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**A Case Study of the Destination Image of
Nicaragua**
Exploring the perceptions of the Danish Travel Agents.



**Author: Mariana Téllez
Caballero**
Supervisor: Gunvor Riber Larsen
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Marianela Téllez Caballero

Abstract

In this thesis the Destination Image of Nicaragua perceived by the outbound Danish Travel Agents is investigated. Destination Image, cognitive/perceptual and affective components and the three-dimensional model of Echtner and Ritchie (1991) were used as the theoretical basis of the thesis. Given there is scarce research in relation to the Destination Image of Nicaragua, this thesis was conducted as qualitative exploratory case study. Outbound Danish Travel agents were selected as the unit of analysis, because they are regarded as opinion makers and strongly influence the decision making process of tourist towards tourist destinations. Seven interviews were conducted with six different Travel Agents

The findings shown that the DI of Nicaragua has been conditioned by the war that took place in Nicaragua during the late 70s and 80s. The specific target groups of the Travel Agents have influenced the way the Destination Image of Nicaragua is perceived. Nicaragua is considered as an unknown travel destination, lacking of unique selling points, with a weak and unpopular Destination Image, which is a result of the lack of information about tourism in Nicaragua reaching the Danish audience.

Key words

Destination image, Travel Agents, perceptions, Nicaragua

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Research Motivation

This research is conducted within the framework of the thesis dissertation for the Master's degree in Tourism. It is important to mention the researcher's motivation to conduct this research because selecting a specific topic arouses "*from a very personal choice*" (Creswell 2013), and it would reflect specific areas of the researcher interest.

To start with, since I undertook Master programme in Tourism in Denmark I was motivated to conduct a research related to the tourism wingspan of my country, Nicaragua. When considering the possibilities and exploring some ideas, I recalled the many times I witnessed surprising reactions from many people when commenting on my nationality. Most of them did not have any idea where Nicaragua was located; only few people could associate Nicaragua with a Latin American country; others were people in their late 40s and onwards that knew about Nicaragua because of the revolution in the 70s. These reactions sparked my interest on exploring the Destination Image of my country. I was already aware of some of the challenges Nicaragua face related to its Destination Image through my living, work and traveling experience there.

Living in Denmark sparked my interest on conducting a research that connects the Danish market perspectives with Tourism in Nicaragua. Thus, I saw an opportunity and a need to conduct a research in relation to the outbound Danish market, more specifically related to Travel Agents, in hope to provide an open window to the Nicaraguan stakeholders interested in addressing their offer to this particular market or already working with Danish Travel Agents.

1. Introduction

The tourism sector in Nicaragua has had a remarkable growth in the last 15 years, and to the date it represents one of the main economic sectors in the country (Berrios 2015). According to the tourism´s leads agency, namely the National Institute of Tourism (INTUR, for its acronym in Spanish) Nicaragua is considered as an emerging tourist Destination in Central America (CA) with promising perspectives. However, when comparing Nicaragua to other countries in the region, for example to Costa Rica or to Guatemala, Nicaragua does not stand out and it´s been acknowledged that this is related to its weak Destination Image (DI) as a travel destination (Velasco, Laguno, et al. 2010).

Many scholars (J. D. Hunt 1991; Baloglu and Mangaloglu 2001; Konecnik 2005; Nadeau, et al. 2008; Alaeddinoglu and Can 2010; Mulec and Wise 2012; Vicol and Zait 2014; Berrios 2015; Pike 2015;) have provided evidence that the DI of a place constitute a key element for the success of a destination and has a great influence on the tourists decision making process. For this reason, it is of great importance for travel destinations to convey a positive DI, as tourists are most likely to choose between those destinations with an attractive and positive image (Alaeddinoglu and Can 2010).

Related to the case of Nicaragua, efforts have been made in order to better address its DI as way of to attracting more attention within the international tourism scope. Some of the efforts that are integrated to the National Plan for Sustainable Development of Tourism in Nicaragua (2011) are to project a better DI, increase the awareness of the latter by targeting and attracting new markets from Europe (more specifically, those markets with the highest levels of income) among others.

Silva, Melchior and Téllez (2016), argue that it is hard to promote Nicaragua when tourists do not have access to important information sources that project the image of Nicaragua as good travel destination. In turn, they hold the opinion that foreign travel intermediaries could help to create awareness and improve the DI of Nicaragua internationally. In line with this, Alaeddinoglu and Can (2010) posit that *“images held by tour operators or travel agencies have more possibility to influence crucial processes for the tourist destination choice”*.

In this respect, it can be said that DI studies related to Nicaragua are scarce (Berrios 2015). And the only existing paper with direct connection to the DI of Nicaragua has been addressed only from the perspective of tourists that have visited the country. Arguably, the findings have only provided insights associated with the post-visited experience (Berrios 2015; EPYPSA, AFI, EGOS TEA CONSULTUR 2011), making it hard to fully understand the way Nicaragua is perceived as a travel destination outside its own borders.

It's been argued that travel intermediaries play a very important role contributing to the DI of a country because they are regarded as "*significant information sources and distribution channels influencing the images and decisions of travelers*". Consequently, images held by travel intermediaries can influence potential travelers' vacation decision-making process (Balaglu and Mangalogu 2001). Moreover, many others scholars (Cavlek 2002; Konecnik 2005; Nearchou and Pashardes 2008; Alaeddinoglu and Can 2010; Clerides; C. O. Vicol 2012; Ji and Wall 2015) have regarded travel intermediaries as opinion makers, taking the lead towards their clients to seek for destinations conveying a positive DI. Additionally, travel intermediaries serve as advisors, and regardless if the final consumer purchase or not a travel package through them, potential travelers will rely on the travel intermediaries preferences (Baloglu and Mangaloglu 2001; Alaeddinoglu and Can 2010; Mulec and Wise 2012; Vicol and Zait 2014; Berrios 2015). Another important point to highlight is that the DI travel intermediaries hold about a destination influences the way they design their offer, considering or overlooking destinations based on their DI (Greaves and Skinner 2010).

Certainly, exploring the DI from travel intermediaries standpoint could provide enriching insights about the DI of a country and can help assist stakeholders to assess and address the DI to markets of interest. In the case of Nicaragua, the exhaustive literature review showed that there is none research that explored its DI from travel intermediaries' perspectives.

It can be say that there is a need to gain better understanding of the DI of Nicaragua. Moreover, if the perceptions of Nicaragua DI are explored from the perspective of those whose job is to sell Destinations, it can provide an essential insight to assess Nicaragua's DI.

It's been argue that DI hold by Travel Agents (TAs) "*can be reflected in the images perceived by their customers*" (Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001). Additionally, the literature seems to point at TAs as the "*the chief information sources in the selection of a tourism destination*" (Vitouladiti 2014). For this reason this thesis aims to explore the perceptions that travel intermediaries hold regarding the DI of Nicaragua.

For Nicaragua the Danish market does not figure as a main inbound market, and currently there is not existing information that specifies the participation of the Danish market for the inbound tourism in Nicaragua. Likewise, Nicaragua is not a popular destination among the outbound Danish tourist market. This was noticed throughout the revision I conducted of the outbound travel intermediaries offering destinations in Latin America (LA). From 50 outbound Danish TAs, only 10 have integrated Nicaragua in their offer. Evidently, this suggests that Nicaragua is an unpopular destination in Denmark. On the other hand Denmark is part of the "Smaller Western and Northern European countries" (the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Austria and Switzerland) that the Center for the promotion of Imports (internationally known by its Dutch acronym CBI, 2014) suggested as one of the focus areas from the European long haul tourism market that offer opportunities for developing countries, because although these markets are smaller in terms of volume, their mature travel markets ensure that their residents have relatively high spending power and are amongst the most likely to seek tourism experiences and travel to developing countries.

Considering this, this thesis attempts to provide perspectives specifically from the outbound Danish TAs offering destination in LA. TAs will therefore refer throughout this thesis to the outbound Danish TAs.

1.1. Problem statement

With aforementioned to consider, this thesis intends to address the following research question:

How do the outbound Danish Travel Agents offering destinations in Latin America perceive the Destination Image of Nicaragua?

By seeking answers to this question this thesis aims explore the perceptions TAs hold in relation to the DI of Nicaragua, in hope to gain in-depth understanding and knowledge about the way Nicaragua is being portrayed, and to uncover those characteristics that compound the DI of Nicaragua in the eyes of this particular market.

Researches about DI have suggested that perceptions held by travel intermediaries, such as Tour Operators (TOs) and/or TAs regarding tourist destinations are a considerable component influencing their decision on promoting a certain destination (Baloglu and Mangalolu 2001; Alaeddinoglu and Can 2010; Mulec and Wise 2012; Vicol and Zait 2014; Berrios 2015) and that understanding their perceptions can help to assess the DI of a country.

This thesis intends to contribute to the scarce research about Nicaragua's DI, specifically from the outbound Danish TAs point of view, in hope that this piece of research can inform Nicaraguan stakeholders that have an interest to address their offer to this particular market.

In order to address the problem statement this thesis follows a qualitative exploratory case study approach (for more detail read the methodology chapter). The following section outlines the structure of the thesis, where an epigraph of the sections comprising the thesis is explained.

1.2. Structure of the thesis

This thesis comprises 8 chapters. The introduction is the first one. Chapter 2 is dedicated to the theoretical framework, and it is divided into 5 sub-chapters: Travel Agents, Destination Image; Travel Agents and Destination Image, where the relationship between these two variables is explained, Destination Image formation and the DI model of Echtner and Ritchie (1991). Chapter 3 comprises the contextual framework of Nicaragua's Tourism and Nicaragua's Destination Image. Chapter 4 is dedicated to the Methodological considerations of this thesis. It starts by exposing the paradigmatic stance adopted, followed by the Research Design, where the methodological approach and all methodological choices are explained, and it ends with a discussion of the Role of the researcher. Chapter 5 presents the analysis of the data collected. Chapter 6 assesses the Trustworthiness of the research. Chapter 7 presents the Discussion, where the conclusions, recommendations, limitations and further research are discussed.

1.3. Abbreviations

DI: Destination Image

TA: Travel Agent

TAs: Travel Agents

TO: Tour Operator

TOs: Tour Operators

LA: Latin America

CA: Central America

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter examines and discusses relevant literature and theories to properly address the research question. The problem statement underpins DI and TAs as the theoretical basis to address the research question. For this reason, the first section is dedicated to the examination of theoretical fundamentals in relation to DI and TAs. This is set out to assist and expand the understanding about the problem statement. It firstly starts by outlining the concept and role of TAs, as TAs comprises the unit of analysis for this thesis. Secondly, is discussed the importance of DI as well its theoretical basis about its conceptualization. Thirdly, the importance of the TAs in relation to the DI is explained. The last part of the first section addresses the aspects influencing the DI formation and the DI model of Echtner and Ritchie (1991), which serves as a tool during the field work and further analysis, to gain knowledge about the TAs 's perceptions in relation to Nicaragua 's DI.

The second section is dedicated to the presentation of the tourism context in Nicaragua and a literature review about its DI.

2.1. Travel Agents

Travel Intermediaries have indisputably played an important role in Tourism, as they function as channels between the tourist and services providers (Baloglu and Mangaloglu 2001). In this respect, TAs and TO are regarded as important Travel Intermediaries.

In relation to DI studies, when looking at the perceptions of Travel Intermediaries, researchers pointed out at TAs and TO as key players in the distribution system in Tourism, however, they don't elaborate or mention any distinction between them, and ascribe the same importance to both (Baloglu and Mangaloglu 2001; Alaeddinoglu and Can 2010). Other studies have focused on exploring the DI from TO perspectives (McLellan and Foushee 1983; Tomigová, Mendes and Pereira 2016), and others have studied the importance of TAs in marketing and DI, as well as the influence of TAs in the tourist expenditure (Mulec and Wise 2012; Chen and Chang 2012).

In this respect is important to point out the difference between TAs and TOs. According to Sheldon (1996) TOs *"is defined to be a company which negotiates with hotels, transportation companies, and other suppliers and combines these vacation components into a package tour"*. On the other hand TAs purchase holiday packages from the TOs and sell them to the tourists

directly. There are many other types of definitions that ascribe different tasks to both cases. For example the definition of Eric Ng (2009) differs from the latter, in that he refers to TAs as a company that arrange services such as hotel rooms, meals, transportation, cruises, tours, and other travel requirements on their own, rather than through a TO. According to the USAID report (2007) TAs' *"primary businesses is to resell accommodations, transportation services, (including airplane and train tickets, car and bus transfers) individual services including guide and translator services, and package services such as sightseeing tours"*. Both, TAs and TOs, can be categorized as inbound, ground or outbound travel intermediaries according to this same report.

All in all, it can be say that TAs and TOs are dynamic businesses, which evolves insofar the sectors shift. Their tasks will hence depend on many factors, and a single definition would limit the scope of their capabilities. What is undeniable is that TAs are an important interface between supply and demand (C. Pastiu, A. Muntean, et al. 2014). According to Oppermann (1999) TAs *"emerge as one of the top three information sources used by tourists"*, moreover, he stresses out that TAs are key information sources for tourists, specially seeking for overseas and long haul destinations. The USAID report (2007) also classified TAs as *"most visible companies in the travel trade"*.

This thesis focuses specifically on the Danish outbound TAs. That is to say those TAs offering overseas long haul destinations, arranging holiday packages to clients that are based on the country the TAs is located, in this case, Denmark; and that either purchase holiday packages for their clients through TOs located in the country of Destination, namely inbound TOs; through outbound TOs or arranging all the services by themselves. To give an example, Jesper Hannibal is an outbound Danish TA based in Aarhus, Denmark. This TA sells holiday packages to clients from Denmark to destinations in LA, Africa, Asia, etc., and purchases the holiday tours through inbound TOs.

This thesis is looking at the outbound Danish TAs offering destinations in LA (this will be further argued in the methodology chapter). Henceforth, this thesis refers to this particular group as TAs.

2.2. Destination Image

Destination Image (DI) has been one of the areas of great interest for tourism scholarly inquiry; and its importance in relation to the overall success of a destination has been acknowledged by destination marketing-related literature (Costa and Bauer 2001; Stepchenkova and Mills 2010; Vitouladiti 2014; Kim and Chen 2016)

DI is considered as a strong element of a destination to develop competitive advantages (Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001), because, as highlighted by Gutiérrez (2005) “*destinations mainly compete based on their perceived images relative to competitors in the marketplace*”. In addition, Baloglu and McCleary (1999) suggested that by studying the DI of a country, it is possible to better understand destination selection processes of tourists, as it is an element influencing tourists’ behavior before, during and after the visitation of a place. This opinion has been supported by Nadeu, et al (2008), who considered that the study of DI is of great importance because it influences “*tourists’ decision-making and behavior*”. Likewise, DI is an element that contributes to the tourists loyalty of a destination (Agapito, Oom do Valle and da Costa Mendes 2013). Arguably, the perceptions of the DI potential tourists hold of a place, is a key player in the selection process of destination. In this respect, Vitouladiti pointed out that Tourism literature:

“in general, indicates that what a prospective traveler believes or thinks about the natural environment, climate, people, infrastructure, quality of a place, may shape perceptions or images which will contribute, or not, to the selection of this place by the traveler” (Vitouladiti, 2003, noted by Vitouladiti 2014).

In other words, studies have shown that destinations conveying positive image are most likely to be selected rather than those with negative image (Day, Skidmore and Koller 2001). In sum, it can be said that exploring the DI of a country is an imperative task every destination should undertake (Berrios 2015).

One of the most relevant discussions about DI has been related to its conceptualization, and its definitions have varied from researcher to researcher (Crompton 1979, Pearce 1982; Hunt 1991; Jenkins 1999; Skidmore and Koller 2001; Day, Skidmore and Koller 2001; Baloglu

and Mangalogu 2001; Gallarza, Saura and García 2002; Tasci and Gartner 2007; Alaeddinoglu and Can 2010; Stepchenkova and Mills 2010; Day, Hung, et al. 2012; Kim and Chen 2016). The efforts to create a framework that provides an accurate definition dates since the late 70s, and according to Jenkins (1999) there are almost as many definitions of DI as the attempts to conceptualize it.

Nevertheless, to the date, there is not universal accepted definition (Gallarza, Saura and García 2002; Stepchenkova and Mills 2010; Kim and Chen 2016), and one of the reasons is because perceptions on DI are subject to a myriad of factors dealing with a place, people's perceptions, feelings, etc.

For this reason, it results important to cover recurrent definitions in the literature that have been valuable to the DI framework, and thus, have influenced the theoretical model choice of the researcher for the present thesis. To this point, it is important to clarify that there are two points of view from which one can address DI, the projected DI marketers and Tourism stakeholders from the destination intend to project, and the perceived DI by the consumers (Andreu, Bigné and Cooper 2008). This thesis addresses the perceived DI hold by the TAs.

Pearce (1988) stated that image perception of a travel destination is a term with different approaches. Gnoth (1997) for example, referred to perceptions in tourism as the image of a tourist destination that makes effective the behavior intentions. In this respect, McLellan & Foushee (1983) noted that decisions where to travel, before actually knowing the place is based more on images, than problems actually encountered at the destination. This statement is supported by Stepchenkova and Mills (2010), whom reiterates that *"people act on their perceptions rather than on facts"*. Likewise, McInnis & Price (1987) posit that *"decision making process depends on people's perception of products"*. In line with this, other scholars have suggested that image perception in tourism is considered to a great extent, more imponent that tangible resources because it's what triggers that interest for specific places (Gallarza, Saura and García 2002; Gândara 2008).

According to Kotler (1998), image is a set of ideas and impressions that a person holds in relation to an object. Consequently, the actions of this person in relation to this object are strongly conditioned by its image. Kotler et al. (2012) further elaborated on this definition in

relation to tourism. They noted that DI refers then to the “*perceptions of tourists in a destination and these correspond to the perceived contribution of the different services of tourism to be found there*”. Jenkins (1999) and other scholars to the date (Kim and Chen 2016) agreed, when they mention that the most used definition of DI have been that one of Crompton (1979), which is one of the first definition suggested: “*Destination Image is the sum of belief, ideas, impressions that a person has of a destination*”. Other definitions acknowledge that images can be shared by groups of people.

From the marketing perspective Jenkins (1999) noted that it is important to understand those aspects of DI that are held in common with other members of a particular group. In this respect, Lawson and Baud Bovy (1977, quoted by Jenkins 1999) stated that DI encompasses both the personal images and the stereotyped images shared by groups; they defined DI as “*the impressions, prejudice, imaginations, and emotional thoughts an individual or group might have of a particular place*”.

From all the above definitons about DI, one can tell the complexity DI studies carry out, as it deals with peoples feelings, impressions, emotions, behaviour, decisionst, etc. It can be understood from an individual perspective to a group perspective. As it is the aim of this thesis to explore perceptions of the DI the TAs hold, it is important to follow a concept that allows this thesis to address Nicaragua’s DI from this group perspective, and that at the same time allows a better understanding of Nicaragua’s DI from its parituclarities to a holistic sense.

Echtner and Ritchie (1991), created a conceptual framework, wherein they argued that DI is based in two main dimensions: attribute based and holistic based, therein Echtner and Ritchie define DI “*as not only the perceptions of individual destination attributes but also the holistic impressions*”. At the same time, they argued that these components are formed by functional and psychological characteristics. Their approach to the conceptualization of DI has been well accepted by the scholars, and has been used and incorporated in many studies assessing the DI of different countries to the date (Costa and Bauer 2001; Baloglu and Mangaloglu 2001; Hung, et al. 2012; Alaeddinoglu and Can 2010; Konecnik 2005; Tomigová, Mendes and Pereira 2016). The reason why Echtner and Ritchie conceptualization (1991) has been broadly accepted is

because they presented a simple way of understanding and unifying the complexity of DI (Gallarza, Saura and García 2002). Hence their conceptualization allows unifying many of the elements the aforementioned definitions highlight. For this reason in this thesis DI will response to Echtner and Ritchie approach. DI will therefore refer “*the perceptions of individual destination attributes but also the holistic impressions*” that TAs hold regarding the DI of Nicaragua.

