as participant 134 wrote, ‘‘nowadays London is very accessible, but it was not always like this, so there is definitely still that exotic element’’.

The persistence of images, demonstrated by time lag, seems to be created by sources with enduring qualities such as books and films. Participant 99 wrote that he was influenced by ‘‘K. Capek – an interesting description of English customs – but this is from the era of the first Republic (1920s)’’. A number of participants wrote about specific films set in the past: participant 32 mentioned ‘‘dark pictures from the film about Jack the Ripper’’; participant 55 identified fictions set in the past, ‘‘and film - for example Sherlock Holmes ... and Elizabeth - the golden age’’. Even though such images are based on past realities, they are recycled in contemporary media and contribute to current image formation. This links to Donald’s (1999, p. 2) observation that ‘‘the city conjured up by Dickens is not a place we have left behind’’. The Velvet Revolution took place in 1989, but images from before the Revolution are still remembered and remain present in the minds of many Czech individuals. Before 1989 there were significant barriers to travel and limitations on the content and availability of information about London. For example participant 96 felt that ‘‘...the fact that I could not go there (I lived most of my life under communism) probably influenced that I got my images from the literature. I did not look for guidebooks and travel-related books about London’’. The many changes in information provision and travel restrictions that took place in 1989, (Williams and Baláž, 2001), inevitably affected images of London. For people with no direct experience of visiting London, the obvious restrictions endured by Czechs under the

communist regime still influence city images held today. The persistence theme is in line with existing literature that proposes that image change occurs only slowly (Anholt, 2009; Pike, 2008).

### *2.5 Unknowability of non-visited places*

The unknowability and elusiveness of non-visited places was also identified in the data. Some people evidently found it challenging to describe a place they had not visited. Experience was seen as essential to forming an evaluative image of a place, as outlined by participant 227, “if I want to talk about London either positively or negatively I have to visit the city first”. Similarly, participant 106 wrote, “a person does not get to know much about London if he does not visit it himself – in my opinion”. Various reasons were given for this lack of imagery, including language: “I cannot imagine life in London due to the language barrier. I do not have an image about life in London”.

The perceived unknowability of the non-visited place did not necessarily result in no images, as only seven participants mentioned that they have no image of London, but there were more complicated effects of finding it hard to imagine London. For some, it meant plural images of the imagined destination. These parallel images are built on different destination image sources. For example, participant 272 wrote, “I have never visited London, but I have some image of this place. I should rather say a number of images. The first one is linked with literature. And then there is the image from the travel books”.

Some participants recognize that their own images are inaccurate. Participant 218 reflected, “but I do not know if it is really true because only from narratives it is difficult to judge how they are in reality”. Along similar lines participant 29 wrote, “my image will probably be

largely inaccurate”. Contrasting with more critical perspectives in academic texts, participant 168 recognized that image and reality are different concepts with different characteristics by stating, “image is not the same as reality”. Some compared their images to dreams, in particular participant 299 wrote, “and if I daydream, I start to think about other things as well”. Images of non-visitors often seemed to be hazy, as participant 126 commented, “my images of London are blurred, this is probably the right expression”. A nostalgic view was also included where people were reluctant to contaminate their imaginary perceptions with dissonant realities. Participant 75 for instance commented, “I do not want to go to London, because I do not want to lose my image of London that I have from the literature”. The wish by some participants to compare the imagined with reality was also evident in the dataset, as participant 58 pointed out, “I cannot make comparisons. I will find out when I go to London”. However, the unknowability of places is not necessarily resolved by visitation. It is the complexity of places that make them elusive epistemologically. For example, Raban (1974, p.92) talks of the “intense we difficulty we experience when we try to perceive the city”. This is particularly true for a large city like London, which Raban (pp.94-94) feels is “unreadable...the closer we look the more impenetrable and unprecedented it all seems”.

