ANALYSING DESTINATION IMAGE FROM A CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Trough a narrative literature review, this article frames the evolution of destination image within the evolution of destination branding. Main theories used, methodologies, relevant findings and implications to marketing practice are identified. Four relevant conclusions are extracted: first, recent studies of destination image research tend to adopt a joint cognitive-affective approach in an attempt to capture destination image in a more effective way; second, the dimensions of destination image (overall image, affective image and cognitive image) affect consumer satisfaction and consumer loyalty differently; third, the current academic perspective on destination branding is mostly based on the notion that destination image is not susceptible of being easily changed by marketing efforts. Finally, residents, as privileged interpreters of place image should be called to participate in branding efforts.

Keywords: Place Branding, Destination Branding, Destination Image, Place Image, Literature Review.

JEL Classification: M31

1. INTRODUCTION

Places compete for foreign investment, exports, skilled labor, residents and visitors. That reality has lead academics and also marketers to search for new ways to highlight the individual characteristics of places that can enhance competitive strengths. A major step in this search for place distinctiveness was the realization that places can act as brands.

Branding places is a complex process. Branding is about creating unique positions in consumers' minds trough distinctive associations targeted at clearly defined segments (Hankinson, 2010). Places are complex in nature involving multidimensional variables, such as urbanism, history, culture and heritage, economic and social aspects, demographic, cognitive and affective dimensions. Distinct stakeholders have different perceptions of the place and the complexity of branding places is increased by both the strong feelings that residents exhibited about their home places and the multitude of targets, which may include tourists, visitors, investors, residents, second home purchasers, students and workers.

When place branding is focused in tourism, it is usually designated as destination branding. A key concept in destination branding literature is destination image. The importance of image as an intangible cue to influence buyer behavior has long been recognized by both marketers and market researchers (Elliot & Papadopoulos, 2016). Since the 70s, destination image has been one of the major topics of research in tourism due to its importance for destination marketing, management, and branding (Song, Su & Li, 2013; Kim & Chen, 2015) and remains one of the most popular research topics in tourism.

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Framed by destination branding, this study aims to present an analysis of the current state of research in destination image, from a consumer behavior perspective. Connected with the aim of the study, this research was guided by the following research questions: What is the impact of destination image on consumer behavior?

To answer the research question, this article compiles current research on the topic of destination image, focusing on the most relevant approaches and theories used, contrasting related constructs, highlighting main empirical findings and implications to marketing practice. The objectives of the present review are: i) to situate the concept of destination image within destination branding research, by referring to related concepts and constructs; ii) to identify current conceptualizations of destination image; iii) to map the diversity of practical approaches to the concept of destination image by highlighting recent empirical findings.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: in the next section we present the theoretical context of this research. The following section discusses the results of current empirical studies on destination image. The final chapter presents the conclusions of the study.

2. THEORETICAL CONTEXT

The application of marketing principles to places can be traced back, at least, to the seventh century when city "boosterism" emerged in response to the globalization of markets, increasing competition between national economies and expanding international commerce (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008).

Initial research on destination marketing was mostly based on the adaptation of mainstream marketing theories and concepts to tourism, including the classic marketing mix of the 4 P´s (Pike & Page, 2014) and the development of the destination image concept (Hankinson, 2010).

Dissatisfaction with the application of mainstream marketing principles to destinations, particularly the marketing-mix concept, led researchers to explore new approaches, which ultimately led to the development of destination branding. The pioneers of brand studies in tourism were Ritchie and Ritchie (1998), who identified destination brand as

> "…a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that both identifies and differentiates the destination; furthermore, it conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; it also serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience."(p.17).

Most countries and cities today affirm to develop some type of branding efforts, however in many cases these practices can be considered as mere place promotions, were catchy slogans and logos seem to concentrate the entire efforts, a situation that has been appropriately characterized by Beritelli and Laesser (2016: 1) as a "term extension and inflation" of branding. Recent studies evidence that, despite the efforts of destination management organizations (DMO´s) to develop attractive slogans and logos to promote destinations, these elements may not even be recognized by visitors. For example, Beritelli and Laesser, (2016) found tourists to be unaware of brands intentionally constructed by local DMO´s to promote Swiss destinations.

