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The role of visual media in religious tourists' destination image, choice and on-site experience: The case of Tinos, Greece

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Abstract

Although visual media are known to influence the image people have of tourism destinations worldwide, only a few studies have examined their role in the context of religious tourism. This study explores the role TV news and documentaries play in religious tourists' destination image, choice and on-site experience. Ethnographic research (31 participant observations and 38 in-depth interviews) was conducted in two organized coach trips to the sacred island of Tinos, Greece. The findings suggest that broadcasted images of the holy icon, the leading politicians, and the performing religious crowd shape the image of Tinos and influence visitation patterns. Additionally, the visual projection of religious tourists' offerings appears to condition peoples' on-site experience. The theoretical and practical implications of the study are also discussed.

Keywords: Visual media, Destination image, Religious tourism, TV documentaries, Tinos

Introduction

Tourism, as a fantasy industry, largely relies on the projection of favourable destination images to entice people to visit a destination (Pan, 2011). Especially within the religious

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context, most religious institutions use visual media among other means to instruct people to visit sacred places and to engage in religious performances, acknowledging the power of places and the performances in them in generating particular experiences and establishing religious belief (Bourdieu, 1991). Religious tourism is commonly viewed as a physical encounter with the sacred (Eliade, 1969), which according to Turner (1973, p.191) can only be evidenced outside one's surroundings, namely "out there" where the principle sites of religious interest are located.

Such a religiously-motivated form of tourism is estimated to be as old as religion itself (Kaelber, 2006). Religion and tourism are historically related through the institution of pilgrimage, which is not an exceptional feature of Christianity, but according to Lanczkowski (1982) a universal phenomenon of religious history. Pilgrimages in Hindu, for instance, are considered a religious obligation during free time (Singh, 2006). In Islam, adherents are instigated to travel to circulate Allah's word, to enjoy Allah's creations and to enrich their knowledge (Timothy & Iverson, 2006). In a similar vein, while there are no specific references to tourism in the Bible, it can be inferred that a person's behaviour and experience during leisure time should lead to a greater appreciation of God (Vukonic, 2006). While previous studies focus on the extent to which modern tourism practices can be distinct from, or comparable to, traditional pilgrimage (Boorstin, 1964; Graburn, 1989; Smith, 1992), this study asserts that the performance of tourism can accumulate as many sacred features as pilgrimage can secular. As Turner and Turner (1978, p.20) state "a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist". Within this context, religious tourists, similar to other tourists, get influenced by representational means such as myths, narratives (Badone, 2007; Bell, 2003; Selwyn, 1996) and visual media (Scarles, 2009; Siripis, Scarles & Airey, 2013) that pre-program their expectations and experiences (Kim & Assaker, 2014; Pan & Tsang, 2014;

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Siripis et al., 2013), creating spaces for collective gazing and performances (Baerenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen & Urry, 2004; Urry, 1990).

Specifically, visual media - being the focus of this paper - including TV news and films are part of people's daily cultural life and shape the image they have of tourism destinations worldwide (Iwashita, 2008; Kim, Kim, Agrusa & Lee, 2012; Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott, 2002; Pan, Santos & Kim, 2016). News coverage and popular television programs - deeply embedded in everyday life - are able to provide substantial information about a place in a rather short period of time (Kim & Richardson, 2003). This type of information is perceived as unbiased by consumers, as they are considered more genuine, in contradistinction to induced image formation agents like traditional advertising (Gartner, 1993; Govers, Go & Kumar, 2007). Past research on visual media and destination image has mainly focused on how films, TV commercials and photos affect peoples' destination image (Gong & Tung, 2016; Pan, 2011; Pan, Lee & Tsai, 2014; Shani, Chen, Wang & Hua, 2010; Yen & Croy, 2016), destination choice (Hudson, Wang & Gil, 2011; Wong & Lai, 2013) and their on-site experience and behaviour (Kim, 2010; Siripis et al., 2013; Yen & Teng, 2015). Studies, in particular, have found that visual media increased peoples' awareness of places, had tourist inducing effects and influenced visitors' on-site experience (Kim & Assaker, 2014; Kim, 2012; Kim, Agrusa, Lee & Chon, 2007; Pan & Tsang, 2014; Riley, Baker & Van Doren, 1998; Siripis et al., 2013).

However, there is scarcity of research on the role of visual media in the context of religious tourism. Understanding such phenomena is critical given the popularity of religious tourism and the fierce competition among destinations to attract potential visitors. Building upon the work of Pan (2009) and Pan et al. (2016) on visuals, Kim (2010; 2012) and Siripis et al.

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(2013) on destination image and behaviour, and within the specific framework of Greek Orthodoxy (Andriotis, 2009, 2011), this study seeks to extend past research on religious tourism by exploring the role TV news and documentaries play in religious tourists' destination image, choice and on-site experience along with any implications these may have for the management and marketing of the tourism industry. This research contributes to a better understanding of the destination image formation processes, especially within the religious tourism context. It also extends our understanding of the religious tourism market, and in particular the Christian Orthodox one, which has been studied less in comparison to other Christian affiliations (Andriotis, 2009, 2011). To set the theoretical framework within which religious tourists behaviour should be looked at, the study now turns to discuss the effect of visual media on destination image, selection of sites and on-site experiences, after first providing a broader understanding of religion and its relation to visuals.