2.3. Destination Image and Travel Agents

Studies exploring the perceived DI from travel intermediaries’ point of view have not been as recurrent as the studies exploring perceptions from the traveler’s perspective. In fact, there is a plethora of studies focusing on the DI from the travelers point of view (Beerli and Martin 2004; Hsu, Wolfe, and Kang 2004; Chen and Tsai 2007; Vaughan 2007; Stepchenkova and Morrison 2008; Ji and Wall 2015), and although there is a growing interest in travel intermediaries' images toward tourist destinations, the research is still limited (McLellan and Foushee 1983; Fakeye and Crompton 1991; Gartner & Tasci Bachri, 1994; Costa and Bauer 2001; Balaglu and Mangalogu 2001; Cavlek 2002; Mulec and Wise 2012; Vicol and Zait 2014; Mbiyu 2014; Tomigová, Mendes and Pereira 2016).

In this light, it’s relevant to acknowledge the importance of the TA regarding DI. On one hand, DI influences the travellers decision making process, and it is “*an important factor in determining its popularity with visitors*” (Hsu et al., 2004 noted by Greaves and Skinner 2010). On the other hand, according to Vicol and Zait (2014) “*travel intermediaries are considered opinion leaders and the images they have about tourist destinations influences decision making process on tourist*”. In this respect TAs have increasingly emerge as “*the most powerful and influential bodies pursuing a function or organizing package holidays*” (Baloglu and Mangalogu 2001).

Likewise, in the words of Alaeddinoglu and Can (2010), travel intermediaries, such as TAs address demand towards destinations they include in their offer, and by this, they stimulate a need of tourism, and provide the means of satisfying it. This mean that as distribution channel they collect reliable information of destinations they consider to have a positive and attractive DI, and make it available to the public; at the same time, they provide ratings based on their

customer experiences and their own assessment (Clerides, Nearchou and Pashardes 2008), and therefore they act as image builders and opinion makers of destinations.

Therefore, their images and knowledge about destinations impact travelers' decisions making process and the way the design their offer as well (Gartner, 1993; Lawton and Page, 1997; Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001; Alaeddinoglu and Can 2010; Martin 2011; Vicol and Zait 2014.). For this reason, it can be say that TAs have a big influence in the induced image of a tourist destination during the active search process. Induced image refers to the image delivered by commercial sources of information, such as TAs, brochures, travel guidebooks, etc. (Echtner and Ritchie 1991; more detail about induce image in the following section). They also represent secondary sources of information for travelers (Baloglu and Mangaloglu, Tourism destination images of Turkey, Egypt, Greece, and Italy as perceived by US-based tour operators and travel agents. 2001). Therefore, according to Alaeddinoglu and Can (2010), understanding TAs image can assist destinations in assessing their DI.

For example, Gartner and Bachri (1994, noted by Baloglu and Maloglu 2001) emphasized that the DI held by travel intermediaries in the tourism distribution system for developing countries, has a great influence on their package development decisions.

These same authors investigated the perceptions of the Indonesia's DI held by Tour Operators from the United States. The findings indicated that the DI of Indonesia was considered to be strong in terms of attractions, but the images of its service efficiency were considered to be poor. Hence travel intermediaries were giving priority to other destinations they were including in other tour packages. Other example, is the research conducted by Tomigová, Mendes and Pereira (2016) in relation to Portugal's DI perceived by Czech travel intermediaries, in the specific case of TO. The findings showed that Portugal was "*viewed as an expensive and geographically distant destination*". The findings also showed that the majority of the Travel Intermediaries qualified the level of promotion of Portugal as poor, which was reflected on the low popularity of Portugal within Czech tourists. Hence, about two thirds of the TOs "*do not take any further steps to strengthen the position of Portugal as a destination in their offer*".

Another example is the case of Ecuador, a study conducted about its DI revealed that Ecuador is relatively unknown destination for the Spanish market, both, for tourists and travel intermediaries. The findings showed that the knowledge about Ecuador as a destination was superficial, and it was based on general observations that could be easily related to any other destinations in the Latin American region, such as natural resources, tropical weather, distant, etc. In relation to this, for many destinations, like Ecuador, DI perceptions can be derived from general impressions of a larger region, when the awareness of a destination is low (Torres 2010). In sum, some places struggle to develop a strong DI due to the lack of awareness by tourist. To this Mulec and Wise (2012) suggest *that “knowledge must be mediated by tourism experts, TOs or TAs”*. They added that for a tourist destination to become successful they must *“strategic promote specific location endowments that distinguish one place from another”*. Contrary to this, other destinations have succeeded in developing a strong image recognized internationally (Mulec and Wise 2012), to illustrate an example there is Paris (France) and the immediate association with iconic Eiffel Tower, or Peru and the iconic Machu Pichu. Arguably, the extent how a destination is perceived in terms of its individual attributes and holistic impressions plays a vital role in the way its DI would be assess by tourist or travel intermediaries (Echtner and Ritchie 1991) (Mulec and Wise 2012) (Balaglu and Mangalogu 2001).

In the case of Nicaragua there is not research that provides insights about its DI from this type of perspectives. The mere fact of the lack of DI studies about Nicaragua entails that there is a need to explore this topic, not only from the travelers perspective (Berrios 2015), but also, to research new markets, from bodies that have the power to influence the final consumer such as TAs (Inter-American Development Ban 2010). For these reasons, this thesis focuses on the perspective of the TAs, by exploring their perceived DI of Nicaragua it would be possible provide a contribution to the dearth of research regarding to its DI.

The following section elaborates on the DI formation agents and DI components, which will guide the fieldwork, in order to gain deeper understanding on the perceptions of TAs.

2.4. Destination Image formation

It has been highlighted the importance of the DI for destinations and for the tourist travel choice. Foremost the importance of TAs in the formation of a DI in the travelers minds, and therefore in the destination choice, as well as the importance of the DI perceived by these TA when considering a destination within their offering. In other words, image is therefore one the most important concept for interpreting the choices made by tourists (Govers and Go, 2003 quoted by Ferrerira 2011) and the literature seems to point that TAs constitute a relevant information source for tourists (Vitouladiti 2014). It is therefore necessary to explain where throughout the components of DI formation TAs fit.

Garnet and Tasci (2007) explained the functional relationship between three elements of a Destination: **The Destination originated information**, which refers to the supply side or the Destination (marketing and promotions material from DMOs, inbound TOs and TAs). **The autonomous agents** that are not necessarily link to tourism, but that communicate messages about the country (e.g.: news, documentaries, movies, etc.) and the **receivers or demand side** (foreign TAs, TOs.Tourists, etc.). Thereby, the outbound Danish TAs in this thesis are regarded as the receivers or the demand side of the destination, in this case, Nicaragua.

In line with this, TAs adopt perceptions from the messages send by the destinations supply side and autonomous agents, and those perceptions influence their attitudes towards a certain place. At the same time the TA perceptions will influence the travel choice of their clients and potential travelers, because as it has been explained before, TAs constitute important information sources. Consequently a negative perception about the DI of a country held by TA would reduce the chances of promoting certain destinations (Hsu et al., 2004 noted by Greaves and Skinner 2010). According to the above explanation, this thesis is looking at the TA as the receivers in relation to Nicaragua´s DI. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that a duality exist when looking at importance of exploring the TAs ´perceptions, because throughout the thesis, their influence as opinion makers and information sources are also considered.

Furthermore, many scholars (Holbrook 1978, Moutinho, 1987, Anand, Holbrook and Stephens 1988; Gartner, 1993; Baloglu and Brinberg, 1997; Walmsley and oung, 1998; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990; Lin, Duarte, Kerstetter and Hou, 2007; Ferrerira 2011) have pointed out that DI is a result of a combination of three components:

Cognitive/perceptual, affective and conative evaluations, which are based on consumer's rationality and emotionality. The following section elaborates on these components and its relevance to exploring the perceptions of the TAs.

2.4.1. Cognitive/perceptual, affective and conative evaluations

Cognitive/perceptual evaluation: There is a general agreement (Anand, Holbrook and Stephens 1988; Holbrook 1978; Russel and Pratt 1980; Stern and Krakover 1993, noted in Ferreira 2011; Beerli and Martin 2004) that the cognitive component is an antecedent of the affective component in the process of acquiring the overall image of the destination. The cognitive/perceptual evaluation comprises the knowledge or beliefs about a destination (Beerli and Martín 2004) and is acquired before the visitation of the place, and furnished during and after visitation. In addition, Genereux, Ward and Russel (1983) relate the cognitive/perceptual component to the knowledge about the places attributes. Hanyu (2016) suggest that *“perceptual/cognitive quality refers to the appraisal of physical features of environments”*. Therefore, the cognitive/perceptual evaluation according to Michie and Sullivan (1990) can be indicated by *“the awareness of a travel destination”* it is a necessary condition to place in the mind of tourists the travel alternative. In other words, the cognitive/perceptual component refers to what one recognizes about a destination in relation to the specific attributes, for example, beaches, mountains, museums, etc. (Kim and Chen 2016). In this respect, TAs develop cognitive/perceptual evaluations about destinations.

Affective evaluation: This makes reference to the feelings and emotions in relation to a place (Keller, 1993; Rial et al., 2000; Rial, Garcia and Varela, 2008). It is argued that affective evaluations in tourism can have a greater effect on a person than the cognitive/perceptive evaluations (Walmsley and Young 1998). Moreover, this emotional component is strongly affected by the motivations of tourists (Beerli and Martín, 2004). In brief, the affective component refers to how one feels about a destination. (Kim and Chen 2016). In the case of TA, this effective component can be influenced by previous experience visiting a destination, a historical fact, among others, that could condition their attitudes towards specific destinations (Greaves and Skinner 2010).

In sum, both type of evaluations in relation to the DI arises from the need to comprehend the way the individual evaluates a place, and these evaluations are not limited to the tangible elements of a destination, but comprises a set of the emotional experiences, e.g. the excitement ,relaxation, happiness, etc. (Gutiérrez 2005).

Conative: This component responds to the behavioral attitudes towards the destination, and is basically how one behaves in relation to aforementioned two components. It is the point where an individual decides to travel or not.

Consequently, the **overall image** of the destination is a combination of cognitive/perceptual and affective components (Ma zursky & Jacoby, 1986, Stern & Krakover, 1993). This overall image could drive a person to travel to a destination or revisit. Hence, it can be argued that the actual experience of visiting a destination will have an important effect on the DI from a cognitive and emotional point of view (Beerli & Martín, 2004).

In sum, TAs are considered as receivers of the DI in relation to the Nicaragua, and as such this thesis intends to explore their perceptions shaped by their cognitive/perceptual and affective evaluations.

2.4.2. Factor influencing the Destination Image

The receiver characteristics according to Gartner and Tasci (2007) are dynamic and uncontrollable, that is to say ever changing; and their perceptions will therefore be influenced by many factors such as socio demographics characteristics, experience, motivations, prior visitation, or/and information sources. For example, in the case of the TAs, their years of experience in the travel industry, their expertise on certain regions, their target groups, etc. could influence the way they perceive the DI of Nicaragua.

Beerli and Marti (2004) outlined the factors influencing the DI in the following graphic in connection with the cognitive/perceptual and affective evaluations.

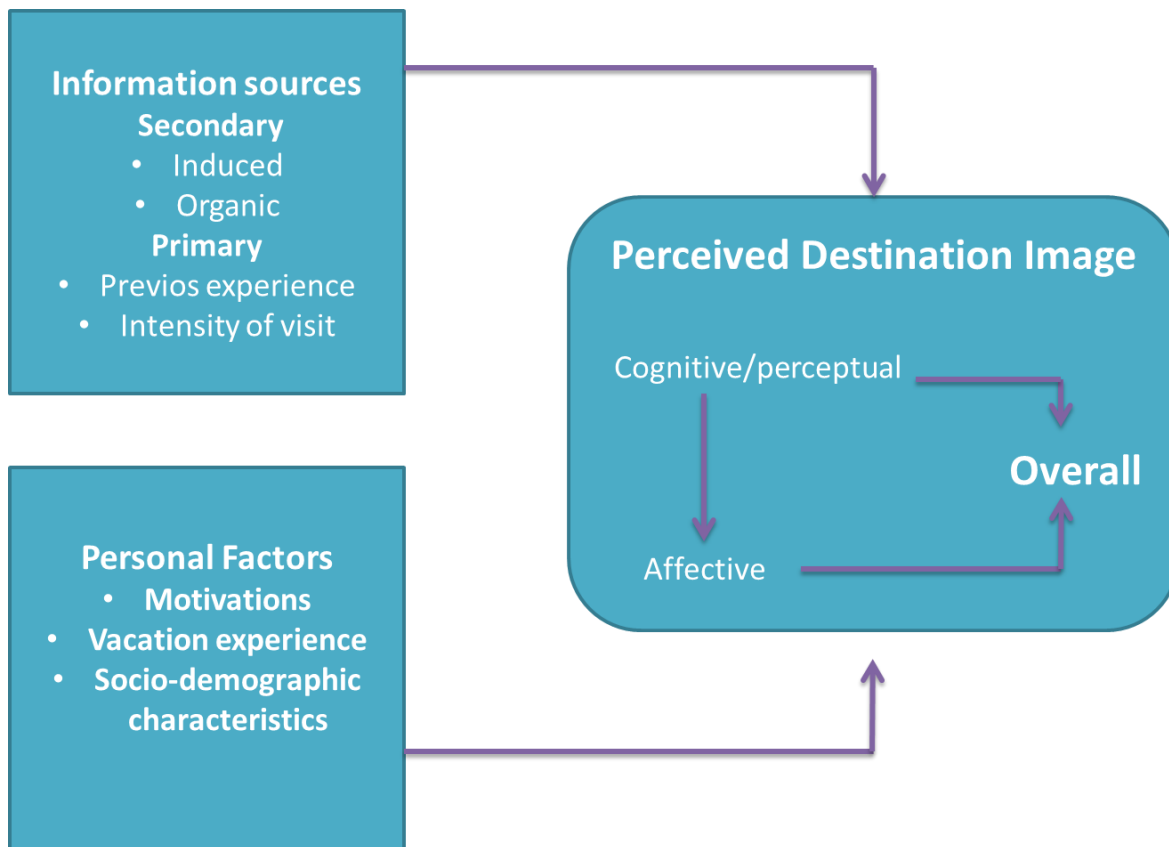


Figure 1: Destination image formation (Beerli and Martín 2004).

2.4.2.1. Information sources

According to Tasci and Gartner (2007) information sources are fundamental in presenting, introducing and exposing the information of a destination to the tourists. The intangible characteristic of tourism experiences makes promotional material significantly important, as well as any other type of information that creates an association in the consumers' mind with the place under visiting consideration (Tasci and Gartner 2007). There is a wide spectrum of information sources influencing the DI of a place, the following part elaborates on secondary and primary sources of information.

Secondary sources

According to Vitouladiti (2014) secondary sources of information are vital in forming the image of the destination before visitation. This sources communicate messages that shape the perceived image of a destination before the actual experience (Gunn 1972; Garner 1993; Beerli and Martín 2004). The secondary sources can be categorized in two separate types of sources:

organic and induced sources of information, which contribute at the same time to the formation of organic and induced images (Gun 1972).

- **Organic image:** This refers to the image shaped by all of the information transmitted by different types of communication channels at the travel destination, with no tourism promotional aim, namely organic sources. For example, information transmitted by news on television, radio, e-news, books about geography or history, newspapers, magazines, or by people living at a tourist destination (worth of mouth). Organic sources are equivalent to what Tasci and Gartner (2007) refers to autonomous image formation agents. According to him, these types of sources *“have a higher credibility and ability to reach crowds than sources with commercial aims”*.

- **Induced image:** This image refers to the image formed by the promotion and communications sources that have direct relation to the tourism sector of a destination (Ferrerira 2011), namely induced sources.

Consequently TAs are exposed to these types of secondary sources, which are related the information obtained previous visitation to the place. These sources can be either organic and/or induced.

In this respect, it's important to go back to the TAs role as relevant information sources in tourism, because as such, they form part of the secondary sources used by tourists. Arguably, TAs take play a relevant role in the induced image formation process of tourists before visiting the destination. In line with this, Mansfeld (1992, noted by Ferrerira 2011) states that there is general agreement, although not based on empirical evidence, that the secondary sources of information fulfill three basic functions in destination choice:

- To minimize the risk that the decision entails.
- To create an image of the destinations.
- To serve as a mechanism for later justification of the choice.

One can say that these functions have a direct connection to the job of TAs, as it's been stated before.

Primary sources

Primary sources refer to the information gathered by the actual visitation of a destination. In this sense, some authors such as Gartner and Hunt (1987), Pearce (1982) and Phelps (1986) have pointed out that when individuals visit the place, the image they obtain after that experience tends to be more realistic and complex, and therefore, differs from the one formed by secondary sources of information. This image is also influenced by different factors during the visit, for example the intensity of the experience; this can be related to the numbers of days spent at the destination, the involvement with the place and the people, etc. According to Echtner and Ritchie (1993) *“those more familiar with the destination have images that are more holistic, psychological, and unique, while those less familiar have images based more on attributes, functional aspects, and common features”*.

In the case of the TAs, those participants that have visited Nicaragua, for different reasons, may hold more complex perceptions of Nicaragua's DI.

2.4.2.2. Personal Factors

The socio-demographic factor refers to aspects such as age, gender, education, social class, occupation, household status, income and place of residence, etc. In the case of TAs, this factor can be seen as the years of operation, business practicalities, the size of the company, target groups, etc.

In relation to motivations, TAs conduct business which involves preparing holiday packages, so motivations are generated from a business perspective.

In relation to experiences, it's been argued that the actual visitation to a place can generate *“an image more realistic than that existing prior to visitation”* (Vitouladiti 2014). These images are supported by the primary sources, which is all the information and images gathered during the visit. In this respect, Mazursky (1989) stresses that in tourism, past experiences weigh more than information obtained through other secondary sources. In the case of the TAs, those already offering Nicaragua may convey more complex imagery of Nicaragua, in comparison with those TAs that don't offer Nicaragua.

2.5. Destination Image model

Another relevant aspect about DI is the particular attention that has been paid to developing methods for measurement of the DI (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Driscoll, Lawson & Niven, 1994) with the purpose of providing a framework that improves the understanding about the DI formation processes and its conceptualization (Jenkins 1999). It's been argued that since the very beginning of DI research back in the 70s, there is still no consensus about the its concept (Gallarza, Saura and García 2002; Stepchenkova and Mills 2010; Kim and Chen 2016). In this light, the literature review have pointed out that destinations have different dimensions and components in which one's can construct an image of the place.

Most of the approaches to DI have been related to physical or functional attributes (more tangible elements that are directly observable or measurable) and only few studies have attempted to focus on psychological characteristics of the destination (less tangible components of DI that are more difficult-to-measure) (Echtner and Ritchie 1991). This thesis is not focused on conducting a measurement research of the DI of Nicaragua; instead, it attempts to use the extant theoretical model by Echtner and Ritchie (1991), with roots on measurement process (further explained in the following section) and that has over time been adjusted towards a more qualitative approach; in order to uncover the attributes and holistic images of Nicaragua hold by the TAs. This model will serve as the theoretical guide to gain understanding and knowledge about the perceptions TAs hold regarding Nicaragua as travel destination.