## *2.6 Archetypal images*

Many of the scripts collected indicated that respondents had generic images of a city that underpinned more customized images of London. This highlights the importance of ‘archetypal city images’ to non-visitor images and their formation. Archetypal images are background images that inform the destination image of non-visitors. Participant 207 wrote, “I would probably be surprised by large amounts of people, dense transport, city noise, turmoil, simply the typical features of a big city”. Archetypal images were formed from representations but also from direct experience. Participant 31 wrote that his image was

formed through ‘general images of trips to other cities’. Living abroad was also a source - participant 15 stated, ‘most probably the fact that I lived a year in Ottawa. I liken London exactly to this city’. This latter comment also reaffirms the importance of comparative images discussed previously.

Archetypal images were often linked to the notion that London was best understood as a metropolis. For instance, participant 189 wrote, ‘I always think that a metropolis, especially if it is a world metropolis has the right and possibility to influence what happens in a country’, adding that ‘it provides a person with more opportunities, it enables him to get an overview, but certainly also the feeling of superiority over the rest of the world’. Participant 210 wrote, ‘London is a metropolis, so I imagine a lot of people, cars, buildings, billboards I believe that one will meet a lot of tourists’. The archetypal metropolis was connected to a range of characteristics, mainly related to size (big, confusing), diversity (ethnically mixed) and sound (noisy). Participant 175 wrote ‘metropolis. If you do not have a guide, you are lost’. Participant 109 mentioned ‘metropolis – a lot of minorities’, whilst participant 290 referred to the ‘noise of the metropolis’. Individuals who lived in the city tended to imagine the archetypal metropolis more positively than those residing in the town or rural case study areas. This reinforces the importance of environmental / cultural distance in image formation. Archetypal city images can be linked to the existing literature – general qualities and attributes of a city are discussed by many authors (Donald, 1999; Raban, 1974; Pike, 1996). Archetypal city images thus can be regarded as akin to ‘common attributes’ of destination images (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003), albeit specific to city destinations.

## *2.7 Credible image sources*

The credibility of image sources was also identified as an important theme. It was evident from the dataset that participants' images of London are largely influenced by sources they thought credible. The believability of a projected image was something brought up by participant 222 who wrote, "images about places we have never visited are created mainly by the media and it is up to each person if he believes the information or not".

This study showed that the sources that are perceived to be credible, such as autonomous sources and solicited and unsolicited organic images, are highly influential in image formation. The role of formal education was particularly important, reflecting the relevance of first images discussed previously. Participant 56 mentioned that his image "was created only at secondary school, where my teacher of English who lived in London for some time, told us about London". Other school subjects were identified as key in image formation as well. Representations "in geography" (participant 5), "in history" (participant 193) and "literature" (participant 193) were also identified. In summary, the images created in primary and secondary school, are essential to overall destination image formation of non-visitors, and influence subsequent interest in the destination.

The research also revealed the richness of various credible destination image sources, and the complexity of sources that form image. In addition to school, a range of other image sources were identified - for example: "friends" (participant 12), "acquaintances" (participant 118) and "relatives" (participant 234) who had visited or lived in London, and obvious media sources: "television" (participant 92), "films" (participant 71), "magazines" (participant 29), "newspapers" (participant 45), "the Internet" (participant 5), "radio" (participant 166). "Promotion" by tourism organizations was, perhaps unexpectedly, mentioned by very few

participants. This reinforces Gartner's (1996) argument that autonomous sources are highly influential in image formation.

Out of the 300 participants, the following were the five most mentioned image sources - books (155 participants), people who had visited the destination (148 participants), television (147 participants), films (107 participants) and school (70 participants). Many of these sources are discussed in the existing literature. A number of less acknowledged image sources were also identified by this study. Interestingly, many of these were mobile phenomena - things linked to London that could be experienced outside the city. For example, people from the destination - "Englishmen" (participant 150), were mentioned as key image sources. Other sources included music; for example participant 270 commented, "when I was young, the Beatles". The Royal Family (participant 38) and "the visit of crown Prince Charles" were also identified as important. Theatre was identified in the response of participant 285 who stated, "regarding the city itself, I was definitely influenced by theatre". Further sources included "talks" (participant 186), "language - English that grew to my heart" (participant 11). Products from the destination were also identified as influential destination image sources - for example "clothes" from London (participant 147). Such sources emphasise the blurred distinction between representations and experiences. These phenomena were all 'experienced' in the Czech Republic yet inherently represented London and - in the absence of direct visitation - helped form images of the city.