Literature Review

Religion and Visuals

Religion is commonly defined as a “total mode of interpreting and living of life” (Geering, 2002, p.147) as it helps people to ascribe meaning to their experiences and surroundings and forms their behaviour (Cohen & Rankin, 2004; Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003; Geertz, 1973; Silberman, 2005). Evidence for the key role religion plays in peoples' daily activities is found in practices including eating and drinking (Poulson, Eppler, Satterwhite, Wuensch & Bass, 1998), social life (Bailey & Sood, 1993) and tourism (Cohen, 1998; Rinschede, 1992) as people have been observed to adjust their everyday conduct to their religious beliefs. Especially in relation to tourism, religious affiliations are known to affect religious tourists' decision making (Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003; Williams, Francis, Robbins & Annis, 2007),

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on-site experience and behaviour (Cohen, 1998; Rinschede, 1992); a phenomenon termed 'theology of tourism' by Cohen (1998). Based on that, Jews, for example, do not use to travel on Saturdays and other Jewish holidays (Fleischer & Pizam, 2002). Cohen-Ioannides and Ioannides (2006), moreover, explain how Orthodox Judaism's dietary restrictions cause some Jewish travellers to frequent hotels, airlines and restaurants that serve kosher meals. Timothy and Iverson (2006) also note that devout Muslims will frequent hotels that have gender-segregated swimming pools and prayer rooms, are located near mosques, and have restaurants that offer halal foods.

Religious scripts/doctrines, similar to theatrical scenarios determine the nature of performative encounters in the religious tourist experience, while religious producers, such as priests, organize the religious scenario, mobilizing stages, directing believers, materializing and aesthetizing places in their attempt to perpetuate and establish particular meanings to sacred places and performances. Visual media play a dominant role within this respect. In Christianity, the fundamental teachings along with the religious scripts that circulate in schools, religious sites and TV programmes, such as documentaries and news, convey to religious adherents the message that a visit to a sacred place will free them from their spiritual or secular anguishes (Cohen, 1998; Mattila, Apostolopoulos, Somnez, Yu & Sasidharan, 2001). A visit to such places constitutes an essential tool and presupposition for some religious tourists to achieve particular end results from their trip including pain alleviation, body curation and restored balance and harmony (Bolen, 1994). As Bourdieu (1991) emphasized, religious institutions structure the dependence on religious symbolic power and hence the longing for it. Places outline practices and religious oriented tourists are in fact considered 'cast members' (Crang, 1997), by performing a series of directed religious practices as established by religious producers. Thus, what is projected in visual media - often

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constructed and organized by religious authorities and destination managers - might shape to a large extent religious tourists' destination image, selection of places and their on-site experience.

Visual media; destination image and selection of places

Considering the intangible nature of the tourism product, visual information is critical in destination marketing as it portrays the actuality of the place and serves as pre-taste of the destination until actual visitation takes place (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). Information provided through visual media lead to increased familiarity with the destination, which in turn affects destination image formation (Baloglu, 2001; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). Destination image, commonly defined as the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination (Kotler, Haider & Rein, 1993), is considered critical for the success of any tourist destination as it is known to influence tourists' destination selection process, on-site experience and their future behavior (e.g. Chi & Qu, 2008; Lee, Lee & Lee, 2005; Stylidis, Belhassen & Shani, 2015). Tourism authorities, therefore, need to develop and maintain a positive destination image to improve the competitiveness of a place and increase visitors' loyalty (Qu, Kim & Im, 2011; Stylidis, Shani & Belhassen, 2017).

Commonly categorized under Gartner's (1993) autonomous image-formation agents, visual media including news reports, popular culture products (i.e., television programs) and documentaries appear to be more influential on destination image formation than the induced image formation agents (i.e., paid advertising) as they tend to have higher credibility and greater market penetration (Gartner, 1993; Govers et al., 2007). For example, in a study conducted by Govers et al. (2007), the autonomous image formation agents were ranked first

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by respondents as key information sources while choosing a destination. Similarly, Schofield (1996) argued that peoples' images of places are shaped to a large extent by TV programs which do not encompass the perceptual bias of promotional material. Past studies have further revealed the positive effect of films, TV dramas and travel documentaries on destination image and visitation patterns (Kim & Assaker, 2014; Kim, Agrusa, Chon, & Cho, 2008; Kim et al., 2007; Pan & Tsang, 2014; Riley et al., 1998). Kim and Richardson (2003), for instance, reported that a movie related to Vienna had a significant positive effect on some components of Vienna's image and on respondents' intention to visit this destination in the future. Similarly, Hudson et al. (2011) reported that 13% of their study's participants showed an initial interest in visiting destinations in Latin America after seeing them in the film 'The Motorcycle Diaries'. Visual media as such have been widely used by tourism bodies and destination marketers to establish, change or reinforce the image of a tourist destination (Avraham, 2015; Govers et al., 2007; Pan, 2011; Pan et al., 2016).