One of the main challenges in addressing DI is the complexity of destinations, due to the intangible nature of the tourism services and experiences, alongside with many other elements that a destination comprises. Reynolds and Guttman (1984 quoted by Gallarza, Saura and García 2002), refers to a destination as the product, and the numerous variables as the components of the holistic image. In this respect, Jenkins (1999) considers that one of the basic problems of tourist destination image research is that destination images “*are holistic representations of a place*” and that in attempting to measure them, researchers have focused mostly at the parts or attributes singularly. Gallarza, Saura and García (2002) for example, presented a review of empirical DI studies focused on measuring attributes. They elaborated a summary of the common attributes considered in DI research, gathered in a vertical axe that

goes from functional to the psychological characteristics. This approach is at the same time based on Etchner and Ritchie (1991) model of DI. See figure 2.

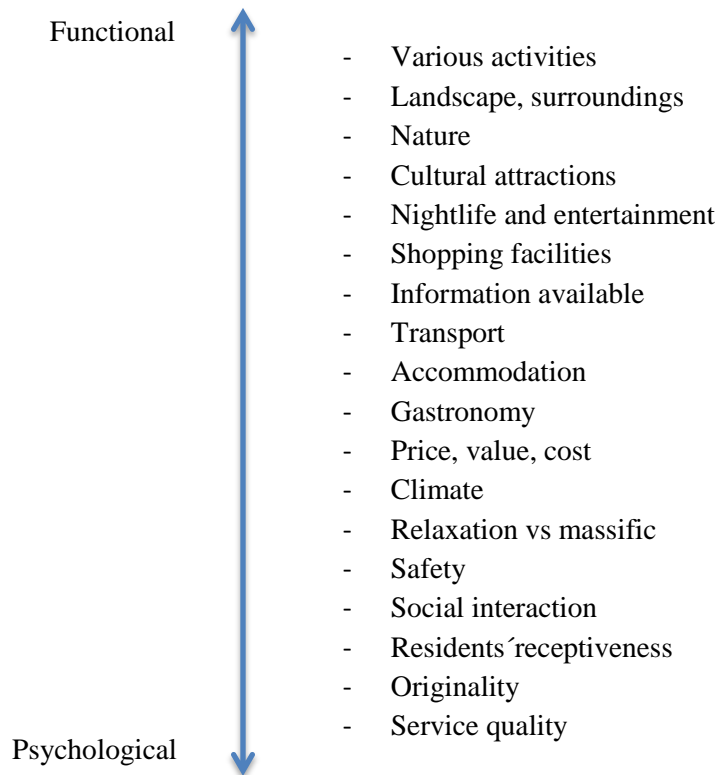


Figure 2: Common attributes in DI research (Gallarza, Saura and García 2002)

Jenkins (1999) argues that some aspects of the DI are not able to be broken down on an attribute based model and opined that Echtner and Ritchie (1991) address this problem with their DI model. In their study about DI conceptual framework, Gallarza, Saura and García (2002) pointed out that many that researchers (Gallarza, Saura and García 2002) have agreed that Echtner and Ritchie (1991) have contributed to the development of a DI framework, which indicates that DI consists of functional characteristics (more tangible and observable features) and psychological characteristics (intangible features). In other words Echtner and Ritchie (1991) model seeks to integrate attribute & holistic dimensions of the DI as way of capturing those features, that are functional and psychological characteristics, and that can serve as a tool to identify the holistic impressions of a destination. This goes in line with their definition of DI *“as not only the perceptions of individual destination attributes but*

also the holistic impression". Arguably, Echtner and Ritchie (1991) ease the understanding of DI framework in their study "The Meaning and Measurement of DI" by proposing a model where they unite two axes based on the **attributes/holistic** components and its **psychological/functional** characteristics of a destination, into a 2-dimensional model, and this altogether formed the four components of a DI that offer a guide to its assessment and understating. See figure 3.

It is important to note that they based their findings from observations of product image research (McInnis & Price, 1987). Echtner and Ritchie (1991) highlighted McInnis & Price's argument, that "*products are perceived both in terms of individual attributes and holistic impressions*". They also noted Martineau (1958) work, where they make a distinction between the functional and psychological components of a retail store. Functional characteristics in this sense would be defined as directly observable or measurable (for example, prices and store layout) whereas psychological characteristics cannot be directly measured (friendliness, atmosphere). They argued that from a DI perspective it has been recognized the importance of the holistic component. In line with this, according to Um and Crompton (1990 quoted by Echtner and Ritchie 1991) DI is a gestalt or holistic construct. Therefore, Etchner and Ritchie stated that DI could be considered in terms of an attribute-based component and a holistic component, and concluded that functional and psychological characteristics, as suggested by Martineau (1958), could be applied to DI.

The following figure shows the DI model by Echtner and Ritchie and displays the example of Nepal's DI.

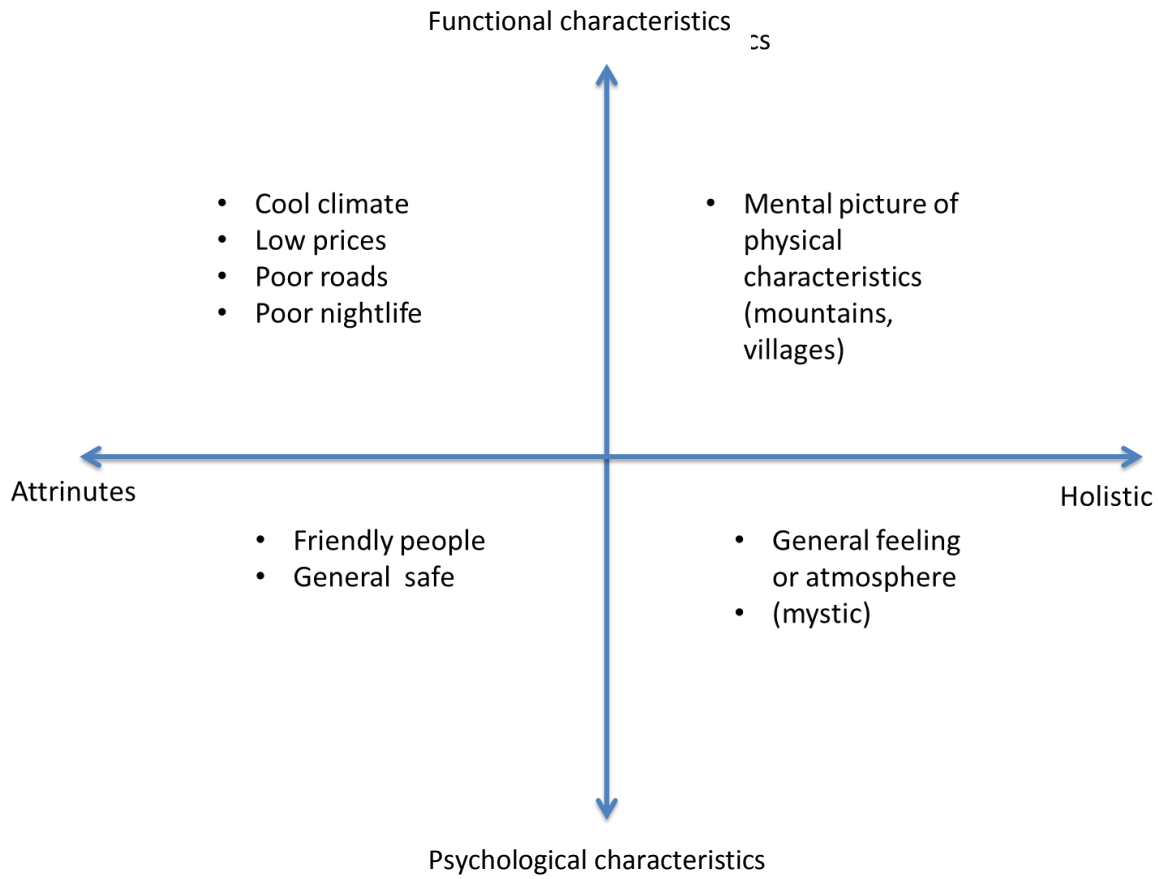


Figure 3: Components of DI. Example of Nepal’s DI. (Echtner and Ritchie 1991)

Hence, it can be say that DI is comprised by 4 components when uniting the 2 axes in a 2-dimensional model:

- Functional-holistic image (egg. a mental picture of the destination’s physical characteristics)
- Psychological-holistic image (egg. the general feeling an individual has about the atmosphere at the destination)
- Functional-attribute image (egg. high prices, warm climate)
- Psychological-attribute image (egg. general safety, friendly local people)

Etchner and Ritchie consider that this model enables capturing in a broader sense the elements comprising the image of a destination, and they stated that *“in this scenario, image would consist of perceptions of individual product attributes, as well as, total, holistic*

impressions". This model is hence a tool to capture attribute and holistic perspectives regarding Nicaragua's DI from TAs' point of view. The TAs perceptions will therefore give an indication about the way Nicaragua is portrayed from this particular market. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the dividing line attributes and holistic perspective can overlap

In addition, there is one more dimension that Etcher and Ritchie (1991) added to the model that has been overlooked in DI studies. This dimension responds to the **common** and **unique** traits of the DI. In other words, it makes reference to the traits of a destination which can be "*commonly used to compare all the destinations to those which are unique to very few destinations*" (Echtner and Ritchie 1991). All in all, it is important that a Destination conveys a positive image, but what is even more desirable according to Ritchie and Crouch (2003) is that it conveys a "*a positive unique image*" that makes the destination stand out from its competitors.

This thesis uses this model in order to gain understanding of the perceptions about Nicaragua's DI held by the TAs in Denmark. By identifying the features of Nicaragua base on attribute/ holistic, functional/psychological and common/unique dimensions, it is possible to explore their perceptions and gain knowledge on the how their perceived the images of Nicaragua as a travel destination.

Echtner and Ritchie suggest the use of three main questions to capture the holistic aspect to the DI, and the common-unique aspect. The question: What image or characteristics come to you mind when you think about "*the country*" as a travel destination? This question aims to capture the Functional-Holistic aspect of the DI; the question: How would you describe the atmosphere or environment you think it's to find at the destination? Is related to the psychological- Holistic aspects, and the question What attributes or characteristics do you consider are unique from "*the destination*"? Intends to capture the uniqueness of a place. Many other scholars (Gutiérrez 2005; García, Muñoz and José 2013; Pike 2015) have used these three questions to capture only the holistic components of the DI as a un-structure method.

In this thesis these questions are used to capture both, attribute and holistic images from the TAs. As the methods will provide free leeway to the participants to build on their impressions form both perspectives. This will be further argument in the methodology section.

The model at the same time allows unveiling the cognitive/perceptual and affective evaluations the TAs ascribe to Nicaragua. In this respect, it can be said that the cognitive/perceptual evaluations have a direct relation to Functional-holistic image, Functional-attribute image and Psychological-attribute image components of a destination.

The literature suggest that cognitive/perceptual evaluations are created before visitation, which means that these evaluations can take form of organic and induced images, influenced by the secondary sources of information. In this sense, TAs that already offer destination in Nicaragua may have a more complex DI, influenced by the primary sources, that is to say the actual experience. Therefore, their perceptions may show a deeper meaning than those TA that don't offer Nicaragua.

In other words, by using this model of Echtner and Ritchie (1991) I intend ease the fieldwork in order to gain deeper understanding of the DI perceptions hold by the TAs. The simplicity of this model will make possible to explore the perceptions not only from the individual traits, but also from a holistic scope, taking into account the factors that influence the DI. What is more, this model does not impose a set of attributes already selected from which the TAs participants will have to choose from, instead it can be apply to qualitative studies such as this thesis, wherein there is leeway to the participants to express and describe their own impressions with their own words.

3. Contextual framework

This section presents a briefing about Nicaragua (geography and demography) and introduces the Tourism context of the country. This is done with the support of public documents, reports and statistic about Tourism in Nicaragua. This is followed by a discussion of the current DI situation in Nicaragua and outlines what has been researched about its DI. This last part also supports the foregoing arguments for the need of this research.

3.1. Fast facts about Nicaragua

Nicaragua is a country located in Central America, bordering with Honduras to the North, Costa Rica to the South, the Pacific Ocean to the West and the Caribbean Sea to the East. It comprises an area of 130,668 sq. km, being the largest country in Central America. The national language is Spanish. English and indigenous languages are used along the Caribbean coast and in some parts of the Atlantic coastal plains. Its population in 2015 was of 6.7 million people according to National Institute of Information and Development (INIDE by its acronym in Spanish) (ProNicaragua 2015) and its capital is Managua. Nicaragua is known in the Region as the land of lakes and volcanoes, because of its many lagoons, lakes and volcanoes. It comprises the biggest lake in Central America, namely Cocibolca lake or also known as the Lake of Nicaragua (INTUR 2016).



Figure 4. Map of Nicaragua. (Tropical discovery 2016)

3.2. Tourism in Nicaragua

Tourism in Nicaragua was not considered an interest area for the national economy development until the early 90s. In fact, during the 80s, when there was a real restructuring of tourism worldwide, Nicaragua found itself immersed in the Sandinista Revolution (López and Obiol 2004), in which the country “*endured over a decade of armed conflict from 1979–1990 which brought the already light visitation to Nicaragua to a screeching halt*” and tourism remained “*virtually non-existent*” (Hunt 2011).

In the beginning of the 90s, with the end of the conflict, the tourism outlook took a big step.

In 1996, Nicaragua took part in the XVIII Central American summit, comprised by Guatemala, Belice, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, where they agreed to impulse the tourism development by integrating their resources under the brand: “*Centroamerica tan pequeña...tan grande*” (Central America...so small...so big!) (López and Obiol 2004).

To the date, the tourism sector in Nicaragua has definitely become an important motor of development for the national economy. In 2014 it was the second most important source of foreign exchange earnings, it generated 445 million US dollars, about 5% of the country's GDP, it grew 8.2% in comparison with 2013 and 1.3 million tourists visited the country (INTUR 2015). In 2015 these numbers increased to 450 million US dollars, and had 1.4 million tourists visiting the country. For this reason this sector has become a priority for country's economic development.

The National Plan of Tourism Development set out for the period 2010-2015, defined the tourist conceptualization of Nicaragua as a set of intangible aspects the country offers: tranquility, security, the hospitality of the people, colonial past and history. As tangible element the well preserve nature, biodiversity, proximity between the resources and attractions and exceptional landscapes were highlighted.

Following this line, the strategy proposed that Nicaragua should be promoted taking advantage of its linkage with Central America, but at the same time, to differentiate itself from the rest of the region as a travel destination. According to López and Obiol (2004) this this has

been one of the main challenges Nicaragua has faced, to sell the country as an individual destination, and not only as a peripheral country to the tourism in Costa Rica.

Relatedly, in terms tourism competitiveness, Nicaragua has always been outpaced by its neighboring countries. Last year, 2015, according to the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index (2015) Nicaragua ranked number 92 out 141 countries, it was the number 18 in LA, and was in the last position in the Central American Region, ranking number 6, out the 6 countries included, where Panamá, Costa Rica and Guatemala held the first 3 places respectively.

According to the National Tourism Program presented in 2010, (Velasco, Laguno, et al. 2010) the main weaknesses Nicaragua has to address in order to improve the tourism sector are related to the underdeveloped tourism offerings. For example, the lack proper infrastructure, quality of lodging, restaurants and services, flight connectivity, among others.

Another aspect in relation to the tourism sector in Nicaragua that need to be addressed is the lack of iconic sites, such as “La Antigua” and “Tikal” in Guatemala, the national parks of Costa Rica, or the “Canal” and “the Free Trade Zone” in Panama city. These recognized landmarks have helped these countries to project their DI. And according to Ritchie and Crouch (2003) *“icons help to reinforce the uniqueness of the destinations they symbolize”*.

In other words, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Panamá have succeeded in standing out from one another with the creation of such globally recognized icons and have been able to develop an association between the needs of the market in terms of tourism and their offer. In the case of Nicaragua, according to the National Tourism Program previously cited, Nicaragua does not count with a tourist product that stands out as a unique selling point.

Tomigová, Mendes and Pereira (2016) among others (Goodrich 1978, cited by McLellan and Foushee 1983) considers that destinations with positive, strong, and a more favorable image have a greater chance to be preferred by tourists. In this respect, in order to stand out, Nicaragua would need to focus on what makes it different from its neighbors (Schwab, et al. 2015). In general the aforementioned issues have hindered the projection of Nicaragua’s image as a suitable and attractive destination. In fact, a study about Image and

Positioning of Central America as a destination in Europe conducted in 2010 (Vargas, Navarro and Guillén 2010) contended that El Salvador and Nicaragua's DI evidenced stagnation, contrary to the case of Panamá, Costa Rica and Guatemala's DI.

In relation to this, in 2013 Silvia Levy, president at that time of CANATUR (National chamber of Tourism, for its acronyms) expressed that it has not been possible to consolidate the DI of Nicaragua, and she emphasized the need to promote an image with the concepts such of kindness, peace and tranquility (Vásquez 2013).

Conversely, according the Competitive Index (2015) Nicaragua listed Nicaragua as one of the safest countries in Central America. The country occupied place number 3, after Costa Rica and Panama, and in terms of price competitiveness it was number 2, after Guatemala in Central America. These certainly are advantages for the DI of Nicaragua. And this can certainly be an asset for the improvement of its DI.

3.3. Destination Image research in Nicaragua

Most of the papers that can be found related to Tourism in Nicaragua are in the form of National tourism statistics, that serves mostly for the internal usage of tourism authorities, to keep track of the tourism behavior, and that assist at the same time marketers to develop policies, marketing and strategy plans and tools for the sector. (Ciudadanía 2012; EPYPSA, AFLLEGOS TEA CONSULTUR 2011; INTUR 2015; Sánchez and Moreno 1997; BAC, Banco Central de Nicaragua 2014). On the other hand, there are academic researches that touch upon topics such as sustainable development of tourism in Nicaragua, studies about rural tourism, marketing strategies for companies or case studies from specific tourist products in certain regions of the country (Burney 2007; Barrera 2010; Barrera 2015).

However, there is scarce research about the DI image of Nicaragua (Berrios 2015) and most of the information related to its image comes from sources such as national periodical articles (Trejos 2014; CANATUR 2015; Vidaurre 2013), interviews to tourism agents on television (Silva, Melchior and Matínez 2016), magazine or international reviews, travel chronicle from magazines, blogs or independent journalists (Leonardi 2003; Cockburn 2011; Felsenthal 2012; McClure 2014; Kontis 2014; River 2014; Strutner 2015).

The only academic research about Nicaragua that addresses DI, is that one conducted by Berrios (2015), who explores the perceived Country Image and DI of Nicaragua from the perspectives of tourists. This research was conducted from a quantitative approach, where 270 questionnaires were handed out to tourists that were visiting the city of León (one of the most popular destinations in the country). The study concluded that the image that the country denotes was negative; on the other hand, the DI resulted to be perceived as more positive, especially from tourists coming from Canada and Europe, in comparison with those coming from the USA. The weather, leisure activities, services, gastronomy were elements positively evaluated. In this respect, it is important to stress out that these insights about the DI of Nicaragua are a result of perceptions that had been already shaped by the tourists' experience in the country. Apart from this research, no other academic study related to Nicaragua's DI was found.

Velasco, Laguno, et al (2010) expressed that the lack of research regarding Nicaragua's DI from travel intermediaries' perspectives has resulted in limited access to the market information. In relation to DI studies, there has been an argument that most of tourist destinations seem to “*gauge the reactions of consumers instead of potential travelers*” (J. Hunt 1995). Hunt opined that this is one of the mistakes in generating marketing plans, and it's one of the reasons why some destinations lack of understanding of the value of DI held by potential markets.

In this light, getting insight from Travel Intermediaries such as TAs become important. A study focused on the role of TAs in tourism in developing countries revealed that TAs have a great power to influence and direct consumer demand (C. Pastiu, A. Muntean, et al. 2014). It is added by different scholars that people's visiting decisions are significantly influenced by the tourist DI (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991; Beerli and Martin, 2004; Tasci et al., 2007; Alcaniz et al., 2009), and that in this sense, “*intermediaries influence the visiting intentions of potential tourists, being able to form opinions and shape behaviors*” about the place (Gartner, 1993; Lawton and Page, 1997; Baloglu and Mangalolu, 2001; Vicol and Zait 2014). For the case of Nicaragua, experts in promotion and tourist services coincided that there is a lack of awareness in the international tourism scope about the country (Silva, Melchior and Matínez 2016). Arguably, there is need to uncover other perspectives to understand the way Nicaragua's DI is perceived.