London is a place with a rich image (Avraham, 2000) and so provides an ideal case with which to assess the relative influence of a wide spectrum of possible destination image sources. The distinction between biased and less biased sources of image has already been made by Gunn (1972) and further developed by Gartner (1996). This study confirms the

influence of independent image sources and highlights the wide spectrum of credible image sources available nowadays.

### *2.8 Different types of non-visitor*

The data collected also suggest that destination image formation differs according to different types of non-visitors. The different types of non-visitors identified in this study, include: potential visitors (people who would like to visit); pre-visitors (people who are intending to visit soon); non-visitors without an interest in visiting; and non-visitors who cannot visit the destination. These categories influence image formation processes. Image formation in the case of potential visitors and pre-visitors is influenced by interest in the destination. As participant 210 wrote, “my image of London is definitely influenced by the fact that I would like to go there and travel through not only London, but the whole island”. Images reflect the image sources used by the individual, which differ according to the type of non-visitor. Pre-visitors (those who have decided that they are going to the destination), actively look for and use sources that other types of non-visitors do not use. For example, participant 256 stated the different sources he would use if he decided to travel to the destination, such as specific travel guides, “I will buy maps in advance and guides and I will try to get to know London as much as possible”.

The image formation processes of non-visitors without an interest in destination and those non-visitors who cannot visit the destination differ from the other types of non-visitor. When there is no decision to travel to the destination or no specific interest in the destination, image sources are limited to what a person normally sees or hears and their everyday habits. So images are obtained passively or incidentally. This trend is illustrated well by the views of participant 160 who wrote, “everyone has their images according to which environment they

come from, which books they read and which type of information they seek''. There seem to be different types of non-visitors and these groups form destination images in different ways. Studies of destination image of non-visitors to date have mostly been conducted with potential visitors (Phelps, 1986 in Lopes, 2011) and pre-visitors that hold images once they have decided to travel there, before their visit (Kolb, 2006). By accessing a wider range of non-visitors, this study has revealed the important effects that interest in a destination has on the image formation process.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the destination images of non-visitors with particular focus on the characteristics of these images and their formation. The findings are based on three hundred written responses to a set of open-ended questions. The primary research was conducted in the Czech Republic using the same instrument delivered in two ways, firstly (remotely) through local magazines and subsequently (in person) through libraries. The collected material was then translated from Czech into English and further analysed through thematic analysis.

The work focused on the characteristics and formation of non-visitor images, rather than their specific content. This increases the wider relevance of the work. The study found that images are based on comparisons, highlighting the relativist nature of destination imagery. In conjuring up images of London, participants made a number of comparisons with their own country and place of residence in terms of its cultural, natural, and built environments. Some participants also drew on cities that they had visited in the past. Images are thus revealed to be relative to what the individual has directly experienced. In this sense, experience is still fundamental to understanding non-visitor images. Comparisons are also made with generic

images of the city (archetypal imagery). A number of attributes of archetypal city images were identified and their influence explained.

The research also found that specific images that non-visitors possess are highly persistent. This is something recognized in the marketing / public diplomacy literature, particularly by Anholt, (2009, p.6) whose work also suggests place images are very robust. Images of prominent cities seem to be formed at an early stage in life and are resistant to change. This highlights the importance of knowing more about first images – i.e. children's images of places.

Importantly, the unknowability of destinations to some non-visitors was also identified. Some individuals found it challenging to describe the imaginary and sought more certainty - expressed via their wish to compare their images with reality. This reinforces Relph's (1976) view that non-visitor images are dependent on people's powers of imagination. It seems that some individuals simply do not have a destination image of places never visited. The unknowability of a city as a characteristic of destination image of non-visitors is also linked with the fact that individuals hold plural and, at times, contradictory images of the imagined destination. This provides further evidence that tourists hold a more nuanced understanding than marketers seem to think (McCabe, 2005). Perhaps most significantly, some participants recognize that their own images are inaccurate. This suggests that the obsession with image in marketing and consumer behaviour studies may be misplaced – if people have images but know they are wrong this challenges the common assumption that destinations images are the key influence on travel behaviour.