Past research also on religious tourism has further revealed that religious tourists appear to search for signs and symbolic structures - widespread by religious institutions through narrations and visual media - that create meaning and shape their experiences (Badone, 2007; Selwyn, 1996). Using visual media including TV news and documentaries religious authorities often even develop what Baudrillard (1981, p.85) calls "strategies of desire", through which tourists are mobilized to visit particular places. The visual projection of material objects such as the fame of miraculous icons inscribe places with fantasies and memories and motivates people to visit sacred places to encounter these objects (Cloke & Pawson, 2008; Coats, 2011; Selwyn, 1996; Tilley, 2006). Therefore, through the selection of an emblematic trait or historical event (i.e. Virgin Mary apparition) that is provided for consumption (see Cloke & Pawson, 2008; Knudsen, 2011) religious sites have gradually

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become well-known tourist destinations. Additionally, new religious tourist destinations have been established within the last decades like the Medjugorje in Serbia (Vukonic, 2006) as a result of the visual projection on TV news of stories of miracles that have happened there.

Visual media; on-site experience

Apart from promoting tourism destinations and increasing the numbers of visitors at locations associated with films or presented on TV, visual media often also influence tourists' on-site experience and behaviour (Iwashita, 2008; Kim, 2010, 2012; Mercille, 2005; Rittichainuwat & Rattanaphinanchai, 2015; Siripis et al., 2013) as they further shape (through destination image) expectations before the actual visitation takes place (Font, 1997; Phelps, 1986). For example, Siripis et al. (2013) studied the impact of the film 'The Beach' on Thailand's image and concluded that images or videos displayed in popular media pre-programmed visitors' experience in Thailand. Similarly, Kim (2010) explored the impact of a Korean TV drama series on tourists' on-site experience and found that this TV programme inspired film tourists to enhance their tourist experiences by re-enacting scenes from the series. In line with Urry (1990, p.13) people seek to "experience in reality the pleasurable dramas they have already experienced in their imagination." This is potentially due to the fact that people give meaning and form to their experiences through visual images, signs and symbols (Boulding, 1956; Bandura, 2001; Reijnders, 2011), and popular media often circulate and sustain such images (Browne, Firestone & Mickiewics, 1994; Pan et al., 2014). Popular media through visual representation as such enhance tourist's construction of the gaze in that tourists are searching for already known objects, spots or settings to feast their eyes on (Urry, 1990). 'Lord of the Rings' film tourists, for example, were searching for settings like hobbit houses and attached

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intrinsically deeper meanings to the locations depicted in the film, which were experienced “as sacred places rather than as sites of spectacle” (Roesch, 2009, p.134).

Equally within the religious context, visual media along with myths and narratives seem to create spaces for collective gazing and to pre-program (Urry, 1990) religious tourists' expectations and experiences; “familiar narratives of lost cities, ancient civilizations and spirituality facilitate peoples' partial understandings of that which may be encountered” (Scarles, 2009, p.470). Nevertheless, religious sites are not only to be gazed at but are also places of conduct. Moving thus beyond a masculine paradigm of the gaze (Ateljevic, Morgan & Pritchard, 2007; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000), the destination image building process in the case of religious tourism is (further) supported by visual media which underline the importance of other corporeal experiences and senses such as doing and touching, in generating particular experiences that constitute the core of religion (James, 1960). The visual projection of crawling pilgrims on TV has, for example, such an effect on potential visitors' destination choice and on-site experience (Dubisch, 1995). Equally, participation in religious rituals and religious trips, bestow members with feelings of ‘*Communitas*’ (Turner and Turner, 1978), which denotes an egalitarian association between people who share a liminal state. Such states of togetherness and brotherhood are communicated through visual media that broadcast collective religious performances and interviews of believers sharing their on-site experiences, thus influencing other religious tourists who attempt to seek out similar experiences.

The above review of the literature revealed that visual media play a critical role in both the tourism and the religious context. However, only a limited number of studies have adopted an interdisciplinary (combining both religion and tourism) approach and explored the role of

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visual media in the religious tourism context. Similar to Siripis et al. (2013) and Kim (2012) visual media are expected in this study to have an impact not only on religious tourists' destination image and intention to visit a destination but also affect their on-site experience (tourists' gaze and practices). Specifically, and based on the above, the study seeks to address the following research objectives: 1) Identify and understand the way visuals influence religious tourists' destination image and site selection, and 2) Identify and explain the way visuals affect religious tourists' on-site experiences. This understanding is critical for religious and church authorities, destination managers and tourism marketers to maximise patronage to the destination and to try to shape religious tourists' destination image and choice through marketing initiatives (Sun et al., 2015). It also helps DMOs to better manage visitors' experience by identifying and taking advantage of powerful visual elements in tourism promotion (Pan et al., 2014).