4. Methodology

This section is dedicated to the methodological choices that made possible gaining the knowledge to answer the research question, stated at the beginning of the thesis as: *How do the outbound Danish Travel Agents offering destination in Latin America perceived the Destination Image of Nicaragua?* This chapter firstly starts by explaining the paradigmatic stance of the thesis where the epistemological, ontological and methodological considerations are exposed. Secondly the Research design is outlined, where the study approach, the data collection methods, data processing and data analysis methods are explained. Finally, the role of the researcher is presented. A qualitative exploratory case study approach has been chosen as the most suitable approach to answer the research question. This is guided by the constructivist paradigm.

4.1. Philosophy of sciences

This thesis is aiming to gain understanding and explore the perceptions held by the TAs regarding Nicaragua's DI. In order to achieve this, it is important to identify which paradigmatic stance will best guide the researcher to answer the research question, and help the reader to understand the nature of the processes followed throughout the whole thesis.

For this reason, constructivism in this thesis is the paradigm that will best serve as a lens to gain the best insights and knowledge about the perceptions of the TAs. Paradigms should then be understood as a set of belief of ontological, epistemological and methodological presuppositions (Guba 1990). These presuppositions are important because they give answers to questions such as: what is the nature of reality? Or what is there that can be known? What is the relationship between the knower and the known? and How the researcher goes about finding out the knowledge in relation to the subject of study? (Guba 1990). The following section elaborates on the aforementioned considerations from the constructivist approach, as well as its relevance to this thesis.

4.1.1. Ontology

Ontology deals with the questions such as *what is the nature of reality?* (Guba 1990; Gurdíán 2007; Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Lincoln, Yvonna and Guba 2013;) or *what is there that can be known?* (Gurdíán 2007). In the context of this thesis, the ontological beliefs are situated among the different perceptions (or different realities) that TAs have constructed regarding the DI of

Nicaragua. Constructivists claim that “*knowledge is a human construction, never certifiable as ultimately trues*” (Gurdián 2007). In words of Guba, “*there is not one reality, only multiple realities that exist in people’s mind*”. For this reason, relativism is the basic ontological presupposition (Lincoln, Yvonna and Guba 2013). To this Guba adds that “*relativism is the key to openness*” (Guba 1990). This means that researchers adopting a constructivist approach acknowledge the diversity of mental constructs there can exist within the participants contributing with their views to this research. Hence when adopting a relativism standpoint, each opinion will matter in this research, because there is not an ultimate truth.

Thus, the ontological presuppositions of constructivism throughout this thesis acknowledge that there are multiple versions of realities or multiple perceptions about the DI of Nicaragua from the TAs perspective these perceptions are subject to the knowledge and experience about the business, tourism sector, business practicalities, etc. In turn, Traverso (2007 noted by García, Muñoz and José 2013) emphasizes that the DI is not homogenous for everybody or static in time, and therefore is comprise by many relativist elements.

Arguably, this ontological presupposition is what makes this approach enriching, because it will enable the researcher to deepen into different points of views about the DI of Nicaragua and to identify the variety of images they may hold. Likewise, it is the flexibility of constructivism that enables the researcher to explore the perceptions in its pure nature, and it does not take for granted that all participants have generalized meanings about Nicaragua’s DI in their minds.

4.1.2. Epistemology

As mentioned above, the ontological presupposition of constructivism proposes a relativist world (Lincoln, Yvonna and Guba 2013), where multiple realities exist. Then, the epistemological presuppositions of constructivism refer to the way the researcher will relate to what is being study, in order to gain in-depth understanding about these multiple realities and answer the research question (Guba 1990).

This is called subjective epistemology. The ontological presuppositions in this thesis point out at different perceptions of the TAs regarding Nicaragua’s DI; in this sense, subjective epistemology suggests that engaging in meaningful interactions with the participants is an essential element to best unfold and understand the meanings the TAs ascribe to the DI of

Nicaragua. Constructivists then believe that knowledge created in social inquiry is a result of the interaction between the researcher and the participants (Guba 1990). In words of Ritchie and Lewis (2003) this means that the “*relationship between the researcher and social phenomena is interactive*”.

Consequently, epistemology is dealing with questions such as “*How do researchers know what they know?*” (Klotz & Lynch, 2007) or “*What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known?*” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) and to give answer to the aforementioned questions, the subjective epistemology of the constructivist paradigm guiding this thesis allows the researcher to engage in the interpretation and dig deeper into the perceptions of the TAs (Klotz and Lynch 2007).

In line with this, it can be argued that, contrary to objectivism, where the facts are measure by the researcher, and the researcher does not have any influence on the findings, (Jennings 2009); subjective epistemology claims that the researcher cannot escape from her beliefs, and therefore the research cannot be value free (Guba 1990; Lincoln, Yvonna and Guba 2013). Hence, it is important to acknowledge tha the results of the research are influenced by the researcher’s interpretation of the partipants perceptions and such interpretations will at the same time be influenced by the methodolofical choices made by researcher to answer the research question (Murphy 1997; Lincoln, Yvonna and Guba 2013). For this reason, it is important to clarify that subjective epistemology adopted in this thesis, does not imply that the rigor of the research is lost, but that it will responds to the researcher managing the subjectivity, as Lincoln, Yvonna and Guba (2013) stated: “*as tenaciously as possible*”. Which means recognizing that this thesis is not value free, but at the same time, that the researcher makes their assumptions as transparent as possible. (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2009). To this end, the role of the researcher will be discussed in the last section of the Methodology chapter.

Additionally, each partipant may carry different perceptions about Nicaragua’s DI, that are contextual and produced by their previous understanding and/or experiences in the tourism. To this point, it is important to recall that that the perceptions of the DI will merely correspond to those one’s of the outbound Danish TAs offering destination in Latin America.

Moreover, the knowledge that is being co-created by the researcher and the participants happens within an interactive interpretative process, and is continuously furnished, where overarching question guiding the research is constantly revised. This dynamic is known as the hermeneutic circle, and it will be further explained in the Research Design section.

4.1.3. Methodology

Methodology deals with questions like *“How should the inquirer go about finding out knowledge?”* This thesis intends to gain knowledge about the perceptions TAs hold regarding the DI of Nicaragua. With the purpose of achieving this, the thesis follows a qualitative exploratory case study approach. This approach has been selected as the most suitable path to explore the perceptions of the TAs in relation to the DI of Nicaragua and therefore, gaining the knowledge to answer the research question.

During this research process, the researcher identifies and selects the data collection methods that will best help to obtain the information needed to answer the research question. In order to do so, it is necessary to explore the TAs perceptions regarding Nicaragua’s DI. A Qualitative study seems to be the most appropriate approach, because this type of study aims to capture the worldviews of those who construct and experience the reality the researcher is trying to understand (Gurdián 2007). Likewise, an exploratory case study approach arises from the need to gain in-depth understanding of a “complex social phenomena” (Kin 2009) that in this thesis corresponds to the perceptions about Nicaragua’s DI. The following section elaborates on the research design of this qualitative exploratory case study research, where the choice of this approach and the methods selected are further explained and argument.

4.2. Research Design

Research design is *“a plan for conducting the study”* (Creswell 2014). It outlines methodological choices made in order to answer the research question *“which is the central intent of study”* (Creswell 2014). Thus, the research design comprises the research approach, the methods selected to collect, process and analyze the data needed to answer the research question.

In this line, the research question has been defined as: *How do the outbound Danish Travel Agents offering destination in Latin America perceived the Destination Image of Nicaragua?* Thus, this thesis intends to explore the perceptions regarding the DI of Nicaragua, and to gain understanding in particular of those perceptions hold by the outbound Danish TAs offering destination in LA (this will be further explained in the sampling section). In order to do, this thesis is conducted as qualitative exploratory case study research.

It is important to stress out that there is no single accepted way of doing qualitative research, and the way a social research is carry out, depends on the ontological and epistemological considerations that would best assist the researcher to answer the research question (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). In this thesis, these considerations are rooted in a constructivist setting, previously stated (see philosophy of science).

To this point, it is important to point out two relevant particularities of the qualitative methodological design that are embedded throughout the whole research process of the thesis: hermeneutic and dialecticism. These two, are in the basic methodological presupposition of constructivism (Lincoln, Yvonna and Guba 2013).

The hermeneutical process, or also called the hermeneutic circle (Dilthey1900, cited in Gurdíán 2007) is regarded as a reflexive movement that goes back and forth throughout the individual parts of the research. In this respect, constructivists believe that knowledge is rooted in previous understandings of a social phenomenon, and that, this knowledge is then shaped and furnished insofar the researcher gets deeper into the research process.

To mention an example, this back and forth movement can be explained as the constant revision of the research question and each one of the individual parts of the thesis at every stage of the research. This dynamic enables the researcher to seek for improvement, and ensure that the theoretical framework and the methodological choices are the best to assist the research process to answer the research question. Many changes are made through the research process, and these changes are a reflection of the increase understanding of the topic.

Moreover, as Guba (1990) explained, the role of hermeneutics is also to interpret constructions as accurate as possible. In line with this Lincoln, Yvonna and Guba (2013) posit that an interpretative explorative method of hermeneutics seems most appropriate. It is not only about interpreting, but trying to find the real meaning behind the impressions of the participants. The researcher, carefully and actively listened to the participants during the interviews, and commit to truly understand what they really mean and feel towards the DI of Nicaragua.

Dialectics is as well an important part of this research. It makes reference to different constructions in relation to the DI of Nicaragua, and the process of comparing and contrasting different points of views (Lincoln, Yvonna and Guba 2013). The interpretation and the analysis are not only to provide descriptions of the data, but to deconstruct the meanings and reflect upon them. Recognizing the flaws of the data is part of the dialectical process. Thanks to this dialectical element, the data will provide different points of view of the different TAs. Hence, analyzing similarities and difference between the perceptions hold by the TAs results to be an essential process of the analysis. Thus, dialectics encourage the reflection about the different constructions.

The forthcoming section argues on the research approach choice within this research design and the methods to collect process and analyze the data.

4.2.1. Qualitative exploratory case study research

The aim of this thesis is to gain knowledge and understanding about the perceptions of the TAs regarding the DI of Nicaragua. In order to do so, it is necessary to explore gain access to the TAs describe Nicaragua's DI. Arguably, a qualitative exploratory study seems to be the most suitable approach for this thesis, because it allows the researcher to create knowledge through the interactions with the participants and obtain deeper insights from the TAs opinions.

In line with this, qualitative approach, according to Alonso (1998), gives importance to the way members of a determined community socially construct their own world, and where the data is express through their points of views and their descriptions constitute the main mean of analysis. Contrary to the quantitative approach, where the data has a numeric meaning, qualitative research conducts an extensive study of small groups (Bryman 2012), and by unpacking their meanings it is possible to develop rich explanations and of what is being study (Ritchie and Lewis 2003).

In tourism, there has been recognition of the need for more qualitative research methodologies (Chon 1992; Choi, Chan and Wu 1999; Johns and Gyimóthy 2002; Phillimore and Goodson 2004; Greaves and Skinner 2010). Phillimore and Godson (2004) pointed out that these methodologies should focus *“upon the individual’s role in the active construction and reconstruction of reality [...] and the meanings they attach to various aspects of tourism”*. In this respect, qualitative methods enable to take into account the individual perceptions. Creswell (2014) posits that *“one of the chief reasons for conducting a qualitative study is that the study is exploratory”*. In this respect, qualitative exploratory research is conducted where there has been not much written or known about what is being studied. It can be said that there is a lack of studies addressing the DI of Nicaragua; likewise there is no single study that indicates the perceptions from travel intermediaries’ perspectives. For this reason, this research approach arises from the need to know more about the DI of Nicaragua, especially from those that have the power to influence tourists, such as the TAs. Furthermore, this qualitative exploratory approach is embedded in a case study. The reason for this is because a case study allows building in-depth understanding about a specific setting from a group of people’s perspective (Ritchie and Lewis 2003; Creswell 2014), that is to say the perceptions of TAs in relation to the case of Nicaragua’s DI.

Additionally, this qualitative exploratory case study approach will provide the direct opportunity to describe holistic impressions regarding Nicaragua’s DI as well as unique features and feelings associated to this country (Choi et al (2007; Kin 2009). In other words, a case study approach attempts to draw an analysis based on the overall meanings that emerge from the data and create rich knowledge of what is being studied. However, rather than drawing definitive conclusions, it pays attention to the single constructions, and from there it attempts to build “patterns” (Yin 2009 noted by Creswell 2013; Bryman 2012). Thus, it will be possible to identify patterns and unique standpoints regarding the DI of Nicaragua from the particular point of view of TAs.

4.2.2. Data collection method

The data collection method in this thesis consists on qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted outbound Danish TAs offering destinations to Latin America were

purposefully selected. The methods and sampling choice will be further argument in the following sections.

4.2.2.1. Qualitative Semi- structure Interviews

To start with, it is important to stress the qualitative interviews are regarded as one of the most accurate methods for qualitative exploratory case study approach where the understanding of the subject is limited (Creswell 2013).

This piece of research is aiming to explore the perceptions of the TAs regarding the DI of Nicaragua, where little research has been done. In order to get access to those perceptions and gain in-depth understanding, the constructivist paradigm suggests that knowledge is co- created and unfolds through meaningful interactions with the participants contributing to the research (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). For this reason, qualitative semi-structured interview result to be the most suitable qualitative method for this thesis, because it enables to stablish interactions with the TAs as way of gaining access to their perceptions, and give the participants the chance to express their opinions in their own words. At the same time, this data collection method enables to use the theoretical framework of DI as lens to better understand those elements related to the DI of Nicaragua.

To better understand such choice, many scholars (Kvale 1996; Ritchie and Lewis 2003), explain that interviews are a way of engaging in a conversation. Sidney and Beatrice Webb (1932, noted by Ritchie and Lewis 2003) described the method of the interview as being “*conversation with a purpose*”. This conversation provides an opportunity for the researcher to engage with the participants in a meaningful dialogue. In qualitative interviewing, according to Bryman (202) “*there is much greater interest in the interviewee’s point of view*” and the researcher seeks for rich and detail answers. Therefore, this data collection method will enable the in-depth exploration and of the TAs points of view in respect to the DI of Nicaragua by talking to the participants.

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted via face to face, Skype and telephone. The argument for the use of each type of interview is elaborated in the following section, as well as the sampling technique and the participants’ information.

Face to face, Skype and Telephone interviews

In total seven interviews were conducted. Four were face to face interviews with the TAs representatives. Face to face interviews according to Bryman (2012) are the most natural choice in qualitative research and allow gathering the data in the natural setting of the participants. Three face to face interviews were conducted in Copenhagen and one in Bagsværd, three of them took place at the main office of the company, and the latter took was conducted at the house of the participant. This type of interview allowed the researcher to have a better connection with the participants and enabled the dialogue to flow in a more spontaneous way. At the same time, the researcher noticed that the time to perform the interview was less restricted, as the participants felt a higher level of engagement with the interview. It has to be mentioned though, that some background noise issues hindered certain parts of the interview recording in the case of interview that took place at the house of the participant. But this is something that the researcher cannot control.

Two other interviews were conducted via skype, and one via telephone. In this respect Bryman (2012) commented that this type of interviews enable the researcher to solve situations where the participants are hard to reach or for other types of constraints. In the case of this thesis, the reason was because these TAs were located far away from where the researcher lives. In respect, one of the TAs was located in, Aarhus, the other in Ry. The last TAs is located in Randers and the interview with this participant was conducted over the phone. These two types of interviews have pros and cons. They are cheaper and faster choice than travelling to the participants setting (Bryman, 2012). On the other hand, some factors can affect the dialogue, such as bad internet connection, failures with the computer, bad phone signal, etc. For example, with the interview conducted over telephone, technical issues with the computer hindered the accurate recording of the first 7 minutes of the interview. However, and as it recommended by Bryman (2012), field notes were taken, which enabled the researcher to document important information of those 7 minutes. The rest of the interview elapsed without any other inconvenient.

On the date of the interview, the participants were reminded about the aim of the research and the importance of their contribution. There were also asked if they would prefer to remain confidential. In this respect, all the participants granted their consent to indicate their names and

the names of the company in this thesis. The consent was granted previously to the start of the interview and reminded at the end, as suggested by Ritchie and Lewis (2003). The participants did not have any inconvenience with the interview being recorded. Moreover, the participants were asked they will be willing to further answer some over email, that may arise during the data processing. To which all of them agreed. On average each interview lasted 43 minutes, for a total of 301 minutes of recording.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was selected as the sampling technique in this thesis. With this technique the unit of analysis are chosen *“because they have particular features or characteristics which will enable the detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes the researcher wishes to study”* (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). This means that the TAs sampled were chosen because they are regarded as key informants to provide data that will make possible to answer the research question, consequently interviewing experts, such as the project managers for the LA regions of the TAs sampled resulted appropriate. (Bryman 2012), rather than sampling them on a random basis (Creswell 2013).

Purposive sample can be further explained as one of the methods of non-probability sample (Bryman 2012; Ritchie and Lewis 2003). In qualitative research non-probability sample is used to select the population for the study. Non-probability sample refers to selection the units of analysis deliberately. In addition, in qualitative research the sample does not have to be statistically representative, and smaller sizes are used on the basis of their characteristics and with the aim to have an in-depth approach (Ritchie and Lewis 2003).

The aim of this thesis is to gain understanding of the perceptions the TAs regarding the DI. Therefore, outbound Danish TAs offering destinations in LA were selected as the units of analysis. The underlying argument for this selection is that (1) this thesis attempts to explore the perceptions of the DI of Nicaragua from the perspective of the Danish market. (2) Additionally those TAs that already offer destination in LA were selected, because they possess more knowledge and expertise about the countries in that region, contrary to those ones with no destinations at all in LA. Hence, selecting this particular group was the most logical decision. (3) Foremost, TAs were selected, as it has been stated before, they are opinion makers and have

a great impact on the travel choice of the final traveler, thus understanding the images of those whose job is to sell destinations could provide a deeper insight in a more strategic way to understand the DI of a country.

According to The Danske Rejse Bureauer website (an independent Danish website) in Denmark there are 307 outbound Danish TAs registered. From which 50 offer Destinations in LA. From these TAs, only 10 have Nicaragua in their Catalogues. It was decided to explore the perceptions of TAs offering destinations in LA in general and not only those ones that have already integrated Nicaragua in order to ensure that within the units of interests, there were as many perspective as possible, as purposive sample suggest. According Ritchie and Lewis (2003), it optimizes “*the chances of identifying the full range of factors or features that are associated with a phenomenon*”. In this case, the perceptions of the DI from the TAs will vary based the characteristics of the TAs, and other influencing factors (Ritchie and Lewis 2003).The hermeneutic/dialectic process of this research will allow contrasting and comparing those perceptions and deepen into the issues the DI may convey.

22 TAs were contacted via email during the first 2 weeks of February, with a request of collaboration with the research. The aim of the research was stated, as well as the average length of minutes the interview could take, the ways in which the interview could be conducted, the right of confidentiality the participants are entitle to, and their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Arguably this process followed the ethical principles highlighted by Creswell (2013).

During the second week of March another email was sent as a reminder of the request, getting 9 refusals in that same month. TAs stated lack of time. Three TA confirmed via email, and the date of the interview was set up. I proceeded to call the TA that hadn’t answered, being able to arrange an interview with another 3. The remaining 6 did not provide any answers over email. It was impossible to contact the project managers over telephone. In total six TA agreed to contribute to this thesis, for a total of seven interviews.