There is a consensus in the literature (Pike, 2009; Hudson, 2016) that the most comprehensive definition of destination branding to date has been the one proposed by Blain, Levy and Ritchie (2005) that identify destination branding as follow:

> The set of marketing activities: (1) that support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that readily identifies and differentiates a destination; that (2) consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience; that (3) serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; and that (4) reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk. Collectively, these activities serve to create a destination image that positively influences consumer destination choice. (p.337)

The above definition has been granted the advantages of underscoring the critical contribution of destination image, a key concept in tourism studies, to the formation of a destination brand (Hudson, 2016), and highlighting the mutual benefits of destination branding for both DMO´s and the visitors (Pike, 2009).

In the 1990s, as places became more competitive, occurred the bridging period within the literature, when academics started to research how places attract not only tourists but also investment, workers and industry. Consequently, during this period, there was a shift from the use of the word *destination* to the use of the more-encompassing word *place* (Skinner, 2008).

Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2008) identify three phases in the development of place marketing. The phase of "place promotion" (from the seventh to nineteenth centuries) was triggered by the demand for agricultural colonization. The most notable example being the colonization of the American West. During this phase there was also a trend towards urban functional diversity, with the promotion of the first urban centers dedicated to mass-leisure tourism, in Britain. The second phase, labeled "planning instrument" (from the 1990s onward), was characterized by the development of urban planning and management as a means of delivering public services by administrative bodies. The terminology, concepts and philosophy of marketing started to be applied to public sector place planning, especially in Western cities, during the course of the 1980s. Finally, the stage of "corporate brand" (after 2000) is characterized by attempts to articulate new approaches that would be more relevant, including the notion of place or destination branding, which is a development of traditional product branding.

Place branding has been described as the current episode of place marketing development (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008). Some authors have proposed that the essential feature of a place brand is nothing more and nothing less than the good name of something, a place, that's on offer to the public (Anholt & Hildreth, 2005). Pryor and Grossbart (2007: 293) suggest the following definition of place branding: "the process of inscribing to a place symbols and images that represent that set of central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics that actors have ascribed to that place, thereby creating a focus of identity".

Being consensually recognized that place marketing as its origins in tourism and urban policy studies, an analysis of the literature reveals that important developments in the application of branding principles to destinations came from the broader field of place branding research. In our view, it is not feasible to analyze destination branding research without considering place branding studies. First, because both fields overlap and much of the recent developments of destination branding come from place branding research. Second, because in some literature the terms are being used interchangeably (Skinner, 2008). The confusion over the use of terms stems not only from the way the literature developed over time in different subject areas but also appears to be linked to the way authors targeted articles for publication, using terms that would better align with their own discipline area (Skinner, 2008). Finally, some authors argue that branding destinations for tourism purposes limits inclusivity of the wider range of stakeholders of place (Kerr, 2006).

Destination image is a critical factor in influencing tourist's satisfaction and subsequent future behavior (Kim & Chen, 2015). Several definitions of destination image have been proposed. Based on an analysis of the literature, Martin and Bosque (2008) summarized 20 definitions of destination image and more recently Zhang et al. (2014) highlighted 10 different definitions. Earlier studies defined destination image as "the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination" (Crompton, 1979: 418). More recent definitions of destination image tend to consider that it is a complex concept more than a summation of all the factual attributes of a destination (Baloglu et al., 2014; Suhartanto, Ruhadi, & Triyuni, 2016).

In the literature it is possible to identity two major approaches in conceptualizing destination image: the three-dimensional continuum approach and the three-component approach (Zhang et al., 2014). The first approach, three-dimensional continuum, suggests attribute-holistic, functional-psychological, and common-unique as the three continuums of image (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). The attribute-holistic continuum reflects the perceptions of destination attributes as well as holistic impressions of the place. The functional-psychological continuum represents the distinction between directly measurable, functional components of a destination and intangible, psychological characteristics. The third continuum is indicative of both generic, common features and unique characteristics of the place.

The three-component approach holds that destination image is composed of cognitive, affective, and conative components (Lee, 2009; Zhang et al., 2014; Kock, Josiassen, & Assaf, 2016). The cognitive image refers to the beliefs or knowledge a person has of the characteristics or attributes of a tourism destination (Wang & Hsu, 2010). The affective component is represented by the feelings or emotional responses toward the destination (Baloglu et al., 2014; Hallmann et al., 2015). Finally, the conative aspect of destination image is the behavioral manifestation from the tourists' side and can be understood as onsite consumptive behaviors (Zhang et al., 2014; Suhartanto et al., 2016).