Methodology

Context and study setting

The research objectives are addressed by drawing on participant observation material and in-depth interviews conducted with tourists on an organized religious tour to the sacred island of Tinos Greece. Despite its small size (8,600 inhabitants) Tinos attracts thousands of visitors annually who flock to see the icon of the Virgin Mary in the Church of Annunciation. The Church of Annunciation (built on the location where the icon was found in 1822) has gained fame after numerous reports of therapeutic miracles fulfilled by the icon of the Virgin Mary of Tinos (Panagia Evangelistria), which nowadays is the most visited religious site in Greece (Dubisch, 1995; Terzidou, Stylidis & Szivas, 2008). Accordingly, while the vast majority of studies on Christian religious tourism have mainly focused on the views and religious

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practices of Protestants and Catholics, this study gives attention to the Christian Eastern Orthodox church (see Belhassen, Caton & Steward, 2008; Coleman, 2004), which ranks second in popularity within the Christian world after the Roman Catholic Church.

The Greek TV market

There are eight private and three public TV stations that broadcast nationwide in Greece. According to data obtained from Nielsen Media Research Greece (2015), people in Greece spent on average 4 hours and 26 minutes watching TV in 2015, while those aged over 65 years old watched on average seven hours per day. Till recently the most popular TV station was Mega Channel, with its News programme being watched by 20% of the TV viewers (763.000 people). Second was Ant1 News with 18%, and third Alpha TV with 16%. In the years 2014-2015, about 20% of the TV News audience was over 65 years, 19% was male between 45-64 years, and 8% female aged between 45-64 years. The Greek State owns three TV stations, with the most popular one having on average 10% of the market share and the least popular one about 2.7% of the total audience share. However, it is notable that on the 15th of August, which is the national celebration of Virgin Mary, the three State TV stations that broadcast the procession in Tinos achieved a cumulative 20% share of the market. Those who watch the three State TV stations tend to be older and with a lower educational level (Nielsen Media Research Greece, 2015).

Sampling and research methods

Considering that tourists' destination image and on-site experience are highly complex, subjective and unique to each individual (Kim, 2012), qualitative research was considered most appropriate to study the phenomena into question. Ethnographic research, in particular,

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was conducted in two organized religious coach trips (each four days long) to the sacred island of Tinos. Purposive sampling was adopted as research participants were selected from the trips' group members. Information leaflets were distributed to prospective participants at the beginning of the trip explaining the purpose of this research. Confidentiality was assured at all stages and participants were allowed to decide whether they would partake or not in the study. In the first stage of the research participant observation and informal interviews were conducted, with the role of the 'participant as observer' for the researcher being adopted. To avoid issues of reactivity and annoyance, and to gain trust in a natural manner, one of the researchers participated in religious practices alongside group members (Bernard, 2006). The similarity between participants' and the researcher's national and religious background facilitated engagement, acceptance and mutual understanding (Andriotis, 2009). Following ethical approval, only participants who gave their consent were observed. In total, 31 observations were conducted during the two trips and detailed field notes were kept throughout.

In the second stage, 38 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted after the end of the trips until data saturation was reached (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The interviews lasted on average 75 minutes and were conducted after assuring participants' confidentiality and receiving their written consent (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In order to determine the multiple realities, the interview questions were as open-ended and flexible as possible so as to encourage respondents to freely communicate their beliefs, values, etc., without feeling constrained (Fielding & Thomas, 2008). To answer the study's research questions, two broad interview themes were elaborated, namely: 1) How do visual media, and in particular TV news and documentaries influence your image of Tinos and its selection? and 2) How do visual media (TV news and documentaries) influence your on-site experience? Topics of

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discussion for the first main theme included the time/frequency people spent watching TV documentaries and TV news; the TV programmes with religious content that respondents know and systematically watch; selection of religious sites, motivation to visit and expectations, which were addressed, for example, with the use of opinion questions such as *“What is your opinion about the documentaries devoted to the religious places in Greece?”* and knowledge questions including *“What do you know about the miraculous icon of Tinos?”* or behaviour questions like *“Have you watched any TV documentaries related to the Virgin Mary of Tinos?”* For the second interview theme, topics of discussion included, among others, participants' onsite activities; religious objects used; symbolism, which were captured with questions such as *“If I followed you in the church, what would I see you doing?”*; feelings questions including *“What were your feelings when you first arrived at the island? At the church?”* and sensory questions such as *“Did you see/experience familiar objects/things known from TV when you visited Tinos?”* Follow up questions including *“when did that happen?”* were particularly used to establish rapport, convince respondents to expand their answers and clarify arising issues (O'Reilly, 2005).