The participants’ positions at the TA are related to the management and operations of travel packages at different destinations, and all of them with expertise in the countries belonging to

LA. However, one participant is travel guide for one of the TA. The following table provides the information of the TA and the participants in detail. It shows the chronological order in which the interviews were conducted. During the analysis the opinions will refer to the name of the TAs.

Travel Agency	Location	Destinations in LA	Clients	Name of the participants	Role in the mpany	Years in the mpany	Nationality	Type of terview
Jesper Hanibal	Aarhus	Mexico Guatemala Belice Honduras Nicaragua Costa Rica Panamá Brasil Argentina Perú Chile Colombia Ecuador (Galápagos ands) Bolivia Guyana	FIT and groups (tourists in their late 40s and up)	1. Jesper Hannibal	Owner, Director And project manager for LA.	11 years	Danish	Skype interview
Inter Travel	Copenhagen	México Guatemala Belice Costa Rica Cuba Argentina Bolivia Ecuador(Galápagos ands) Peru Venezuela	FIT and groups (tourists in their late 40s and up)	2. Brian	Co-owner	25 years	Danish	Face to face
Svaner Rejser	Bagsværd	Mexico Cuba Peru The Caribbean	FIT and groups (tourists in their late 40s and up)	3. Peter David Jensen.	Project manager	3 years	Danish	Face to face
Tikva Travel & iel Tours	Randers	Nicaragua Brasil Ecuador (Galápagos ands)	FIT& farmers	4. Mette Hvid Hansen	Director		Danish	Telephone
Albatros	Copenhagen	Mexico Belice Guatemala Honduras El Salvador Nicaragua Costa Rica Panama Argentina	Groups (late 40s)	5. Inge Beyer 6. Juan Ramirez	-Product manager For LA -Travel guide	5 years 6 years	Danish Uruguay	Face To face Face to face

		Bolivia Brasil Chile Colombia Ecuador Galápagos ands) Peru							
Topas Travel	Ry	Argentina Costa Rica Cuba Ecuador Peru	Group (between s and 70s)	7.	Camilla Hvalsøe	Operations manager	9 years	Danish	Skype interview

Table 1.Travel Agents and Participants information .Own source

It is important to clarify the reason why two interviews were conducted with the staff of the same company, in the particular case of interview held with a travel guide from Albatros. This opportunity arose when product manager, mentioned that one of the travel guides from Albatros, which area of expertise is LA was available for an interview as well, and that she considered he could provide deeper insight because he is a tour leader for LA, and consequently knows a lot about destinations in this region. For this reason, the researcher took this opportunity, hoping to enrich the fieldwork. This kind of sampling can be explained as “opportunistic sampling”. This emerge when the researcher take advantage of “*unforeseen opportunities as they arise during the course of fieldwork*” (Gurdián 2007). This type of sampling allows adopting flexibility within the type of sample already selected. In this respect, participant number 6 is the only travel guide interviewed.

4.3. Interview guide

The interview in this thesis was elaborated on the basis of the theoretical framework. And interview guide in semi-structure interviews assisted the researcher to perform the interview in a logical way; drawing upon questions relevant to the topic (Kvale 1996).The interview was elaborated with open-ended questions, in order to encourage full and meaningful answers from the participants. The interview guide was divided into three parts. The first part comprises questions regarding the general characteristics of the TA and the participants in relation to their role in the company.

The second part of the interview guide corresponded to questions related to the overall DI of Nicaragua. Firstly, the participants were asked to describe images or characteristics that come to their minds when thinking about Nicaragua. In this respect open-ended questions gave leeway to the participants to elaborate on their perceptions without leading them to focus on specific aspects of the DI of Nicaragua. The forthcoming questions in this second part were elaborated taking into consideration the 4 components of DI according to Etcher and Ritchie (1991) such as: Functional-holistic image (egg. a mental picture of the destination’s physical characteristics), Psychological-holistic image (egg. the general feeling an individual has about the atmosphere at the destination), Functional-attribute image (egg. high prices, warm climate) and Psychological-attribute image (egg. general safety, friendly local people). By elaborating questions related to

these aspects, it was possible to identify the cognitive and affective aspects of the DI. The third part is related to the information sources.

Arguably, the interview was designed thematically, with questions related to the topic, following certain logic, but at the same time dynamically, enabling a spontaneous interaction, and giving freedom during the process to raise new questions (Kvale 1996). As suggested by Bryman, the questions were elaborated in comprehensive and simple language to avoid miss interpretations. See the interview in the appendix.

4.2.3. Data processing and data analysis

Thematic analysis has been chosen as the best way of analyzing the data. Thematic analysis hence enables to unveil the perceptions of the TA regarding the DI of Nicaragua. The following section elaborates on the steps followed to process and analyze the data.

4.2.3.1. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is used because it enables to identify and analyze patterns within the data. This seems to be the most appropriate method in order to unveil the perceptions of the TA regarding the DI of Nicaragua. With this method, the analysis seeks to identify patterns and unique standpoints regarding the DI of Nicaragua from the participants' perspectives.

Thematic analysis is widely used, and given that qualitative approaches are diverse, complex and nuanced (Holloway and Todres, 2003 noted by Braun and Clarke, 2006), Braun and Clarke (2006) contend that thematic analysis “*should be seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis*”. In this thesis, it is argue that this method offers an accessible and theoretically-flexible approach to analyzing qualitative data. This can be explained in that thematic analysis is not necessarily embedded with a theoretical framework, but it can be theory-driven. Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that one of the benefits of thematic analysis is its flexibility. Thematic analysis can work both to reflect reality and unravel it. It recognizes the active interpretative role of the researcher in identifying and selecting patterns and themes.

Additionally, this method is suitable for this research because it is argued that it is suitable with under under-researched areas Braun and Clarke 2006), such as the case of

DI of Nicaragua and the perceptions of tourism stakeholders such as TA. On the other hand it is important to acknowledge that one of the weaknesses of this method is that “it does not show the researcher how to find themes from a text” (Bryman 2008). For this reason a series of steps are suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed:

Transcription: According to Bryman (2012) transcription enables to transfer the oral statements of the interviewees into text, get familiar with the data, and ease managing the data for the analysis. This step plays a crucial role in the interpretative act of the analysis, as the researcher insofar transcribes, informs the early stages of the analysis. It is been noted by Clarke and Braun (2006) that there is no one set of guidelines to follow when producing a transcript, for this reason it “*requires at a minimum a rigorous and thorough ‘orthographic ‘transcript’*”, additionally “*it is important that the transcript retains the information you need in a way which is ‘true’ to its original nature*”. The transcripts of the interviews were loyal to the participants’ oral statements; however, some phrases that existed for the purpose of maintaining the dialog were omitted, as well as irrelevant comments to the topic.

Coding: This consists on coding features of the data is interesting to the analyst, and that gives meaning to the raw material in relation to the research question (Braun and Clarke 2006). Coding can be performed manually, and Braun and Clarke suggest that one of the ways is using highlighters to indicate potential patterns within the data. This has been adapted to the coding process of the findings, and has been done carefully and reflectively, as repetition in the data does not necessarily imply its relevance for the research question (Bryman 2012). Different colors were selected for different patterns identified. The following example was taking from an extract of one of the transcriptions used in this thesis.

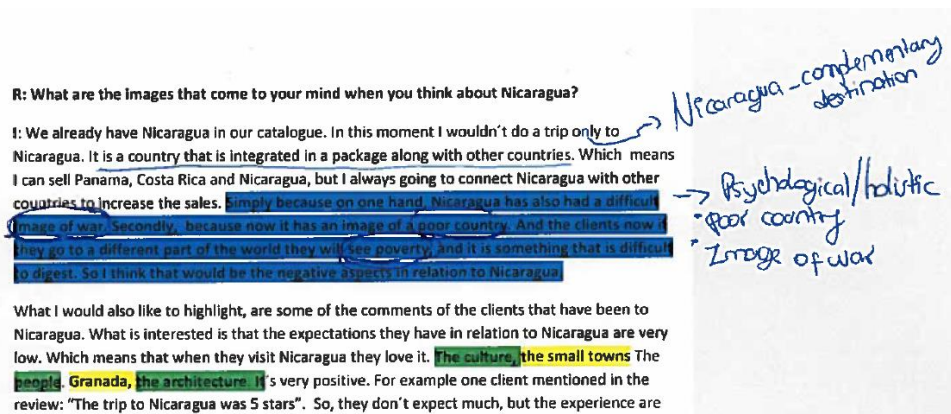


Figure 5: Example of coding

Creating themes: Once all the data set has been coded, the next step consisted sorting all the coded data extracts within the potential themes. In this phase, a mind-map was used as a visual tool to ease the combinations of the coded data into potential themes, as suggested by Clarke and Braun (2006). Figure 6 and 7 displays two of the examples, of the thematic mind-minds used during this process; it shows the initial and revised thematic map.

As mentioned before, the flexibility of thematic analysis enables the process to use the theoretical framework as a guide to creating themes relevant to the research question, and at the same time, generates themes from the data. Both approaches were used in the analysis. The main themes were guided by theoretical considerations, and sub-themes emerged from the data.

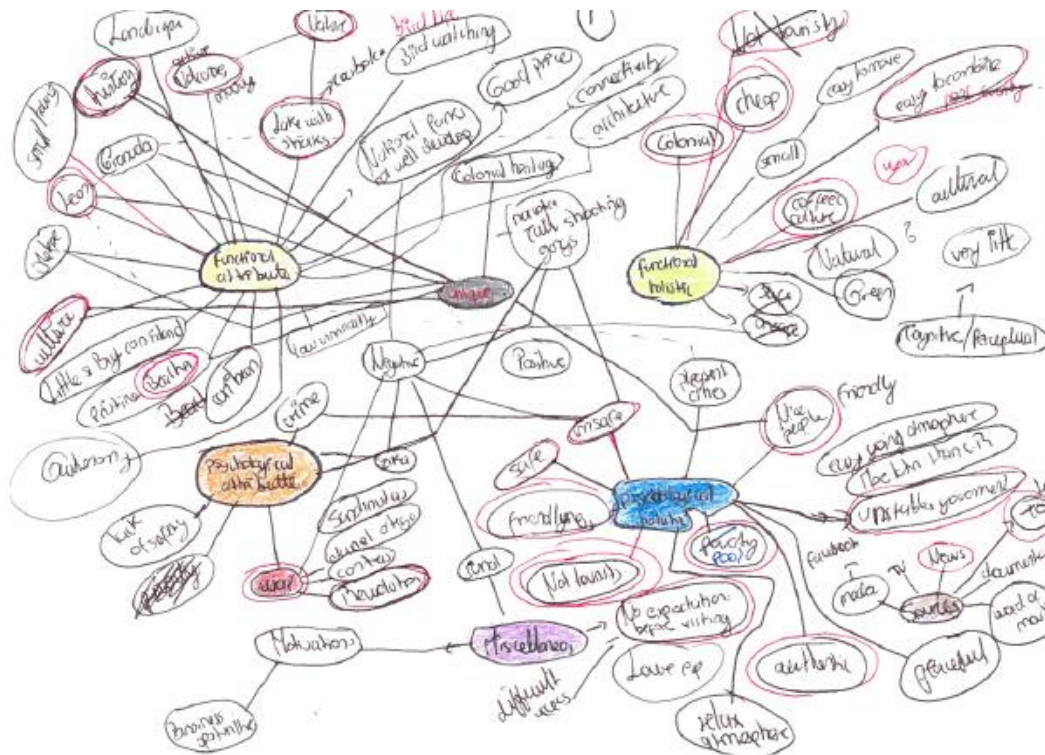


Figure 6: Initial thematic mind map. Own source.

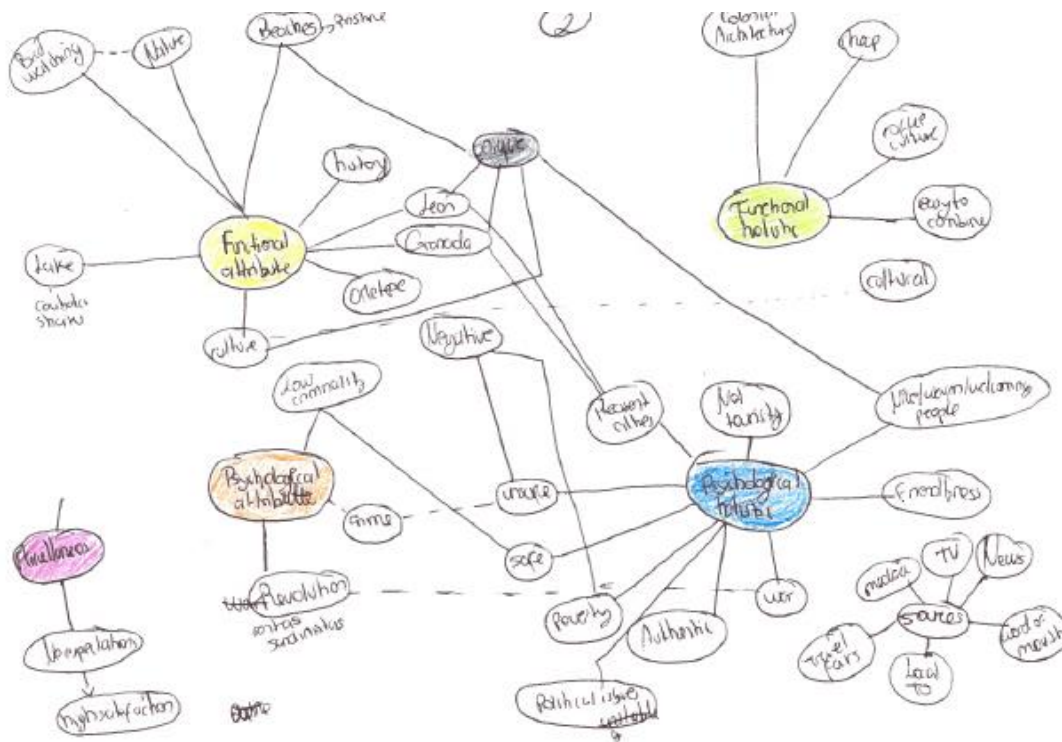


Figure 7: Revised thematic mind map. Own source.

Reviewing and defining themes: This step is about revising the selected themes and subthemes emerged from the data, and critically assess how well they are supported by the data set. In words of Braun and Clarke “*data within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes*”, which is what is called internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. The coded data extract belonging to specific themes and subthemes were carefully revised, to ensure they capture the essence of the perceptions of the TA, and that at the same time form coherent patterns. The thematic mind map helped the researcher to highlight those themes and subthemes that were persistent in the data extracts and relevant to the research question.

The themes were grouped in the following categories using the model of Etcher and Richie (1991) and the DI formation factors of Beerli and Martín(2004)

- Cognitive/perceptual and affective evaluations
- Functional Characteristic
- Psychological Characteristics
- Information Sources

And subthemes emerged accordingly from the data, for example Safety, Warm people, etc., as sub-themes of the Psychological characteristics of the DI of Nicaragua perceived by the TA

Producing the report: Once themes were defined, a detailed analysis of the data started. It is important to provide sufficient evidence of the themes within the data. Choosing extracts that provide vivid examples of the TAs’ perceptions about the DI of Nicaragua reflects the hermeneutic and dialectical process of this analysis; it is not only about describing, but arguing the relation between the findings and the research question.

4.2.4. The role of the Researcher

In qualitative research the role of the researcher has a great influence in the way the research is carried out. For this reason it is important to clarify the role of the researcher in this thesis.

In qualitative studies the researcher is regarded as the primary instrument of data collection (Denzin and Lincoln 2005), hence the all the research process and the final outcome will be influence on how the researcher position herself in this process. With this in mind, Creswell (2013) stated that the researcher have to be transparent throughout all the research process in respect of the choices made (Creswell 2013). As it was noted by Lincoln, Yvonna and Guba (2013), it's all about managing subjectivity and making the researcher assumptions clear.

Considering that the research question of this thesis calls for a constructivist paradigm, which pleads to qualitative methodologies, that enable in-depth access to the participants' insights, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection has a great power to influence the outcome with her methodological choices, that she considers will best assist to answer the research question. More specifically, my understanding of the needs of this study guided me to address the DI of Nicaragua from the particular perspectives of outbound Danish TA.

Another example is that during the interviews, I committed to carefully listen to the participants, to respect and accept their standpoints in relation to the topic, to give freedom to the participant of expressing their thoughts. But also, it is my responsibility as the researcher to get deeper into their perceptions by drawing relevant questions that guided the interview in a certain direction. Moreover it was my ethical responsibility to elaborate a transparent and an honest interpretation of the participants' statements, and to draw an accurate reflection of what they said. Undoubtedly, this is subject to my interpretation and reflection skills. For this reason, reflexivity, as suggested by Galani-Moutafi (2000; quoted by Phillimore and Goodson 2004), is an aspect I embrace throughout this thesis.

5. Findings and Analysis

This section is dedicated to the results of the empirical stage of the research, which has been guided by the theoretical framework. The analysis has been divided into three sections. The first section elaborates on the cognitive/perceptual and affective evaluations of the participants about the Nicaragua. This first part introduces the overall evaluations of the DI, coming from broad perspectives given by the participants. It accounts as the background to go in detail about the TAs' perception in the second section of the analysis.

The second section comprises the core of the research: "the perceptions of the TAs about the DI of Nicaragua". This section offers a more detailed perspective about the DI of Nicaragua from the TAs' angle. By using the model of Echtner and Ritchie (1991) it is possible to answer the overarching research question: *How do the outbound Danish Travel Agents offering destinations in Latin America perceive the Destination Image of Nicaragua?* The model enables capturing those perceptions from an attributes and holistic perspective.

The third address the factors influencing the perceptions such as information sources. This factor together with personal factors are also melded in through the first two sections, however, the third sections further elaborates on it, as the findings showed an important reflection from the TAs in this respect.

5.1. Cognitive/perceptual and Affective Evaluation

It's been pointed out in the theoretical framework that DI is a result of a combination of different components: the cognitive/perceptual, affective and conative evaluations, which are based on consumer's rationality and emotionality.

The first two, cognitive/ perceptual and affective evaluations have been chosen as the point of departure of the analysis, because in the order address the perceptions of the TAs regarding the DI of Nicaragua, it is important to first know the origins of the perceptions acquired by the TAs. In other words, being knowledgeable about the TAs rational and emotional evaluations will allow the reader to have a richer understanding of the TAs constructions (Baloglu and McCleary 1999). This section is hence focuses on the prevailing evaluations throughout the data.

Let's recall that the cognitive/perceptual evaluations comprise the knowledge or beliefs about a destination and the affective evaluations make reference to feeling and emotions in relation to a place, these evaluations are influenced by different factors such as personal factor and information sources. Both types of evaluations are interrelated and it's argue that former is an antecedent of the latter. (Beerli and Martín 2004).

The findings showed that the cognitive/perceptual and affective evaluations of the TAs regarding the DI of Nicaragua are deeply rooted a historical episode occurred during the 70s and 80s, namely "The Sandinista Revolution"¹ and to which the participants mostly refereed as the "civil war". Moreover, the findings show that the

Demographic characteristic of the TAs' target group resulted to have a great influence in the cognitive and affective evaluations of the participants, especially when associating the DI of Nicaragua to the aforementioned episode. Moreover, the cognitive/perceptual evaluation related to the DI of Nicaragua was persistent with the opinion that Nicaragua is an unknown destination within the market targeted by the TAs, consequently the TAs

¹ The Sandinista Revolution encompassed the rising opposition to the Somoza dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s. Nicaragua was governed by the Somocista dictatorship from 1936 to 1979. The development of the Somocista regimen crisis at the end of the 70s was a result of the economic depression, the marked differences between the social classes, the detriment of the quality of life of the population, among others. However the constitutions the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Libeation front, by its acronym in Spanish) and other opposition groups have their roots since the beginning of the 60s, but It was until 1978 that the insurrectionary revolution phase started against the Somocista dictatorship, presided at that time by the president Anastasio Somoza de Debayle. This year was a critical year for the dictatorship; the assassination of the Nicaraguan journalist Pedro Joaquín Chamorro by the regime was followed by a business national strike, the rise of popular manifestations and the arm insurrection. Since then Nicaragua entered in an arm conflict until the triumph of the "Sandinista Revolution" on July 19th, 1979. The shift of government presided by the FSLN, with Daniel Ortega as the president received a country plunged into an economic and social crisis (González 2009)

considered that Nicaragua only be sold in combination with other destinations as part of something bigger.