Customer satisfaction is one of the most relevant and frequently operationalized concepts of marketing thought and practice (Neal & Gursoy, 2008). Satisfaction plays a crucial role in successful destination marketing because it influences the choice of destination, the consumption of tourism services and tourist loyalty (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Tourist satisfaction can be defined as "a positive perception or feeling that tourists develop by engaging in a certain recreational activity" (Beard & Ragheb, 1980: 21). The central aspect of visitor satisfaction measurement in tourism research has been the disconfirmation theory, whereby satisfaction arises when consumers compare their perceptions with their initial expectations. (Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Neal & Gursoy, 2008; Prayag, 2009). According to the influential model developed by Oliver (1980), tourists develop expectations about a product before purchasing and subsequently compare actual performance with pre-formulated expectations. When the actual performance is superior to tourists' expectations, they have a positive disconfirmation, implying that consumers are satisfied and will be more willing to purchase the same tourist product again (Neal & Gursoy, 2008).

Other models used to evaluate consumer satisfaction in tourism include the norm model, the equity based model and the perceived overall performance model. The norm model, suggested by La Tour and Peat (1979), is based on the principle that norms serve as reference points for judging the tourist product, and dissatisfaction comes into play as a result of disconfirmation relative to these norms. In the equity-based model (Oliver & Swan, 1989) tourists' satisfaction result from the relationship between the inputs associated with the purchase (monetary, time and effort) and their perception about the rewards or benefits achieved. In the perceived overall performance model (Tse & Wilton, 1988) consumer satisfaction results from actual performance, regardless of consumers' expectations, meaning

that initial expectations or past experiences should be considered separately. According to Yoon and Uysal, (2005) the perceived overall performance model is effective when tourists do not have previous knowledge about the destination, thus only their actual experiences should come to play and determine their satisfaction with the tourist experience.

In marketing theory, customer loyalty has been approached in different ways. When loyalty is conceptualized as attitudinal it is argued that customers' beliefs about the value received lead to their overall attitude toward a product or service, such as the intention to repurchase (Hawkins, Best, & Coney, 1989). When conceptualized as behaviors, loyalty is identified with continued purchasing, continued patronage and act of recommendation (Hughes, 1991). Both of these conceptualizations of loyalty are subject to criticism. According to Suhartanto et al. (2016) behavioral methods tend to look narrowly to what loyalty means and cannot differentiate a loyal customer that identifies with the product/ service from consumers who simply consume for cost or convenience reasons. The same author argues that attitudinal approaches, on the other hand, lack any of the predictive power of the actual behavior. An alternative conceptualization consists in the integration of the two approaches (composite method), defining customer loyalty as the relationship between relative attitude and repeat patronage (Oliver, 1999).

3. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS IN CURRENT LITERATURE

Tasci and Kozak (2006) point some uncertainty in literature regarding the difference between destination brand and destination image. Some studies use the term destination image without much rigor in the conceptualization (Hallmann, Zehrer, & Muller, 2015). Qu et al. (2011) research brought some understanding to the field by developing and testing a theoretical model of destination branding, which integrates the concepts of destination branding and destination image. This model suggests unique destination image as a component of destination brand associations and proposed that the overall image of the destination (i.e., brand image) is a mediator between its brand associations (i.e., cognitive, affective, and unique image components) and tourists' future behaviors (i.e., intentions to revisit and recommend). The results of Qu's et al. (2011) research confirmed that overall image is a critical mediator between brand associations and tourists' future behaviors.

In tourism research, brand identity as been linked with brand positioning, and said to be the desired brand image articulated and communicated to target tourists (Tsaur et al., 2016). Konecnik and Go (2008) proposed a strategic conceptualization of destination brand identity, from a supply-side perspective, based on a framework composed of three dimensions: tourist analysis, competitor analysis, and self-analysis. Recently, Tsaur et al. (2016) proposed a five-dimension scale for measuring destination brand identity based on: destination image, destination quality, destination personality, destination awareness, and destination culture. A common ground on the above-cited studies is the stressed relationship between destination brand identity and destination brand image and the consideration that brand identity entails a strategic perspective of destination brands. Whereas brand identity is understood from the supply side, brand image is usually considered from the consumer side. As stressed by Hankinson (2010) place brand identity can be considered as a supply side perspective of place branding, which influences the demand side perspective, corresponding to place image.