All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English retroactively (Brislin, 1976) by both researchers to ensure consistency in meaning. Pseudonyms were used during the data analysis to ensure anonymity. Religious tourists' age ranged from early 30's to early 80's with the vast majority of respondents (80%) being women. This is not uncommon as in the Greek culture woman usually connect the family with religion through religious institutional performances (Dubisch, 1995). Furthermore, the vast majority of them were travelling in small groups of two to three people and only one out of five travelled alone. About one third of the study's participants were employed full-time (36%), one third have never worked in the past and the rest 30% were in pension. The vast

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majority reported having one or two children, and only three people reported none. Lastly, almost half of them had finished the basic education (up to high school), 30% had a higher school degree and another 20% had a university degree or higher. Thematic analysis was applied to reveal patterns and themes (Boyatzis, 1998). In a similar vein, the field notes were analysed and coded by both researchers to decrease potential bias. The patterns identified in the field notes were linked to the themes that emerged from the interview transcriptions. Data triangulation is known to minimize individual and methodological biases and increases generalizability of the findings (Decrop, 1999).

Findings

The role of TV news and documentaries in shaping destination image and choice

The first part of the findings discusses how TV news and documentaries shape religious tourists' destination image of Tinos and positively influence their decision to visit the island. Religious and political authorities, in particular, appear to use visual media to shape peoples' images of Tinos through processes of meaning making, and to enhance national pride and collectiveness (Bandyopadhyaya, Morais & Chick, 2008). For example, the most important religious festival in Greece is the '*Dormition of the Virgin Mary*' that takes place annually on the 15th of August in Tinos. On that day the Greek folk and the image of festive Tinos circulates all over Greece with TV news and documentaries focusing on the a) holy icon, b) leading politicians, and c) the crowd of people participating in the celebration. This repeated projection of the same or similar shots of items, people and scenery has a powerful effect on TV viewers who accumulate certain images of Tinos (Iwashita, 2008).

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The projection of the Icon

The state-owned Greek TV channels, in particular, offer live broadcasts of the official procession, which involves carrying Virgin Mary's icon (image) from the church to the harbour (see Figure 1) while the celebration in Tinos also features in the leading news of all private TV stations in the country (Haland, 2012). Aspa, for example argued that *"I wanted to visit Tinos because the icon was very frequently on TV."* Similar to past research, the visual projection in Greek TV news of the icon of the Virgin Mary of Tinos along with stories of miracles seem to be an important influential factor for people visiting Tinos (Kim et al., 2008; Kim & Richardson, 2003). As an interviewee, for example, stated *"I've heard so much (on TV news).. that influenced me to come... of disabled people that.. went and got cured.. and of other problems.. personal problems.."* (Nicki). These images are further reinforced by personal experiences and stories included in documentaries about the Virgin Mary of Tinos. A participant, for example noted that *"If you watch TV documentaries, then you will see the icon... and listen to stories about some people who experienced... miracles... things like that."* During the interviews most people explained how influential documentaries have been in their choice frequently quoting *"A documentary has increased my curiosity to visit Tinos."* Some religious tourists as such visit Tinos in the 'trail of miracles' as they desire to feast their eyes on particular miraculous events or even want to experience a miracle by themselves (i.e., to be cured) (Slater, 1986).

[Insert Figure 1 About Here]

The projection of State and Church Officials

The destination image of Tinos goes beyond being a miraculous place and Tinos is also considered an important centre of Greek-ness as it is believed that the icon helped in the fight

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for Greek independence in 1821. Helena, for example, proudly commented that “*Even Kolokotronis [an important Greek General in the fight for Greek independence in 1821] was convinced that since the icon of the Virgin Mary was found, the battle would be victorious.*”

Accordingly, another focal point of the images projected on TV news is the government cabinet members and the head of the Greek Orthodox Church that depict the close relationship between religion and the state. Most TV channels broadcast politicians' on-site speeches in which they annually highlight the contribution of the Church to Greece's independence and designate respect towards this institution. For example, Prokopis Paulopoulos, the President of Greece, in his recent public speech in Tinos on the 15th of August 2015 broadcast by most Greek TV stations, attributed the peace in the country to the Virgin Mary's grace. This image making process is further reinforced by scenes including Greek flags fluttering all over the island of Tinos along with the presence of navy generals and military ships that occasionally gunfire in a symbolic manner (see Figure 2). Visual media as such are often used by authorities including politicians, church leaders and place marketers to shape peoples' imagery of places and to direct their gaze (Scarles, 2009) as well as to reinforce national identity and encourage visitation (Beeton, 2005; Hudson et al., 2011). Through its visual representation in popular media as the 'Centre of Greece' Tinos has developed a destination image that is linked to Greek-ness and religious identity; “*here is our Virgin Mary, she is our Virgin Mary.. for those of us who cannot travel outside Greece, the Virgin Mary is Tinos*” (Anna). A visit to Tinos as such is highly related to nationalism (Pretes, 2003), part of being Greek and Christian Orthodox; as Vaso said “*it is a priority and commitment*” for all Greeks. Maria equally stated that: “*..every Christian comes round to Tinos. Whoever you may ask, he will say that at least once in his lifetime he has been there.*” The Tinos phenomenon, therefore, resembles what Bhardwaj (1973) termed 'national pilgrimage', uniting Greek Orthodox people from around the world.