5.1.1. Nicaragua and the civil war

The majority of the participants when talking about their impressions of Nicaragua as a travel destination recalled the “Sandinista Revolution” of Nicaragua that took place between late 70s and 80s. In this way, it can be say that the historical and political wingspan of Nicaragua during this period had a great impact in their cognitive and affective evaluations.

One of the impressions that best captures the cognitive/ perceptual evaluation is that one of the TA Jesper Hannibal:

“First, you can’t fight history... It’s just that Costa Rica in people’s mind they think is an Island. I don’t know...it’s just the sound of it, it sounds more pleasant. Nicaragua, you immediately think about the Civil War” (JH)

The following example captures a cognitive/perceptual evaluation regarding this same episode, but also denotes affective implications, the TA Inter Travel expressed:

“...the history speaks for itself in those countries (countries in Central America)... If you look, as far as I know, Costa Rica has been safe and quiet for quite some decades now, and when I grew up in the 70s, in Nicaragua, they were still struggling with the revolution. So I grew up in a time where it was different, and it was definitely not safe to go there, and there was a lot of political problem, and there was no democracy ... I think it takes time for the country to settle down”.
(Inter Travel)

The above description shows that this episode in Nicaragua has had a remarkable influence in the image of the country and in the cognitive/perceptual evaluation; clearly, the image of war has prevailed in time. Additionally, it connotes affective evaluations of insecurity and political instability. This goes in line with proposition that the cognitive/perceptual evaluation of a place affects its affective assessment, because the

latter is a response to the cognitive images formed in the mind of a person (Baloglu and McCleary 1999).

In addition, another important aspect needs to be mentioned, and it is the “age” factor. According to Baloglu and McCleary & 1999) age can be explained as an antecedent to the cognitive and affective processes. This statement is supported by others scholars (Beerli and Martín 2004; Tasci and Gartner 2007; Ferrerira 2011) who explain that personal factors such as demographic characteristics influences images perception. In other words, people over certain age will associate Nicaragua with the arm conflict.

Relatedly Topas Travel opined:

“I also think of Nicaragua as a country with a recent political instability and civil war [...] I do remember what happened in the 1980’s...!”(Topas Travel)

What the above example implies is that as mentioned before, people over certain age will most likely associate Nicaragua with what happen between the late 70s and 80s. This can be related to the demographic characteristics of the target groups of the TAs which is mostly people in their late 40s and onwards. Arguably, the TAs’ cognitive/perceptual evaluations pay attention to the war image of Nicaragua as there are chances their clients will remember this, and it will negatively affect the way they perceived Nicaragua as a destination.

It is evident that the “war” image of Nicaragua has prevailed in time. This can be related to the proposition of Alvarez & Campo (noted by Zhang, et al. 2016). They posit that events happening in a destination that have a greater resonance internationally can damage the image of country, such as political incidents and wars, and these images tend to be persistent in time. Another vivid example of this was pointed out by the travel guide of Albatros:

“...You know Nicaragua was on the news for long time because of the civil war. Despite to the date it’s not the situation, it still affects the fact that people associate it with the war...this is a subjective thinking, because they (the clients) also know that war times are over... (Albatros)

The above opinion gives similar insights to Topas Travel, however this TA provided a different perspective by refereeing that although clients know that the war time is over, this association stills affects the DI of Nicaragua. In this sense, it can be said that this historical event has ascribed feelings of insecurity and political instability to the image of Nicaragua. In relation to this, one important element to highlight is that organic information sources seem to have a great impact in the cognitive/perceptual assessment of Nicaragua's DI. The participant gives a clear example by mentioning the news. This is product of the negative press Nicaragua had for many years during and after the war (Crotti and Misrahi 2015), and even though to the date Nicaragua is one of the safest countries in LA, its image has been dramatically affected by the war episode.

From this same TA, the project manager provides an example on the way her evaluations about the DI of Nicaragua have changed over time:

“I have to say it (the image of Nicaragua) was not positive, a negative image of the war...and I think that it is the biggest image....now that I read positive comments of the clients, it helps to support the fact that Nicaragua is a good experience. (Albatros)

Albatros is one of the TA that already offers Nicaragua in their packages. Both participants acknowledged that there is still strong image of war regarding Nicaragua that carries feelings of fear and skepticism for their clients. However, having Nicaragua in their catalogues for more than five years have slowly helped changing the perceptions of the clients that have experience by first-hand the country and that come back with positive experiences, and at same time it has improved the perceptions of project manager, who stated that this confirms that having Nicaragua in the catalogue is right. This can be related to the conative component that refers to the behavioral attitudes towards a destination (Beerli and Martín 2004). The conative component is the point where an individual decides to travel or not, in the case of TAs it can reflect managerial decisions regarding they tour packaging.

Clearly, the above cognitive/perceptual and effective evaluations in relation to Nicaragua's DI have been greatly influenced by the historical and political background of Nicaragua. In this respect Echtner & Richie (1991) have mentioned that the image of the destination can be based on historical, political, economic and social elements of a destination which, in turn "*will shape the image that the person already holds*". But it also shows that TAs constitute a powerful channel to improve tourist perceptions, such as the last example mentioned, by having Nicaragua as part of their catalogues and providing first-hand experiences to clients, perceptions can change.

5.1.2. Nicaragua, an unknown destination

It's been previously stated in the theoretical framework that destinations conveying a strong positive image are most likely to be promoted by travel intermediaries (Day, Skidmore and Koller 2001). It was also mentioned that "*destinations mainly compete based on their perceived images relative to competitors in the market place*". In this respect it was mentioned that Nicaragua does not possess a competitive DI, as other countries in CA better known, such as Costa Rica, Panamá or Guatemala. Relatedly, the findings revealed that TAs considered Nicaragua as an unknown and unpopular destination within the Danish market. To this point, it is important to stress that TAs opinions respond to the knowledge of their target groups, which are FIT and groups mostly in their late 40s and onwards (see table 1 in the methodology section) and it cannot be generalize to all outbound TAs' offering destination in LA with other types of segments or to the Danish market in general.

Most of the TAs stated that if their clients know about Nicaragua the reason would be because of the war and not as a place where they would consider traveling. The following quote gives an example:

"I would say generally Danes don't know about it (Nicaragua). If you ask them where Nicaragua is, a lot of people would say Africa. They don't know. If they know it, they know it because of Sandinistas. So they don't know it for tourism". (Svaner Rejser)

Another example was given by Topas Travel. This TA considers Nicaragua as an anonymous place, which is more appealing for a different type of traveler, such as

younger segment, whereas for the type of clients Topas Travel target, with limited amount of time to travel, Nicaragua does not figure as an destination an elder segment will choose when visiting by the first time Central America:

“If you are 65 years old and have never been or maybe just once or twice in Central or South America - or you have one chance to go – it would take a lot for an anonymous country to pop up in peoples mind as the place they want to visit. (Topas Travel)

Two points can be highlighted from the above quotes. One refers back to the age factor. The quotes reflect the relationship between the TAs target groups. On one hand, the findings showed that TAs’ clients (over 40s) associate Nicaragua with a violent past, and this is also the only knowledge they hold about the country; on the other hand, they don’t know Nicaragua as a travel destination, and the war image they perceived does not contribute to the projection of Nicaragua as a tourist destination either.

The other point is that the type of target group of the TAs is people that have resources to travel, but as Topas Travel stated, it will take more efforts for this people to visit a country like Nicaragua, on the other hand, the war image may not represent a problem for younger Danish segment, that may not know much about the country, but won’t be affected by the war image as they are not contemporary with Revolutionary context of Nicaragua, but may not have the resources to travel to a long haul destination such as Nicaragua.

Given that Nicaragua is regarded as an “*anonymous*” country for the TAs, lacking of sound in the mind of clients, it reflects a weak cognition about the tourists’ attributes Nicaragua comprises. This can be explained as the lack of images regarding attractions, attributes or a general idea about the country as a travel destination, which goes in line with the statement of Xiang, James and Yuan (2008, noted by Mulec and Wise, 2012), when they mentioned that being aware of a destination is not simply “*whether consumers have heard about a destination, but the likelihood the destination will appear in tourists’ destination choice set when identifying places to visit*”. Consequently, Nicaragua, is also perceived as a country that cannot be sold as a main destination, on the contrary, it can

only be offer in combination with other destinations (this will be further elaborated in throughout the following theme) in this respect when asking Albatros, why would be reason, she explained:

“Because clients’ don’t know anything about Nicaragua, it is important when one sells a destination that you say the name and that the clients can relate to. For example I say Brazil and you start thinking and many things. If I say Nicaragua, clients’ won’t be able to say anything”. (Albatros)

Albatross is one of the few TA that includes Nicaragua in their packages, and they have noticed a positive response from the clients that comes back from Nicaragua; however, this TA’s insights go in line with the pattern evidenced in the findings, when considering Nicaragua as an unknown destination for the Danish market. Albatros added that it takes more efforts to sell the country with an unknown DI. This was also noted by Tikva Travel, another TA offering Nicaragua:”

“I don’t think people know it so much. I don’t think there is a big knowledge about it, and that is a little bit sad, but I think that is one of the reasons why I want to put more energy into Nicaragua. Because I believe that now with the world looking different people is looking more for places where they feel safer”. (Tikva Travel)

The above comment, gives an example of an affective evaluation about Nicaragua. It was also pointed out that Nicaragua is not well known within the Danish market, however this TA is willing to “put more energy” to promote Nicaragua because it is consider to be safe country.

All in all from, it can be said that the TAs evaluate Nicaragua as a destination that lacks of sound in the mind of their clients, some of them can not relate Nicaragua to any type of tourism activity or attractions, which can suggest a reduce knowledge about this country as a destination. On the other hand the TAs that already offer Nicaragua, such as Tikva Travel, showed a desire to promote more Nicaragua because it is considers as a safe country. This is supported by Albatros in the former theme, when the participant

mentioned that the perceptions have changed because of the positive experiences of the clients when coming back from a holiday tour from Nicaragua. However, this TA stressed they wouldn't consider selling Nicaragua as a main destination, only in combination with others.

These considerations are in line with an aspect that was previously pointed out in the theoretical framework, and it refers to what Gartner and Bachri'(1994, noted by Baloglu and Maloglu 2001) emphasized, that the DI held by travel intermediaries in the tourism distribution system for developing countries, has a great influence on their package development decisions. This leads analysis to the following theme related to the fact that Nicaragua does not stand out as a main destination, on the contrary, it is consider part of something else.

5.1.3 Nicaragua, part of something bigger

It's been noted that Nicaragua is considered as an unknown destination by the TAs. Relatedly another persistent opinion consistent with the latter is that the TA that already offer Nicaragua share the opinion that Nicaragua is a destination that cannot be sold as a main destination, but in combination with other countries. The project managers of Albatros, as well as the Travel guide from this same company mentioned in this respect that:

It is very important that it (countries they promote) has a good DI at a certain level. I can sell Nicaragua because it is part of a bigger package. But I am sure that in this moment I couldn't sell Nicaragua as the only destination”.

“To start with, it is not a popular destination. It is not a destination that clients would ask for. Besides that there is not a specialized product for Nicaragua. Nicaragua in this sense is part of a bigger trip”. (Albatros)

They make a very clear that the countries Albatros promote in their packages must count on a good DI; in the case of Nicaragua, as stated before, its DI it is not popular within the Danish market; given this situation, it is necessary to promoted as part of a

bigger package. To be more specific, Nicaragua is part of an 18 days tour package comprising 5 countries, starting in Panama, and continuing with Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala. Likewise, Jesper Hannibal considers that Nicaragua is part of a “bigger picture”:

“But many people think of Central America as a chain of small countries. The only country people are asking specifically regarding Central America it would probably only be Costa Rica. The rest of it is like huesos [bones], small bone fragments that you pass through. I mean you need encouragement to go there [the other countries in Central America]. If I look back we did not have that many that specifically only asked for Nicaragua.

“... it’s very rare that people only come from Nicaragua. It would be a piece of a bigger picture, a bigger travel”. (Jesper Hannibal)

What can be understood from this insight is that Nicaragua is considered in the specific case of CA as a peripheral destination and that given its unpopular DI, there is not a specific demand for Nicaragua from the TAs’ clients.

This can be related to Torres (2010) statement, he noted that DI perceptions can be derived from general impressions of a larger region, when the awareness of a destination is low.

This is also a reflection of what has been already stated in the National Plan for Sustainable Development of Tourism in Nicaragua (2011), it was noted that Nicaragua ventured in the tourism industry later than the other countries, and as a consequence it does not count on specialized products that stand out from the rest of destinations. In this sense, TAs offering Nicaragua play a vital role in creating awareness in their clientele and addressing the demand towards it. To this, Mulec and Wise (2012) suggest that *“knowledge must be mediated by tourism experts, TOs or TAs”*.

5.1.4. Nicaragua a country of low expectations

Another interesting aspect that the TAs that offers Nicaragua noted that clients do not have any expectations about Nicaragua. They opined that this is due to little knowledge clients possess about Nicaragua as a travel destination. One of the participants explains in relation to this:

“...for example one client mentioned in the review “The trip to Nicaragua was 5 stars”. So, they don’t expect much, but the experience are very positive. So what I see as a product manager is that this confirms that having Nicaragua in the catalogue is right. And if the DI of Nicaragua could be improved, it would be possible to make a trip that only includes Nicaragua” (Albatros)

This provides a perspective of the TA from their clients after the post-visited experience at travel destination with an unknown DI such as Nicaragua. In this respect, Mathieson and Wall (1992) stated that the DI can be very different from the reality of the destination. The bigger the difference is between the reality and the DI held by the person, or in other words, between the experience and the expectations, there will be a bigger probability that satisfaction won’t be achieved. In the case of Nicaragua, as the expectations are low, and the experiences seem to surpass expectations, there is a higher level of satisfaction. Another participant noted:

“I can see that the people I sent, people that went there on groups are very positive when they get home. And they talk a lot about on what they saw. I don’t know more because I don’t speak that much with them... But I can hear that they get more than what they pay for. So when they talk, I get more clients” (M).

From the above, it can be understood that TAs also build on their cognitive/perceptual and affective evaluations based on their clients’ feedback, in this case, in a positive way. This goes in line with what Baloglu and Mangalolu (2001) have mentioned, that *the “DI hold by TA can be reflected in the images perceived by their customers”*.

Another aspect that can be related to this are primary sources. Let's recall that primary sources refer to the information gathered by actual visitation of a destination (J. D. Hunt 1991). Relatedly, K. Kim, Hallab, and Kim (2012) found *“that travel experiences reinforced individuals' images of a destination and can positively affect the intention to revisit”*, hence, from the participants' insight, it can be said that the positive experiences of their clients are reflected in planning decisions of the TAs regarding Nicaragua, such as the opinion shared by Albatros that was pointed out before, when she mentioned that the positive feedback of the clients suggest *“that having Nicaragua in the catalogue is right”*. This can also be referred back to Zeithaml's (1988) observation. He noted that *“perceived value represents the customer's assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given”*.

It is interesting to note the project managers of Albatros and Tikva Travel have never been to Nicaragua, but their cognitive/perceptual evaluations of the country they promote builds on based on the information sources such as “worth of mouth” by clients that return from a trip.

In the case of the TA Jesper Hannibal, the visitation experienced triggered the interest in this company to introduce Nicaragua. The owner and director explained that he did not have any expectations or bigger knowledge about Nicaragua, other than the war history, but when he visited the country he saw a business opportunity:

“The Danish government had a program where you can start co-business with the Nicaraguan company, a B2B thing [Business to Business]and I went there in connection with that and met some Tour Operators and this one never kicked off, but at least it started our interest for Nicaragua.”(JH)

In the case of Tikva Travel, that also offers Nicaragua, information sources, and more specifically organic sources played a vital role in the managerial decisions of the company, she shared her experience of integrating Nicaragua:

“I am use to deal with countries that have difficult countries, difficult in a way that the media sometimes gives you one idea on how it is, [...] then I prefer to see it myself, I did not have to [in the case of Nicaragua] because I met Olle [her colleague] and he knows Nicaragua very well, so I was not worried at all. (Tikva Travel)

This example reflects that, what Tasci and Gartner (2007) have stated, that organic sources “*have a higher credibility and ability than sources with commercial aims*”.

It can be said that there is a relative stronger cognitive/perceptual evaluation about Nicaragua in comparison with affective evaluations. This is evidently product of the little knowledge most of the TAs have about its DI and especially when they refer to the little knowledge their clients have about the DI of the country. This can suggest that there is a scarce of promotional information reaching the TAs coming from the destination originated information, or the supply side.

5.2. Destination Image of Nicaragua

This section is dedicated to reveal the way the TAs perceived the DI of Nicaragua in detail, from an attribute perspective to holistic perspective. The Three-dimensional model of Echtner and Ritchie is used as a tool to capture the perceptions of Nicaragua’s DI from the TA standpoint. This model is formed by three axes, based on the **Attribute-Holistic** dimensions of the DI, which can have **Functional and Psychological** characteristics, and can be **Common and Unique**.

Firstly, the DI of Nicaragua perceived by the TAs is displayed in the figure 8, considering the Attribute and Holistic dimension, and the functional and psychological characteristics. Which are broken down into the 4 quadrants that comprised the model: Functional-Attributes, Psychological-Attributes, Functional-Holistic and Psychological-Holistic.

Secondly, the images displayed in the model are further discussed with the insights given by the participants. It is important to mention that many aspects of the DI displayed

in the figure overlap. For example in the case of the Functional- Holistic elements, Nicaragua was perceived as a country with natural resources, to which the participants then mentioned individual functional attributes such as mountains, active volcanoes, etc. In other words, as explained by Echtner and Ritchie (1991) *“holistic impressions are based on combinations and interactions of attributes and, in turn, the perceptions of individual attributes may be influenced by overall impressions and feelings”*. For this reason the analysis on how the TAs perceive the DI of Nicaragua is addressed taking as point of reference the Functional and Psychological characteristics of the DI, in which the attribute and holistic dimensions are further explained. Thus model, enables to capture both, perceptions from an attribute based perspective and holistic perspective.

Thirdly, the Common-Unique dimension of Nicaragua’s DI is addressed. Lastly, the influence of the information sources is explained.