Destination images are formed through a wide range of sources. Credible sources that include novels, certain films and school have an unusually strong influence. This may be linked to the different levels of accessibility to - and trust of – ‘official’ information in the communist/post-communist society. But it is indicative of wider trends too. Fatigue with traditional advertising means that people are influenced by what they trust most and / or what they find most interesting. Acknowledging a broader range of credible image sources, for example school, can be useful for future quantitative image research as these sources are not usually included in structured destination image questionnaires. Our study also helps understand non-visitors further by identifying different categories of non-visitors and their implications. Those who have not visited a destination can be categorized into potential visitors, pre-visitors, non-visitors without an interest in visitation and non-visitors who cannot visit the destination. These different segments seem to form images in different ways. The process for potential visitors and pre-visitors is influenced by their interest and their desire to travel to the destination.

By focusing on non-visitors, this study aimed to examine the non-experiential aspects of destination image and its formation. However, the findings suggest that experience still remains pivotal even for people who have not visited a particular city. People’s experiences in their own places of residence and in places they have visited influence their images of other cities. Furthermore, this study indicates that images of a city are strongly affected by experiences of products, cultural output and people connected to that place. This highlights the value of understanding non-visitor images via detailed investigation of ‘secondary experiences’. The fascinating and often heartfelt images elicited by this study also provide empirical justification for Relph’s (1976) argument that ‘vicarious experiences’ can be as profound and deeply felt as ‘real’ experiences.

This study makes an important contribution to the destination image literature, but it has some limitations. The large amount of data collected presented the lead researcher with difficulties relating to data analysis and reduction. It was very difficult to summarise and report 300 individual images, hence the study relies on reporting what respondents actually wrote rather than trying to interpret deeper meanings. Translation also meant data analysis was inevitably difficult. The focused nature of the study means findings presented here may be specific to the Czech Republic, and despite strenuous attempts to avoid bias, the sample of three hundred respondents was not fully representative of the Czech population. The quota sampling strategy used was restricted to age quotas and those who took part in this study were library users and magazine readers; something that may have contributed to the apparent importance of literature as an image formation agent.

Despite these limitations, the study has a number of implications for understanding place image. It also has implications for marketing practice. Promotional campaigns need to be imaginatively designed to capture the true complexity of destinations images and their formation. In particular, the comparative nature of destination image formation means that effective campaigns might work best if they draw on comparisons with better known places (including people's own place of residence). If marketing campaigns are essentially comparative, people who have never visited a destination can more easily construct images of the destination. The persistence of images is a key characteristic implying that changing an existing image is likely to be difficult. Since images of prominent locations are established in childhood, an ad-hoc destination marketing campaign seeking to project a completely different image is likely to have only a very limited impact, even with significant investment. This means that any destination image campaign aimed at non-visitors needs to relate to

existing images, however outdated and unrealistic they may appear to be. Recognizing the impact of credible sources is also key. The wide spectrum of autonomous sources of image identified in this study means that destination images can rarely be controlled to any great extent. Imaginative PR might provide one way of getting message across via autonomous sources – those that are most influential. As organic sources including word-of-mouth are so significant, social media strategies are important (Zarella, 2009). More research is needed to assess the growing importance of social networks in destination image formation. This study suggests that, where updates and contributions are made by people one knows and trusts, these media are likely to have an influential effect on destination images

There are a number of implications for further academic research too. This study has focused on non-visitors, but future research might directly compare the destination images of non-visitors and those of visitors. Understanding of the persistence of images would benefit from more longitudinal studies tracking destination image change. The research here was based on a unique cultural context (post-transition Czech Republic) and a unique bi-lateral relationship (Czech Republic - London). More research is needed in other generating regions to assess whether the findings have wider validity. Research is also needed on smaller, less well known destinations, to see if and how non-visitors imagine places that they know even less about.

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