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[Insert Figure 2 About Here]

The projection of the crowds

Tinos acquires also the image of a vibrant place with ongoing religious action and collective performances that lead to feelings of togetherness what Turner and Turner (1978) term 'communitas' as a result of sharing mutual feelings, meanings and experiences within a liminal state. The visual projection on TV of crowds of people queuing, waiting patiently to venerate the icon, seem to increase peoples' awareness, further cultivate their curiosity and desire to verify the very picture and to be part of it and highlight Tinos significance as a religious centre. *"I was moved... it was so crowded, and all these people are really eager to visit Tinos.. I feel proud of being Christian Orthodox and of being Greek."* (Babis). Religious tourists' performances thus seem to become important elements of authorities' "strategies of desire" as they constitute lived expressions of holiness (Baudrillard, 1981, p.85). Especially the crowd's religious on-site practices such as crawling, which are projected by both public and private national TV channels, shape Tinos' image and reputation (see Figure 3). Makis, for example, said: *"First and foremost it is curiosity that attracts you, because you watch it on television.. you see how they crawl.. on their knees...and you want to be there on that day when the masses ascend to the church to see what exactly is happening.."* Similarly, Maria stated that: *"My decision to come was mainly out of curiosity.. to experience what I was watching on TV.. people crawling."* People seem to choose to visit Tinos to evidence what they have previously watched on TV, a finding similar to Hudson et al.'s (2011) study among others. This curiosity is further reinforced by the projection on TV of Greek celebrities who attend the 15th of August celebration in Tinos. Anna for example argued that *"I was impressed when I saw a famous singer on TV crawling to the church... You see, all that influences you."* This result corroborates Yen and Teng (2015) who also reported that

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celebrity involvement in visual media is positively related to peoples' intention to visit a destination.

[Insert Figure 3 About Here]

Visual media in the context of religious tourism as such create or reinforce peoples' awareness and increase their intention to visit sacred places. These results are in line with tourism research which found that people who frequently watch TV programs showing positive aspects of a destination had stronger intentions to visit the projected place (Beeton, 2005; Kim et al., 2007; Kim and Assaker, 2014; Pan and Tsang, 2014). However, the use of visual media by Greek politicians, Church officials and place marketers was acknowledged by some participants like Barbara who stated: "*It is the advertising... everything what we hear on the 15th of August, of people going there and worshipping.. I have the feeling that everything starts there, from the media.. Because otherwise who would know about the Virgin Mary of Tinos?*" Some people thus seem to be aware of a planned attempt to shape their destination image of Tinos, a finding that appears to partially challenge Gartner's (1993) classification of visual media like TV news and documentaries as autonomous image formation agents, which are perceived as unbiased by consumers.

The role of TV news and documentaries in shaping religious tourists' on-site experience

On the trail of miracles

Apart from shaping peoples' destination image of Tinos, increasing their awareness and creating a strong desire to visit the island, TV news and documentaries were found in this study to frame visitors' understanding of the place's sacredness (Badone, 2007; Roesch, 2009) and to influence their expectations and on-site experience (Kim, 2012; Siripis et al.,

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2013). Religious tourists in Tinos were observed, for example, searching for signs where the Virgin Mary's miraculous power can be manifested (Urry, 1990). While entering the church most religious tourists were seeking for particular objects that were hanging from the ceiling or were positioned in specific posts in the church. One such notable object, well-projected on TV documentaries and often recalled by religious tourists during the interviews, is the metallic orange tree in the church's entrance. As Tasia stated "*the orange tree is so beautiful... it stands on the right side... a gift to Virgin Mary from a blind man who was cured. He promised to bring to the Church the first thing he would be able to see, which was the orange tree in his garden.*" Popular TV programs and documentaries about the Virgin Mary of Tinos seem to direct peoples' gazes and meanings, with religious tourists engaging in practices of 'hunting' and 'capturing' religious signs, similar to MacCannell's (1976) and Urry's (1990) semiotic tourists who are searching for and are influenced by imposed signs in material landscapes.

Additionally, other objects that at first glance seemed to be of secondary value were found to have a considerable impact on peoples' on-site experience. The suspended oil-lamps and the ornaments in the church and around the icon are part of peoples' offerings, the so called '*tamata*', to the Virgin Mary of Tinos (see Figure 4). Each offering is known to depict a miracle experienced by a person and as such the numerous offerings in the church represent the plethora of people who have witnessed miracles in the past. The constant projection on TV documentaries of these religious tourists' offerings seems to be part of an effort to further shape or reinforce the image of Tinos as a sacred place and to influence on-site experiences (Edensor, 2001; Franklin, 2004). Firstly, the projection of offerings on TV allows people to reflect on their imperfect nature. As Katia stated "*looking at the many offerings, I thought: oh my God, how many people are suffering...*" Secondly, offerings were found to elevate the

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significance of Tinos in the eyes of religious tourists; since they are given as a thanksgiving, their presence and projection on TV serves as proof of miracles accomplished by the Virgin Mary of Tinos and highlights Tinos' image as a place of salvation (Selwyn, 1996; Tilley, 2006). As Danay said: *"I saw various things... Hanging ships, which are said to be offerings made by fishermen.. And I saw also gold jewellery.. and I thought that the people who brought all those things to the church.. their wish must have been realized"*.