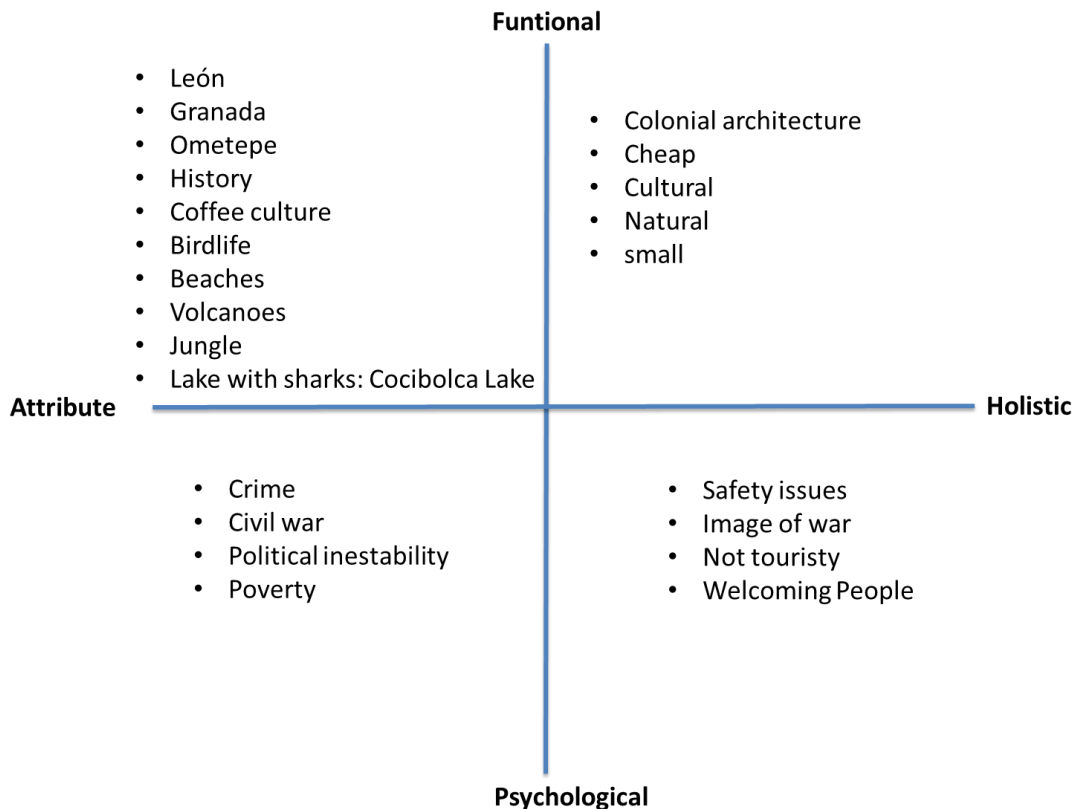


Figure 8: Components of Nicaragua’s DI perceived by the outbound Danish Travel Agents

5.2.1. Functional characteristics of Nicaragua's DI

Functional characteristics refer to characteristics that can be tangible, measurable or directly observable features of a destination (Echtner and Ritchie 1991). From figure 8 it is possible to note that the holistic perceptions about Nicaragua regarding its functional characteristic revolve around five images, its colonial architecture, natural environment, culture; the findings also showed that Nicaragua is perceived as a cheap destination in comparison to its neighboring countries; moreover, given that it is a small country, most of the TA argued that it should be easy to combine it in a multi-destination tour. Additionally the findings showed that half of the TAs that don't offer Nicaragua, had a hard time trying to describe their images about Nicaragua, and instead they took as reference Costa Rica, arguing that given the little knowledge they possess about Nicaragua, they considered Nicaragua would have similar characteristics to its neighbor country or in general similar to the rest of the countries of Central America.

A functional holistic perception was given by Svaner Rejser:

“It's the same as all the other countries in that region, it'll be culture, nature primary and history” (Svaner Rejser)

Likewise, from Topas Travel expressed something similar:

“My expectations of Nicaragua would be very much like Costa Rica...where I have been...beaches on the two coasts, some volcanoes, jungle, birdlife, animals...On top of my head, I wouldn't know if your country was especially great for active tourism” (Topas Travel)

The above insight, can be related back to the cognitive/perceptual evaluations of the TA, that manifested that Nicaragua is seen as part of something bigger, which occur when the awareness of a destination is low (Torres 2010).

Meanwhile, Jesper Hannibal mentioned the colonial aspect of the country and noted that functionality of being a small country:

“Nicaragua has a lot of colonial things and it’s very even sitting in a very small area, so just within few km from Granada, you have some nice volcanoes that are active”. (Jesper Hannibal)

Svaner Rejser referred to Nicaragua as a cheap destination and compares it with Cuba, which is the main destination of this TA:

“It depends on many things, one really important thing is the price, how expensive is to travel as a tourist there. Now is cheap I know, especially compare to Cuba, where the prices are really going up”.
(Svaner Rejser)

Regarding more individual characteristics, such as the attribute- functional aspect of the DI, natural attributes were persistent in their responses. For example Jesper Hannibal mentioned:

“If you look at Central America, Costa Rica is much more attractive for families. We had few families that has ride into Granada (Nicaragua) and crossed the border to Costa Rica, but still, the National parks in Nicaragua are not really evolved as it is in Costa Rica”. (Jesper Hannibal)

This pinion puts in evidence again that perceptions about Nicaragua are conditioned by the perceptions of other destinations that are better known and more competitive. In this case Jesper Hannibal alludes to a negative aspect of the National parks in Nicaragua. This is consistent to what was pointed out in the National Plan for Sustainable Development of Tourism (2011) that one of the main weaknesses about the tourism sector in Nicaragua is the undeveloped offerings.

On the other hand this TA highlighted a positive aspect related to the natural attributes:

“You have the world’s fresh water sea lake with sharks². So, in that respect, Nicaragua has a lot to offer...” (Jesper Hannibal)

Svaner Rejser refers to the same attribute: *“I read something about a big lake with sharks”*. The participant also mentioned:

“Probably it has some volcanoes [...] some nice beaches as well. Bu I don’t know the country that well. (Svaner Rejser)

Inter Travel an also highlight natural attributes:

“For me I would think there should be nature, good birdwatching, and so on, that is more or less what I know about Nicaragua”.(Inter Travel)

Albatros refers to the cultural and architectural aspect: *“The culture, the small towns, the people, Granada, the architecture...It’s very positive”*

What can be understood to this point is that the findings show that the perceptions about Nicaragua are based on very general observations that could be apply to other destinations in LA, such as nature, culture, colonial architecture (Costa and Bauer 2001); and only very few could relate to specific attributes of Nicaragua such as specific cities, natural resources,

On the other hand, Albatros provided a more detailed opinion, this was share by the tour guide whom is highly influenced by his experience trips to Nicaragua, he mentioned:

“Nicaragua has everything to be liked, to satisfy. To mention an example: Nature, jungle, volcanoes, mountains, lakes. Every minute is a pleasure. Since the moment you arrive in Peñas Blancas, the

² The Cocibolca Lake, also known as the Lake of Nicaragua, is the biggest lake in Central America. It has a surface of 8144km² and it is located in the central southern part of the country (Montenegro 2003). The lake sheltered sharks that were known as “sweet water sharks” because they swan through San Juan River, from the Caribbean Sea to the Cocibolca Lake, and adapted to sweet waters. During the 70s there was an indiscriminate shark hunting that took the specie to the point of extinction (Miranda 2010)

Cocibolca Lake, the volcanoes, Ometepe Island. I have never been so close of an active volcano like Masaya. That does not have a price”.

The above perceptions are more complex, based on first-hands experience at the destination. This goes in line with Echtner and Ritchie (1991), Gartner and Hunt (1987), Pearce (1982) and Phelps (1986) proposition, they stated that images obtain after visitation are more realistic, from those formed by secondary sources. Additionally, Echtner and Ritchie (1991) posit that *“those more familiar with the destination have images that are more holistic, psychological and unique”, while those less familiar [...] have images based on common features”*. The description is very detailed; it denotes not only functional-attributes, but also psychological-holistic impressions such as pleasure and priceless. Likewise, it is evident that perceptions about attributes and holistic dimensions can overlap, as well as the functional and psychological characteristics.

To continue, cultural aspects of the DI were also pointed by the TA, for example:

“You have a much bigger tradition of growing coffee in the north. You can go to the coffee region in the north, so it’s kind of lots of more culture.” (JH)

The above two quotes, are from TAs that offer Nicaragua, in this sense, there is a relation with the attributes they identify from the country and what it is offer in the TAs catalogues. For instance, the TAs Jesper Hannibal, in their 14 day package to Nicaragua, one of the main highlights is Matagalpa, a city in the North region, where the tour takes the clients to a coffee plantation; arguably he refers to Nicaragua as country of a bigger coffee culture because of his technical knowledge about it, and his experience. Likewise Albatros refers to very specific places such as Peñas Blancas, Cocibolca lake, Masaya Volcano because those places are part of the visit to Nicaragua.

On the other hand, an interesting insight from Albatros was that the participant referred to the war history of Nicaragua as a positive aspect, contrary to what most of the participants have mentioned; that instead of being depict as a negative image, it can be attractive, he mentioned:

“The glorious history of Nicaragua. The colonial and modern history, even all the problems Nicaragua have had are attractive, it is a motive of inspiration for us...for example, in León I took the group to the revolution museum, and there you are guided by ex-combats. That is an attractive thing. The experience a person that comes from Denmark has to listen to an ex-combat, to listen about it”. (Albatros)

This could be paradoxical, as the war image of Nicaragua is one of the cognitive/perceptual evaluations that are deeply embedded in the minds of the clients. However, as mentioned before, the theory indicates that negative images can be improved after visitation. Moreover, this opinion could suggest that the violent past of Nicaragua could be transform into an attractive historic resource.

5.2.2. Psychological characteristics of Nicaragua’s DI

Psychological characteristic, refers to those aspect that cannot be directly observe or measurable, for example the atmosphere, friendliness, etc. (Echtner and Ritchie 1991) . It is interested to note that the findings showed a more elaborated holistic-psychological image of Nicaragua than a holistic-functional image. On the other side the psychological attributes seems to be less.

Safety issues

To start with, the DI of Nicaragua is very fragmented when it comes to psychological impressions about safety. On one hand most of the TAs agreed that Nicaragua is a safe country, on the other hand, they highlighted that it still have a negative image of war, as it’s been previously noted, and that this has resulted in images of insecurity, crime, political instability in the minds of their clients. Hence safety issues are one of the most persistent psychological-holistic perceptions about Nicaragua as a travel destination

The insight of Jesper Hannibal was previously mentioned, where it was commented that when people think about Nicaragua, they immediately think about the civil war. On the other hand, Jesper Hannibal acknowledged that Nicaragua is a safe country:

“ Nicaragua is probably one of the safest countries in Central America, at least that is what the statistics say, that is safer than Costa Rica, then I think there is really no problem” (Jesper Hannibal)

The TA Albatros opined:

“Nicaragua is an unexplored country and tourism is still not developed strongly, this last aspect is very positive, but the civil war is still part of the image of Nicaragua, and it can be believed that there is not enough security and that there is a lot of poverty. It takes more efforts to promote a destination that has a negative image in general, because clients’ won’t travel to a destination where their health could be in danger”.

Perceptions of risk and safety and travel experiences are likely to influence travel decisions, which is the case of Albatros clients, their perceptions of a negative DI of Nicaragua hinders the promotion of the country. In other words, *“what matters most for the success of a destination is often the perception of risk that the tourist might face rather than the actual risk that is keeping visitors away (Costa and Bauer 2001)”*.

Topas Travel added:

“I probably would think a little bit the same of the thoughts I have about Colombia, people think is a dangerous country, but when you get there is very nice and the people are very welcoming”.(Topas Travel)

Again, the holistic-psychological perceptions regarding safety are conditioned by the negative image Nicaragua has. On the contrary, according to The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2015 (Schwab, et al. 2015) Nicaragua was the third safest country in Central American after Costa Rica and Panamá in 2015.

However the findings in this respect are consequent with the theory in that those images, rather than reality can conditioned the way a destination is perceived. Even

though most of the TAs think Nicaragua is safer from what its images connote, the positive side is outpaced by a deeply rooted image of war.

The TA Inter Travel expressed:

“if you ask people in Denmark [...] how do you feel about Nicaragua, would you go there on your own, take a local bus, jump in [...] I think people would probably be a little bit scared, because I have heard many stories about gangs, narcotics, and so on, the jails are pretty horrible, so I think that Nicaragua would need to get away from a bad image before they could open up at a full scale in tourism.”

(Inter Travel)

Very detailed psychological attributes such as “gangs”, “narcotics” “jails” were pointed out by Inter Travel. Clearly this psychological perception about Nicaragua as a destination leans to negative aspects.

Conversely to the negative image discussed above, the TAs perceived Nicaragua as a country with warm and welcoming people (the next section elaborates on this psychological aspect). These dual perceptions that most of the TAs hold about, that it is a safe country, but with an accentuated image of war can be related to Campo and Alvarez’s statement (2010) “*when a destination is a country, destination image is similar to country image*”. The difference between country and destination image as they explained is a “paradox” in developing countries, “*people simultaneously perceive a negative country image and a positive destination image at the same time*”.

Welcoming people and not a touristy country

Interestingly, the perceptions about the Nicaraguan people were very positive. Most of the TAs when asking what is the mood or atmosphere they think they can find or expect from a destination like Nicaragua, they referred to the nice and welcoming people, some pointed out at the kind interaction with the locals. This perception was also related to the perception of Nicaragua as a destination not so touristy, and therefore, TAs believe that interactions with locals happens more natural.

One clear example is:

“I can take from my clients what they tell me when they get back. They say people are very friendly, and trying to do the best. People are not so used to tourists. When clients go outside the touristy areas they experience the real Nicaragua, they feel very comfortable”.
(Tikva Travel)

Likewise, Topas Travel expressed a similar perception:

“I would think that Nicaragua is not a country that has a lot of tourism. So I would think that people would be interested in tourism and not tired of having a lot of tourists. So I think they would be very welcome”. (Topas Travel)

Another example related to the people of Nicaragua was perceived as follow:

“As far of people, it was in general very nice”. (Jesper Hannibal)

Similarly, the tour guide from Albatros mentioned: *“The people, warm people, helpful. Everything to be liked”* (Albatros).

This psychological perception of “welcoming people” could be related to a specific psychological attribute, however, the descriptions suggest that TAs perceive this as a general feeling of the atmosphere or environment they would expect or has experienced in Nicaragua. This shows that perceptions can overlap, and some may possible to denote not only attributes but also holistic dimensions.

Albatros highlighted the interaction with the locals: *It’s an authentic and cultural experience, a very nice interaction with the people”* (Albatros)

The latter also shows that interaction with locals are part of the cultural experience one can expect at a destination, in this sense cultural experience can be described as an functional-holistic perception, as shown in figure 8.

This psychological holistic perception of Nicaragua is a very positive aspect to note in a destination. In fact, the National Plan for Sustainable Development of Tourism in Nicaragua (2011) posit “friendliness and hospitality of Nicaraguan people” as one of the

story lines to be developed in order transmit positive messages that shows that Nicaragua is a destination with unique experiences, where tourist can feel part of culture, welcome and safe. The perceptions of the TAs regarding Nicaraguans seem to indicate that there is potential to for that story line. In relation to this, LEE and XIE (2011) state that *“local people are the key communicators of destination personalities and play an important role in attracting and retaining tourists”*.

5.2.3. Common - Unique dimension

This dimension makes reference to the traits of a destination which can be *“commonly used to compare all the destinations to those which are unique to very few destinations”* (Echtner and Ritchie 1991). In the past two sections, the attribute and holistic perceptions of Nicaragua’s DI regarding functional and psychological characteristics were presented and discussed. As mentioned most of the TAs’ perceptions about Nicaragua are based on very general observations that could be apply to other destinations in LA, such as nature, culture, colonial architecture (Costa and Bauer 2001). When asking the participants *“What attributes or characteristics do you consider are unique from Nicaragua?”* the findings showed that TA that don’t offer Nicaragua could not identify any unique aspects. On the other hand TA that do trips to Nicaragua pointed out at specific characteristics they consider unique. However, they stressed out that their clients those places are still unknown.

In relation to the first point, one TA mentioned:

“I would say that what Nicaragua has to offer you could also find it in Mexico, you can also find it in Panama, mostly. I think if you ask a normal client, do you want to go to Mexico o Nicaragua? They will always choose Mexico, because they know more about it, they have heard about the Azteca’s, the Mayas”. (Svaner Rejser)

Similarly, Topas Travel shared:

“If you have a destination like Costa Rica, it has some names like Monteverde cloud forest, things like that. There are not any names that come to my mind when I think of Nicaragua. There is not any

highlights, I can't mention anything, a mountain or a city [...] I am missing a highlight". (Topas Travel)

Likewise, the TA Inter Travel said:

"I don't know much about Nicaragua. I know someone that has been there, I haven't been there myself, but if you don't know it yourself, you haven't been there, you don't have this unique selling points, why would you go to Nicaragua?"(Inter Travel)

Evidently the DI of Nicaragua is lacking of sound, of "unique components". TAs have argued Nicaragua does not stand out in comparison to other destinations, e.g. Costa or Mexico, and that given that there is not a unique selling points, clients clearly will feel more attract to destinations with stronger DI. The lack of recognize landmarks has been one of the main challenges of Nicaragua as a travel destination that needs to be addressed by destination marketers (EPYSA, et al. 2011). According to Ritchie and Crouch (2003) *"icons help to reinforce the uniqueness of the destinations they symbolize"*.

On the other hand, TA offering Nicaragua mentioned:

"If you take any countries in Latin America, and ask what is the common denominator, and where does it stand out? What we emphasizes about Nicaragua would be the colonial heritage sites of León and Granada. Places like Ometepe, if they want to have some pristine beaches the Corn Island." (Jesper Hannibal)

"Definitely it's the cultural and historic part and our clients have commented that they have enjoyed the interaction with the people"
(Albatros)

It can be said that in general Nicaragua does not count with "unique" attributes or holistic images in comparison to other destinations, and despite some TAs highlighted specific aspects, for them what it's indispensable is to sell a destination that counts with a positive and strong image. As it's been mentioned before, an unknown DI or misunderstood image implies much higher costs for efforts to enhance the destination's

competitive appeal; and those TAs offering Nicaragua have argued that for that reason, it is not possible to sell Nicaragua as a main destination.

In this sense it is pertinent to take Ritchie and Crouch's (2003) statement, they mention that while it is important that destinations convey positive images "*what is especially desirable is the development of a positive unique image that distinguishes one destination from the many competitors that are actively courting the same potential visitors*"

What is contradictory is that for the TAs and for their target groups there is one aspect about Nicaragua that has been persistent, and it is "Sandinista Revolution" history, to which TA has refer as the war. While it is true that this has been perceived as a negative aspect of the DI of Nicaragua, it is also the most known image of Nicaragua, which can be also consider as unique. Arguably It could be possible to transform the negative perception about this historic element into a positive an attractive unique image. This will be further address in the recommendations section.

5.3. Information sources

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, information sources are fundamental in presenting, introducing and exposing the information of a destination, (Tasci and Gartner 2007) and according to Gartner (1993, noted by Beerli and Martín 2004) "*they are the forces which influence the forming of perceptions and evaluations*". For this reason is important to dedicate a section to the role they played in the perceptions of the TA.

In this respect TAs argued that the scarce knowledge they and their clients possess about Nicaragua as a travel destination are a result of little information received from the induced sources of information (those with tourism commercial aim coming from the destination), on the other hand, perceptions where the TA seems to have a stronger argument, such as the war image and safety issues, corresponds to the influence of organic sources, with no tourism promotion aims.

Inter travel noted:

“I would say media, but that is more bad stories, something like now the USA is sending back the criminals to the Central American countries, and now there is more crime in Honduras and Nicaragua...rarely I see some nice tourism information from Nicaragua”. (Svaner Rejser)

Inter Travel mentioned:

“Nobody is telling a good story from Nicaragua, we only hear in the news or documentaries[...] I saw a documentary and there were following a local police and how there were working there and somebody got shot on the street”. (Inter Travel)

Both TAs refer to secondary information sources, more specifically, organic sources. This type of sources can have positive or negative impact on the DI, depending on what type of information is being delivered, and the destination marketers have no control over them. The sources named by the participants have certainly influence their perceptions in a negative way. According to Tasci and Gartner (2007) these types of sources *“have a higher level of credibility and ability to reach crowds than those sources with commercial aims”*.