Most empirical studies in the tourism literature focus on the cognitive component of destination image (Zhang et al., 2014) and tend to use a multi-attribute approach (Wang & Hsu, 2010). However, recently, more researchers are inclined to acknowledge the role of the affective dimensions of destination image (Zhang et al., 2014). In affective evaluation,

the tourist evaluates the place by the affective quality of the sum of the attributes of that destination meaning that the more appealing the attributes of the destination are, the better and higher is the affective evaluation (Baloglu, Henthorne, & Sahin, 2014). Whereas cognitive images have been measured using lists of functional and psychological attributes, affective images have been measured almost exclusively using Russell, Ward, and Pratt's (1981) affective grid scale or variants (Hallmann et al., 2015).

Recent literature adds that other than cognitive and affective evaluation, places are also subject to overall evaluation, suggesting that affective and cognitive image together lead to an overall image of the destination (Baloglu et al., 2014). Authors such as Martin and Bosque (2008), Wang and Hsu (2010), Hallmann et al. (2015), and Kock et al. (2016) adopted a joint cognitive-affective approach in their attempt to capture destination image. Wang & Hsu (2010) empirical study found that overall destination image is determined by cognitive and affective images, where affective image partially mediates the relationship between cognitive and overall images. The authors also found that overall destination image indirectly influences behavioral intentions through tourists' satisfaction.

Studying a winter sport destination, Hallmann et al. (2015) concluded that both the cognitive and affective image matter on overall image and further on intention to revisit. However, the authors also point that the cognitive image component is more relevant than the affective image component. According to the authors, this is important to note for destination managers as the cognitive image component can be easier controlled and influenced. Baloglu's et al. (2014) study on Jamaica destination presented a more clarifying approach by researching separately first-time and repeat visitors and founding that first-time visitors rely more on affective and overall image, while repeat visitors turn to their cognitive impressions of the destination.

Also considering the multi-dimensional nature of destination image and loyalty, Zhang et al. (2014) analyzed 66 independent studies. The findings reveal that the impact of destination image on tourist loyalty is significant, with varying degrees. Overall image was found to have the greatest impact on tourist loyalty, followed by affective image and cognitive image. Of the three levels of tourist loyalty, destination image has the greatest impact on composite loyalty, and then on attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty, successively.

In the context of tourist destinations, visitor loyalty remains an important indicator of successful destination development (Prayag, 2009) and is commonly considered a causal variable of satisfaction (Lee, 2009). Tourism literature points destination loyalty as decisive factor in the development of the tourism industry. At an operational level, revisit intention and recommendations to others are the most commonly used measured of tourist loyalty (Kim, Holland, & Han, 2013; Zhang et al., 2014). In an increasingly saturated marketplace, destination marketing should be guided by a thorough analysis of destination loyalty and its interplay with tourist satisfaction and destination image (Chi & Qu, 2008).

In an effort to present a more clear conceptualization of destination image, recently Kock et al. (2016), drawing on psychology, introduced an empirically validated destination content model (DCM) of destination image that aggregates three main concepts: i) destination image, understood as the overall evaluative construct and defined as an individual's overall evaluative representation of a destination; ii) destination imagery, relating to individual's diverse cognitive and affective associations to a destination and iii) destination affect, that include the overall affective response to a destination. The authors found that destination image positively affects behavioral intentions, specifically it positively relates with word of mouth (WOM), want to visit (WTV) and willingness to pay a higher price (WTP) for the destination Spain, but in the case of Germany the relationship was only verified between destination image and WOM and WTP, implying that different destinations can trigger distinct behavioral intentions.

Several empirical studies point a relationship between destination image and tourists' satisfaction. Research indicates that destination image influences satisfaction (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Chi & Qu, 2008) and the other way around, satisfaction influences destination image (Machado, 2010). Research in the context of tourism found that tourist satisfaction and destination image are important determinants of visit intentions and tourist loyalty towards a destination (Suhartanto et al., 2016). Satisfied travelers were found to have a higher probability of choosing the destination again, and more likely to engage in positive recommendations to others (Lee, 2009; Wang & Hsu, 2010; Tavitiyaman & Qu, 2013).