[Insert Figure 4 About Here]

In Weber's (1946) words it seems to be an 'emotional propaganda.' The constant projection of the offerings in documentaries promotes Virgin Mary's miraculous power, thus enticing people to look at them and to engage in on site practices like that of wish-making (vow). Katerina, for example, in view of the icon and the offerings also made a vow. As she recounted: *"In fact, when I went there [in the church] I was so much... I mean I was enticed from the various... the crowd I saw.. the offerings that were all around the icon, the golden ones, and all those things.. that I made a vow too.."* This process resembles Bourdieu's (1991) institutionally structured performance of gift exchange that intends to safeguard religious institutions' existence. However, the role of offerings in the production of religious tourists' experience was criticized by some study's participants who emphasized the provocative effect the displayed offerings have on people, diminishing the real meaning and value of the icon. Janna, for example, recounted how she went away from the sight of offerings hanging on the miraculous icon, and chose another non-distractive place in the church: *"I walked away from the icon of the Virgin Mary... because you cannot see her there, so covered with offerings it is. To be honest – God forgive me- but aren't so many offerings really a planned enticement for the pilgrims?"* Projected images on TV news of the

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icon, the Church of Annunciation and of religious tourists' ascendance to the church seem to be so powerful that they set expectations, cultivate peoples' awe and influence the experience while being there (Kim, 2010).

Positive Influences: Confirmation of Expectations

For some people a visit to Tinos aimed to re-enliven and re-confirm the visual conceptions they have already acquired through TV (Crouch, 2001; Kim, 2012; Scarles, 2009; Siripis et al., 2013). For example, a fraction of respondents mentioned during the interviews that they have experienced on-site exactly what they have seen on TV news and documentaries: *"I had imagined a large icon with many offerings...an icon covered by offerings.. and large crowds of people worshipping...I found exactly, what I have watched on TV.."* (Mairy). Similarly, Elsa stated that *"The church was exactly as I imagined it to be and as we watched it on TV. With many stairs, crowded, many candles..."* Similar to the work of Riley et al. (1998) and Kim (2010) on film tourism, TV documentaries appear in this study to encourage a bond between religious tourists and sacred places and enhance the image of Tinos. In line with past research, for those participants who have confirmed their expectations, a higher level of satisfaction with the trip is to be anticipated (Carl, Kindon & Smith, 2007).

Neutral Influences: Limited capacity of the visuals

For some other participants though, visual media offer narrow viewpoints and are sometimes inadequate in capturing the atmosphere people actually encounter in places as part of their immaterial and material engagements (Buchmann, Moore & Fisher, 2010). Kostas, for instance, argued that although he had seen the church several times on TV, what he experienced in Tinos was very intense: *"This has nothing to do with what you have seen. When you enter the church you feel...completely different from watching it on TV."* This often

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results in unexpected and/or unpredicted experiences; as Aspa described it *'when you enter the church you shudder'* while for Niky *"You feel awe... You are standing next to the Virgin Mary."* It appears that spaces of uncertainty and of 'not knowing' occur (Scarles, 2009) as visual representations of the Tinos' experience on TV are insufficient in embracing the extraordinary qualities the divine possess. As Yannis commented: *"In the beginning because you go there with... with all those feelings generated in you beforehand... you go in a different way... it's like a fear I can even say for what you will encounter..."*.

Exaggerated Influences: Mismatch between expectations and reality

The third stream of participants expressed their disappointment with what they actually experienced as contrasted to what they have seen on documentaries, potentially because *"on TV they exaggerate"* (Soula). Visualised representations of the Church of Annunciation and of the icon have resulted in high expectations and have shaped imaginations of Tinos, a notion that Appadurai (1990) termed 'imaged worlds' and Shields (1991) 'place-myths.' One of the participants, for example, stressed that *"It was not as... I thought that I will see something larger in size... perhaps, I do not know, due to publicity. The interior was like in a common church, nothing special."* This finding contradicts the study of Iwashita (2008) who reported that several respondents expressed a feeling of 'déjà vu' experience (Iwashita, 2008). Apart from the church, the icon was also less impressive in comparison to what was expected by some religious tourists: *"I didn't perceive it to be as...I was expecting something different [about the icon]... It seemed to me very simple. From what I have seen on TV programs I was expecting a large icon, with gold, whereas what I found was a small, common icon."* It appears that 'imaged worlds', a combination of images and imaginations, not always reflect the actual reality to be experienced (Kim, 2012).