Meanwhile, Topas Travel mentioned:

“I think is because we have not looked at Nicaragua as a Destination for us, so I haven't looked at it with those eyes. I think to be honest I sort of have this perception of Central America of Honduras and Guatemala, I know them because my friend has been there a couple of times and have talked about it, I don't know anyone on top of my mind whose been to Nicaragua and that came back and gave me information, or talked about it and show pictures. [...] I have a tendency of blocking it, until you start looking more into a section of the world. and you start getting more different images” (Topas Travel)

This opinion shows that organic sources play a vital role in transmitting information about a destination; in this case, it involves friends given information based on their own knowledge and experiences about other places. On the other hand, Topas Travel has not looked at Nicaragua as a travel destination that could potentially be included in their offer. Arguably there is not special business interest on searching for information about Nicaragua. In this respect, Ferreira (2011) points out that *“potential tourists have a strong or a weak organic image and/or direct or indirect experience with the tourist destination will influence the amount of information sought and efforts made in this search process”*.

Thus, TAs will search for information about destinations of their business interest, and if destinations such Nicaragua, where the organic images TAs hold are related to negative aspects, and the destination originated information is basically absence is very unlikely that the DI of Nicaragua would be considered attractive to the TAs.

For TAs that offers Nicaragua *“the tours leaders and the internet”* (Albatros) seemed to be one of the most important sources; as well as feedback of clients coming back for a trip. In this respect, as mentioned before, the DI of Nicaragua has been enhanced by the experience at the destination, as TAs have pointed out, their customers comes back happy and their expectation have been surpassed. In other words, the perceptions TAs hold about Nicaragua are assessed on the basis of their customer and tour guides experiences, and their own managerial assessment; consequently it will have an influence their package development decisions.

Additionally, local stakeholders, such as the inbound TOs are important sources as well, Tikva Travel” mentioned:

“I look in Facebook, because I am friends of Camile (travel planner of an inbound TO in Nicaragua). I know where to get my information from the countries I work with” (Tikva Travel)

Arguably, the quest for information is then highly motivated by business interests. It can be said that the perceptions of Nicaragua´s DI have been influence mostly by organic sources, such as news, documentaries and the broad media coverage that took place in the 70s during the Revolution in Nicaragua (Crotti and Misrahi 2015), which is the strongest

image embedded in the TA. On the other hand the lack of induced sources has resulted on a less accentuated induced image.

In this respect, TAs highlighted two important points. Nicaragua needs to enhance their marketing strategies in order to create a higher level of knowledge about its DI within the Danish market, and also to communicate stronger positive messages, rather than negative ones coming from organic sources. Additionally they added that is it necessary to impulse cooperation with more TAs as way of enhancing the negative image the Danish market has of Nicaragua.

One of the TA mentioned:

“It’s about making the information available to the public [...] Invite Danish TA to visit Nicaragua [...] because if for example, four TA start promotion in their catalogues a 14 days trip to Nicaragua, at some point people will notice. It is responsibility of the country to spread the word about what they have, and when it is attractive then the agencies will sell it”. (Albatros)

TAs consider that destinations needs to work on their DI in order to attract TAs, and that by attracting TAs it is also possible to reach the final consumer. As it’s been stated, DI is very important in determining the popularity of a country (Greaves and Skinner 2010), likewise TAs address demand towards destinations they include in their offer, which are those destination with strong positive DI (Baloglu and McCleary 1999).

TAs need to receive positive messages from the destination, as Topas Travel said: *“I think probably the most important things of hearing something good about a country”.*

Regarding the cooperation with local stakeholders of the destination the TA Inter Travel mentioned:

“They would also need strong cooperation with strong TA, because they would be the one doing the most marketing, they would do more to sell the country because they can make money out of it. So you need not only to do strong promotion of the country but strong TA

cooperation within Denmark to make actually people go to Nicaragua, because the more agencies focusing on one country the more people are going there by themselves of together with the TA”.
(Inter Travel)

This opinion reinforces the importance of TAs as opinion leaders. The more TAs focusing on a destination indicates that such destination is a reliable place to visit, and moreover an attractive place. Many scholars (Baloglu and Mangalolu 2001; Alaeddinoglu and Can 2010; Mulec and Wise 2012; Vicol and Zait 2014; Berrios 2015) regarded TA as travel advisors, and regardless if the final consumer purchase or not a travel package, they will heavily rely on the TA preferences.

In sum the perceptions of the TAs indicates that the DI of Nicaragua is not attractive for the outbound Danish TAs, and this is a result of negative associations with its DI. TAs argued that the lack of promotional material regarding the Nicaragua as a tourist destination has influenced the fact that the negatives messages received from organic sources have been more constant and persistent. Consequently TAs won't put further effort on promoting Nicaragua if its DI is not improves, because a country with a negative image is not attractive to potential tourists.

6. Criteria for assessing qualitative research

This section elaborates on the trustworthiness of this thesis. This is done in order to assess the accuracy of the findings and data collection methods used (Guba 1990; Lincoln, Yvonna and Guba 2013; Bryman 2012). Trustworthiness will therefore be assessed according to the four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

6.1. Credibility

In order to achieve credibility, according to Bryman (2012), the researcher needs to ensure that the findings are carried out “*according to the canons of good practice*”. Moreover that the methods selected are the most accurate to answer the research question.

In respect to the first point, all the interviewees were informed about the purpose of the research, and how and for what the data collected from the interviewees were going to be used. Moreover ethical considerations such as confidentiality and consent were informed, and their right to withdraw from the interview.

In respect to the second point, triangulation is recommended to ensure that the researcher gain as much insights as possible to enrich the research (Bryman 2012). This thesis only used one method of data collection, such as the interviews with the experts because the research question underpins TAs as the unit of analysis. By talking to the representatives of the TA the researcher gained detail information regarding their perceptions about the DI of Nicaragua from TAs perspectives. And this was the principal aim of this research.

In addition, the researcher clarified some points of the interviews that were not clear enough at the time of the transcriptions and analysis. This process consisted on elaborating short and asserted questions in relation to specific aspects relevant of the interviews that needed further clarification. An email with the questions was sent to the participants, to which the participants agreed to collaborate.

6.2. Transferability

Transferability refers to the way the research can be extent to other settings (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). According to Bryman (2012) no study regardless the method use is universally transferable. In this thesis, the researcher provided detailed information regarding the setting the study, methodological procedures and information of the sample (see methodology section) in order to enable the reader to consider if the findings can move beyond the setting of this thesis. It would be up to the reader to assess the transferability (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

6.3. Dependability

Dependability entails “*ensuring that complete records are kept of all phases of the research process*” (Bryman 2012). In other words it is about giving access to the examiners that would assess the research. For this reason, all the material relevant to this thesis is available. The transcripts of the interviews can be found in the appendix of this thesis and recordings have been gathered in a CD attach to the thesis.

6.4. Confirmability

Confirmability “*is concerned with ensuring that, while recognizing that complete objectivity is impossible in social research, the researcher can be shown to have acted in good faith*” (Bryman 2012). In other words, the researcher throughout the whole process of the research was honest to the reader regarding the information being displayed. The researcher manifested a reflective position in all the phases of the research. Moreover, the ethical practices were followed during all the process and the role of the researcher and her influence in the outcome were discussed

7. Discussion

In this chapter, the conclusion, implications and suggestions for Nicaraguans stakeholders, limitations of the research and suggestions for further research are discussed.

7.2. Conclusions

This section presents the answers to the research question: *How do the outbound Danish Travel Agents offering destinations in Latin America perceive the Destination Image of Nicaragua?* In order to achieve this, a qualitative exploratory case study design was chosen as the most suitable methodological approach to gain access the TAs perceptions regarding the DI of Nicaragua. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with six outbound Danish Travel Agents; seven experts' members of these TAs were interviewed.

Cognitive/perceptual and affective components enabled to uncover the overall evaluations from the TAs regarding Nicaragua. This accounted as the background to better understand the TAs' perceptions. Furthermore, the tri-dimensional model of Echtner and Ritchie (1991) was used as a tool to unveil the way the TAs perceived the Destination Image of Nicaragua.

The first section of the analysis focused on the cognitive/perceptual and affective evaluations of the TA regarding Nicaragua's DI. In this respect, the findings revealed that the cognitive/perceptual and affective evaluations of the TAs are strongly rooted in a political and military episode that took place in Nicaragua between the late 70s and the 80s, namely "The Sandinista Revolution". It was noted that this episode in the history of Nicaragua ascribed an image of war to the country, and consequently a set of negatives images in relation to safety, political instability and poverty; these evaluations demonstrated to have a remarkable influence in the way Nicaragua is perceived as a destination by the TAs. In this respect the findings revealed that, when TAs think about Nicaragua there is a big gap between the images the TAs associate with country in general and what they know about Nicaragua strictly in relation to the tourism industry.

Moreover, the findings showed that there is a strong relationship between these evaluations and the demographic characteristics of the TAs target groups. It can be said that the cognitive/perceptual and affective evaluations of the TAs regarding this specific “war” episode responded in a level, to their customers’ demographic characteristics such as the “age”. The TAs primary target group is people mostly in their late 40s and onwards. This gives an indication that people over certain age will be familiar with the “Sandinista Revolution” of Nicaragua; consequently they will remember the violent past of the country and, will therefore associate Nicaragua with negative images of war, rather than being familiar with Nicaragua as a travel destination. Arguably, for TAs that were part of this research, the image of Nicaragua as travel destination has been conditioned by this perceptive/cognitive and affective evaluation, and the findings revealed in this sense that TAs won’t sell holidays destinations with risky images.

However, this is also an indication that for TAs targeting younger segments the “war image” does not necessarily represent an issue that will negatively affect the perceptions of Nicaragua’s DI, as younger segment may not be familiar with this episode, hence they won’t create any associations with a war when thinking about Nicaragua. On the other hand, it was pointed out the specific target groups of the TAs would be people with enough resources to travel to long haul destination, such as Nicaragua, however the negative image of the country discourage potential tourists, which represent a drawback for the tourism in Nicaragua in relation to the this market.

Moreover, contrary to the familiarity TAs and their target groups have with the war image of Nicaragua, the findings showed that Nicaragua is considered as an unknown travel destination. For this same reason, the TAs that already offer Nicaragua argued that it wouldn’t be possible to conceive it as main destination in their offer, rather, it is sold in combination with other countries that hold a more attractive DI. In addition, TAs argued that due to its unknown DI, customers don’t have high expectations whenever they are going to embark on a multi-destination holiday in Central America, where Nicaragua is part of. However, the low expectations according to the TAs have resulted in rewarding experiences because customers have actually gotten more from what they expected. TAs

consider that this is an indication that Nicaragua has potential to be developed as a destination. This shows that primary sources, such as first-hand experiences at the destination can improve the DI of a place, and in this respect, TAs have a great power to address their offer to destinations which good images. In the case of Nicaragua, the TAs argued that if the DI of Nicaragua would be improved, they are sure there would be more demand from their clients, and consequently more efforts to sell the country.

The second part of the findings uncovers the perceptions of the TAs regarding the DI of Nicaragua. The functional and psychological characteristic were used as the point of departure. The findings indicated that perceptions of the TAs regarding the DI of Nicaragua in relation to the functional-holistic aspects are derivatives from general observations that could easily refer to other destinations in LA, for example holistic perceptions such as cultural and natural resources, a perception of a small and cheap country, that don't point out at any unique characteristics of Nicaragua in comparison to other destinations. This is related to the fact the Nicaragua is considered as an unknown and unpopular destination within the TA, therefore, the TA evidenced certain difficulty when elaborating on their perceptions about Nicaragua's DI. It can be argued for the TAs offering Nicaragua, even though there is a bigger knowledge about the country, it is not a main destination, therefore the attention and efforts put into their promotion is limited, which can result in a better knowledge of countries with a stronger DI such as Costa Rica or Panama.

When it comes to the functional-attribute based perceptions, only the TAs that offers Nicaragua could point out at specific attributes from Nicaragua, such as the cities León, Granada, Ometepe Island and Cocibolca Lake. The rest of perceptions regarding this same aspect were persistent to general observations as well, such as beaches, birdlife, and jungle. In this respect the findings showed that most of TAs in order to elaborate on their perceptions took as reference other countries they know more about such as a Costa Rica, arguing that they would expect to find similarities in Nicaragua. Arguably, the DI of Nicaragua in relation to its functional-attribute is perceived as weak.

Moreover, the findings indicated that the attribute and holistic-psychological dimension of the DI perceived by the TAs have a stronger sound than all the functional one, because they have been conditioned by the war image, which was the most persistent image for the TAs. Hence, Nicaragua is perceived as a country dealing with safety issues. While TAs that offer Nicaragua argued that they are aware that Nicaragua is a safe country, they also acknowledge that its DI is still affected by the negative image of war, thus Nicaragua is unsafe in the mind of their clients. Consequently the TAs argued that this has hindered the promotion of Nicaragua as a travel destination. TAs agreed that the DI in this sense does not seem to be attractive to the Danish market. Once again, this may be the case of the groups belonging to certain age that are familiar with the war history of Nicaragua between the late 70s and 80s. TAs targeting a younger segment may not experience this same issue.

Furthermore, the findings showed that information sources play a vital role in the formation process of the DI of Nicaragua. TAs considered that there is an absence of information related to tourist offerings of Nicaragua, this can be also explained as the lack of induced sources from Nicaragua reaching the TAs and their target groups. On the contrary, most of the information that has reached the Danish public has been information related to negative aspects of Nicaragua; news, documentaries, and the strong media coverage during the 70s are the most persistent organic sources of information that have influenced the TAs' perceptions.

Last, but not least, the findings have shown that the DI of a country greatly influences the way a country is perceived, be it as an ideal and attractive destination or on the contrary, as an un-attractive destination. In the case of Nicaragua, the persistent negative image and the lack of knowledge about tourist attributes and holistic images indicated that the DI of Nicaragua does not have sound within TAs. Relatedly, the findings have shown that perceptions held by TAs have an impact in their business procedures and destination choice. In this respect, TAs offering Nicaragua have received positive feedback from clients coming back from holiday trips that include Nicaragua, this suggests that first-hand experience at the destination enhances the image held by their clients regarding

Nicaragua. Likewise, these positive experiences have improved the image held by the TAs regarding Nicaragua as travel destination; which indicates that it is right to offer Nicaragua. In this sense, TAs argued that if the DI of Nicaragua would be improved, there would be bigger efforts to promote the country as a primary destination and not only as an add-on, however the current case if that it is a challenge to promote a country with an unknown DI, what it is more, a country that is associate with safety issues.

Consequently, the fact that Nicaragua is considered as an unknown and unpopular destination reduces the possibilities to put the country in the choice set of the TAs and consequently, in the choice set of their clients. In sum, this gives evidence that TAs can address their offer to destinations of interest and hence act as opinion makers, important information sources and as channel between destinations and potential tourists.

7.3. Implications for Nicaraguan stakeholders

The literature about DI indicates that exploring and gaining understanding about DI of a country can assist destination marketers and tourism stakeholders in general, to assess the DI of a country and to better address their offer to specific target groups (Alaeddinoglu and Can 2010). This section intends to draw on recommendations taking the insights from the findings regarding the DI of Nicaragua.

The findings of this Thesis revealed a set of implications in relation to the promotion Nicaragua's DI. The lack of cognitive/perceptual and affective evaluations in relation to Nicaragua as a travel destination, along with the little knowledge on attributes and holistic images of the DI of Nicaragua call for the improvement of the communication strategies from the destination marketers in relation to the Danish segment. TAs argued that what it is known about Nicaragua is mostly related to negative images coming from organic sources, and in order to reach the Danish market with positive messages Nicaragua stakeholders should implement:

Story telling

Story telling was considered to be communication strategy that TA suggested Nicaraguan marketers should implement. In this respect, storytelling is considered a

marketing tool that focuses on experiencing. More specifically, a marketing-oriented storytelling would be pertinent, which is meant for external stakeholders (Elise 2014).

In this respect, in relation to the specific case of the “war image” ascribed to Nicaragua, it could be transform in to an attractive “unique historical resource” that could capture the attention of the TAs in a positive way. Considering that TAs argued Nicaragua does not stand out from any other destination, this “war image” could be telling a different story, and sending a different message to the target groups that have shown according to the TAs insight, are already familiar with this. Taking into account that to the date Nicaragua is one of the safest countries in Central America, the “Revolutionary past” of Nicaragua, the values that moved this historic episode, the story of the people that witnessed and participate in the “Revolution”, “*The glorious history of Nicaragua*” as Albatros pointed out could appeal to different senses of potential tourists and trigger that desire of visiting a country that far from being dangerous and plunged in a war, is one of the safest countries in CA.

Cooperation with the Danish Travel Agents

It’s been argued that TAs are regarded as opinion leaders and that images they hold about destinations influence potential tourists. Additionally, It’s been acknowledge that TAs are influential bodies “*pursuing the function or organize holiday packages*” (Baloglu and Mangaloglu 2001) and therefore they can address their offer to destinations they consider to be attractive and beneficial for their business. In this light, TA considered that cooperation between the tourism stakeholders from Nicaragua such as Inbound TOs, and Danish TAs is a step that needs to be followed. First there is a need to introduce the tourist offering of Nicaragua to the Danish market, as it is unknown. FAM trips offered to the Danish TA to Nicaragua could be the best way to provide first-hand experiences, as it’s been noted that primary sources could enhance the DI of a place. Then as Inter Travel mention “*for a destination to start up, they would also need strong cooperation with TA, because they would be the one doing the most marketing*”. Arguably, the TAs could contribute to enhance the DI of Nicaragua within the Danish market, to what Nicaragua would need to create strategic alliances with Danish TAs, especially those present in the region.

Participation in Travel fairs where Danish TAs go would also be appropriate.

7.4. Contribution

This thesis was design as a qualitative exploratory case study as there was not previous studying exploring the DI of Nicaragua from travel intermediaries' perspectives. Hence, it can be said that this piece of research has contributed to gain understanding of the specific case of the DI Nicaragua and how TAs perceive it.

This Thesis can also serve to inform Nicaraguans stakeholders that have an interest on addressing their offer to the Danish market and to comprehend how this particular market understand Nicaragua as a travel destination.

It also shed lights on the resonance that the “Revolution of Nicaragua” reached, to the point that this episode still affect the image of the country in people over certain ages, and can assist tourism stakeholders to tackle the problematic when addressing their offer.

As it's been mentioned, there is only one research addressing the perceptions of Nicaragua's DI from the tourist perspective that was conducted with tourist already visiting Nicaragua. Therefore, this thesis shows the importance of engaging on DI research about Nicaragua from a different angle, and the relevance it has for an emerging destination to comprehend the current situation of the perceived DI of the country.

7.5. Limitations

One of the main limitations of this research is that by conducting a qualitative study, which seeks for in-depth analysis, the findings of this thesis based on the perspectives of six TA and seven participants cannot be generalized, and may not resemble the perspectives of all the outbound Danish Travel Agents offering destinations in Latin America; instead the findings should be conceived as a representation of part of the this sector. If Danish outbound TA offering destination in LA with other type of target groups would have participated, findings may have revealed other types of perceptions about the DI of Nicaragua. In addition, this thesis has limitation given that is was conducted regarding the specific case of the DI of Nicaragua; it is not generalize to wider context.

7.6. Further Research

This thesis focuses only on the perceived DI of Nicaragua from the TAs perspectives. As the findings demonstrate the current target groups of the TAs that participated in this research were people over 40s, which influence to a great extent the perceptions of the TAs and the affections the “war image” carries to the DI of Nicaragua. One possibility to extend the scope of this research could be addressing the DI of Nicaragua from TAs addressing their offer to younger segments.

In addition, it would be pertinent to research on the about the Danish outbound tourism, their motivations and expectations when traveling to long haul destinations, and the research the point of view of Nicaraguan stakeholders in relation to the potential of the Danish market and to what extend Nicaragua could meet their needs and expectations.

Moreover, it could be enlightened to research on push and pull factors of TAs in their destination choice set for countries in LA or the Central America Region and explore their opinion regarding those aspects in relation to Nicaragua.

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