According to Chi and Qu (2008) tourist satisfaction improves if the destination has a positive image and destination image also affects tourists' behavioral intentions, in the way that a more favorable image will lead to higher likelihood of tourists returning to the same destination. The results of Chi and Qu's (2008) study confirmed that: i) destination image directly influenced attribute satisfaction; iii) destination image and attribute satisfaction were both direct antecedents of overall satisfaction; and iii) overall satisfaction and attribute satisfaction in turn had direct and positive impact on destination loyalty.

Finally, it should be mentioned the role of residents as contributors to destination image. According to Pike (2009) the host community should generally be regarded as an active participant of local tourism, both as hospitable hosts of the place, and as occasional local tourists. Pike (2009) also stresses that the participation of residents in the branding process brings truth and legitimization to the process, by incorporating the residents´ profound sense of place. In a study developed by Jeuring and Haartsen (2016) in the Dutch province of Fryslân it was found that residents understood the responsibility for sustaining a positive image of Fryslân as a tourist destination to be shared mostly between themselves and tourism entrepreneurs, while regional governments were attributed less responsibility for this destination marketing task. Govers (2011) stresses that when marketers develop a place brand for an external market, there is the risk of ignoring the fact that the shape and substance of places is really produced by residents.

The argumentation in favor of participatory action also resonates with the turn towards a "service-dominant logic" of marketing (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). According to Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) concepts developed within this approach are particularly suitable to place branding, including the co-creation of brands, which stresses the fact that brands are co-created by a multitude of actors who encounter and appropriate them.

4. CONCLUSION

The literature of place branding is still in an infant phase, were some of the well-established concepts of branding start to be discussed and adapted to place branding, including product image. There is a general consensus that places can act as brands and that branding places differs from branding products and services; thus, place branding can be considered a unique case of branding that differs from other areas of application. Similarly, the concept of destination image assumes unique contours in destination branding that differentiate him from general marketing conceptualizations of product or services image.

Recent approaches to destination image tend to adopt a joint cognitive-affective approach in an attempt to capture destination image in a more effective way. Both, the cognitive and affective image, affect tourists' perceptions of the destination. However, studies indicate that first-time visitors rely more on affective and overall image, while repeat visitors turn to their cognitive impressions of the destination. This distinction is important to practionaires and destination managers since the cognitive image component can be easier to control and influence when compared with the affective image of destinations.

Destination image was found to influence customer´s behavioral intensions, including the intention to revisited the destination, the intension to engage in positive recommendations and WOM and the willingness to pay higher prices. Nonetheless, research indicates that different dimensions of destination image affect satisfaction and loyalty differently. Some empirical studies concluded that, compared with affective and cognitive image, overall image has the greatest impact on tourist loyalty. Empirical studies also found a bidirectional relationship between destination image and tourists' satisfaction, meaning that destination image influences satisfaction and satisfaction also influences destination image, both impacting on tourists' loyalty.

While the reviewed studies contribute to our understanding of the complexity of destination image, two key gaps are yet to close. First, researchers are still debating a sound theoretical framework for the components that could make up destination image. Second, and as stressed by Kock et al. (2016), most of the studies that conceptually distinguish between different components of destination representations fail to sufficiently implement this conceptualization at the operationalization stage.

Managing an appealing image in tourists' minds is understood as an important factor to sustainable success in tourism because a positive image helps position the destination in relation to competitor destinations. In addition, an assessment of the destination image can help managers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a destination, enhance the understanding of tourists' behavioral intentions and provide a reference for practionaires in terms of developing tourism destinations.

Contrary to what appears to be the practice, research indicates that branding places should not be limited to produce appealing slogans and logos but to positively reinforce the distinctive characteristics of destination places. Second, most branding efforts are developed by DMO´s without the active involvement of local communities. The current academic perspective on destination branding is mostly based on the notion that destination image is not susceptible to be easily changed by marketing efforts. On the contrary, the literature recommends marketers to work on eliciting and interpreting the qualities and positive attributes already inherent to the place. For this purpose, the process of branding must be inclusive, the resident community as potential ambassadors of the brand and the best interpreters of the place should be called to participate in the branding construction processes.

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