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Conclusion

This study explored the role of TV news and documentaries in religious tourists' destination image, choice and on-site experience, with a specific reference to the Greek Orthodox context. The findings revealed that the repeated visual projection on TV of the icon of the Virgin Mary, the leading politicians, and of the crowds of visitors on TV news has positive effects on religious tourists' image of the island of Tinos, Greece. The image of Tinos as a sacred place seems to be further reinforced by documentaries presenting peoples' personal accounts of their own supernatural experiences, positively influencing other religious tourists to visit the island (see Kim et al., 2008; Kim & Richardson, 2003). By applying 'strategies of desire' such as the miraculous icon (Baudrillard, 1981), church authorities and place marketers seem to create to religious tourists feelings of curiosity which in turn increase their willingness to visit the island. Additionally, political authorities through visual media have reinforced the image of Tinos as the 'Centre of Greece' - highly related to nationalism and Greek Christian Orthodoxy (Beeton, 2005; Scarles, 2009). Lastly, visitors themselves were found to strengthen the image of Tinos, with study's participants being positively influenced (in their decision to visit Tinos) by the projected crowds of people and their on-site practices like crawling. Similar to leisure tourists, religious tourists thus seem to choose to visit destinations to evidence what they have previously watched on TV (Hudson et al., 2011). Overall, TV news and documentaries appear to shape peoples' interest in certain destinations by providing them with myths, images and emotions, all of which being critical motivators for people to travel (Iwashita, 2008). This finding corroborates previous research on the positive effect visual media have on tourists' destination image and choice (Hudson et al., 2011; Gong & Tung, 2016; Pan, 2011; Shani, Chen, Wang & Hua, 2010; Wong & Lai, 2013). Although this link is not new, it has rarely been tested in the context of religious tourism. The first theoretical contribution of the study is that it extends current knowledge on visual media

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and tourism by highlighting the influence visuals exercise on religious tourists, who are instructed by religious authorities to visit particular sacred places and to engage in religious performances to generate particular experiences and establish religious belief (Bourdieu, 1991).

Besides shaping destination image and choice, TV news and documentaries were also reported in this study to influence religious tourists' on-site experiences and shape imaginations of what people would experience (Kim, 2012; Siripis et al., 2013; Yen & Teng, 2015). Similar to the findings of Kim (2010) and Roesch (2009), the study's participants were observed re-enacting scenes or searching for signs and objects like the orange tree that have been frequently displayed on TV documentaries. Especially in the case of Tinos, the presence of offerings seemed to further intensify visitors' experience, as these were interpreted as signs of the icon's miraculous power and underlined Tinos' image as a place of salvation. Religious tourists' experiences on site as such seem to have been pre-programmed by the visuals displayed in popular media (Siripis et al., 2013). The current study though extends past research (Kim, 2010; Scarles, 2009; Siripis, Scarles & Airey, 2013; Yen & Teng, 2015) as it was found here that for some people these expectations have been met, while for others visual media exaggerated or were unable to capture the sacred atmosphere that people actually experienced on site. The study also highlights the role visual media play in shaping - apart from gazing - other corporeal experiences and senses such as touching (Ateljevic et al., 2007; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000). Visual representations of destinations, therefore, affect religious tourists' experience at the destination (Edensor, 2001) with TV documentaries creating a myth of a place (Iwashita, 2008).

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The findings of the study have a number of managerial implications for religious authorities and place marketers. First, it becomes evident that the use of an emblematic trait and/or historical event can assist place marketers in developing a strong destination brand. In the case of Tinos the miraculous icon of the Virgin Mary has elevated Tinos significance not only as a sacred destination but also as the 'Centre of Greece'. The frequent projection on TV of selected images including the icon, politicians and the crowd further reinforced this message, especially as autonomous image formation agents including TV news and documentaries have been used. The role of people in the promotion of sacred sites is moreover manifested through the social reproduction of experiences and miracles that trigger visits to sacred places. This can be supplemented in the near future by stories of people included in mini-movies that are known to be effective in capturing tourists' attention and in fostering positive destination image (Chen, 2015). Second, the displayed offerings along with stories and myths related to them help to increase publicity and shape the identity of Tinos. These offerings were found to greatly influence the on-site experience but should be carefully utilized not to create expectations that could not be met, leading to diminished levels of satisfaction.

Despite its contributions, this study is not free from limitations. First, the study was conducted in a single destination- more research is needed in multiple settings to further validate the study findings. Second, the findings are specific to religious tourists in Greece and cannot be generalised to other religious affiliations. In line with Kim et al. (2008) the consumption of popular media and tourist experiences are contextualised within different social, cultural, and religious values. Third, as only people who have visited the island of Tinos participated in the study, future research should focus also on the role visual media play in non-visitors' images of Tinos. Studies need also to consider the power relations

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between religious-church authorities and destination management organizations as such knowledge will assist in understanding how dominant images projected on TV documentaries and news are being produced.

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