THE ROLE OF BRANDING IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURIST DESTINATION

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Abstract

The given paper is dedicated to the determination of the theoretical aspects of the destination branding as a driving force behind the development of tourism industry at a particular destination. The notion of the term "tourist destination" is considered by authors. It is proved that the implementation of tourist facilities traditionally result in an increasing interest of a tourist destination. Considerable attention is given to the analysis of the role of branding in the development of any geographical location. It is suggested by authors that nowadays many tourists traditionally choose a particular destination according to the total amount of the existing attractions it has to offer. By the way, it is defined that a strong, unique image is the essence of destination positioning for its ability to distinguish a particular tourist destination from competitors to get into the consumers' minds, which simplify information continuously. The results confirm that branding allows destinations to show the main strengths, as well as to send clear messages to the potential consumers and to attract the investors in the tourism industry. Finally, it is noted that branding plays an important role in the development of tourist destinations, because the power of it is in making people aware of the particular destination and then linking desirable associations.

Keywords: *brand, destination branding, destination choice, nation brand hexagon, tourism destination.*

JEL classification: M20, L83

1. Introduction

In the light of recent global developments tourism has become one of the largest and fastest-growing industries all over the world, having an outstanding place in most of national economies. According to the recent annual report, prepared by the World Travel and Tourism Council [15, p. 3], in 2014 tourism's total contribution to the world economy rose to 9.5 % of global Gross Domestic Product (US $7 trillion), growing faster than financial, real estate and business services, transport and other significant economic sectors.

It is not surprising that in today's rapidly changing business environment tourism destinations from all over the world compete with each other for the attention, respect and trust of the visitors, potential investors and residents. In this case a positive brand provides a sustainable competitive advantage of the destination in the international area.

Consequently, it is more important than ever for tourist destinations to stand out and appear unique, to provide the necessary travel and accommodation information to tourists and to promote the developed brand image worldwide.

Over the past few decades destination branding is an important topic that has gained substantial attention among government officials, researchers, academicians and practitioners all over the world. We identified that destination branding is often considered by researchers in the context of its comparison with so-called "corporate branding", an effective tool for companies to strengthen their market positions and identify opportunities for growth, as well as to gain or maintain the competitive advantages. Practically, most companies and destinations are similar and learn from each other to create brands looking for sustainable development and prosperity.

Based on research findings, it should be mentioned that contemporary literature gives more and more examples of how such a process should be constructed, but there's still no clear concept. That is why the given study will take a fresh look at the determination of the role of branding in the sustainable development of tourist destination.

2. The notion of the term "tourist destination"

Nowadays most tourism activities take place at a specific destination, which is quite logical, because destinations are places that attract visitors for a temporary stay, and range from continents to countries, to states and provinces, to cities, to villages, to specifically built resort areas [11, p. 11].

Destination can be considered as a set of all products, services and experiences that are all branded together under the name of a particular destination [5, p. 1]. The key elements of any tourist destination are as follows [5, p. 2]:
- attractions (natural, man-made, artificial, purpose built, heritage, special events);
- accessibility (entire transportation system comprising of routes, terminals and vehicles);
- amenities (accommodation and catering facilities, retailing and other tourist services);
- activities (all activities available to the tourists and residents at the destination);
- ancillary services (banks, telecommunications, post and other services, used by tourists).

The term "tourist destination" is used by the United Nation World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) to signify "a local tourism destination is a physical space in which a visitor spends at least one overnight. It includes tourism products such as support services and attractions, and tourist resources within one day's return travel time. It has physical and administrative boundaries defining its management, and images and perceptions defining its market competitiveness" [6].

Obviously, the above considerations can be summarized into the following certain criteria, which would have to be met in order for a tourist destination, to be eligible for sustainable development. We can safely assume that the first one is a certain geographical place with the physical boundaries where people live in an organized fashion for a long period of time and which demonstrates clear signs of social formation in the form of houses where people live and spend their free time. The second one is an administrative unit, which has not only clearly defined boundaries, but a properly constituted community authority, as well as the own budget and the power to make important decisions regarding the management of this destination.

In general, almost each country claims a unique culture, amazing landscape and heritage, each place describes itself as having the friendliest people and high standard of customer services and facilities are now expected. As a result, the need for destination to create a unique identity for differentiating from competitors has become very important.

3. The importance of branding in the development of a tourism destination

"Almost every place on the Earth gets the image it deserves", once said Simon Anholt [2, p. 35], recognized as one of the world's authority on the branding of countries, regions and cities. This philosophy can be considered within a global environment, which is linked economically and geographically through accessible communication technologies. It goes without saying that every inhabited place on our planet has a certain reputation, just as products or companies have their own brand images. Actually, the brand images of products and companies may be carefully created through various advertising and marketing tools, while the reputation of tourist destinations tends to come about in a more unpredictable way.

At the same time a destination brand appeals to the main characteristics of a place that is attractive to visit by tourists. It is important to keep in mind that a destination brand needs to communicate its "sense of place" and create a strong emotional connection with its audience. Furthermore, it is similar as telling a story that provides an insight into the destination, its history, people and the way it views the world and how it relates to its environment. It is really about branding the place to life and making it relevant to people today.

Considering this fact, in 1996 Simon Anholt coined the expression "nation branding", which is a concept involving a combination of the promotion of tourism, investment, and trade, plus public and cultural diplomacy. Countries that want to succeed in this era of globalization must have coordinated brand strategies in the following areas of national competence (Figure 1).
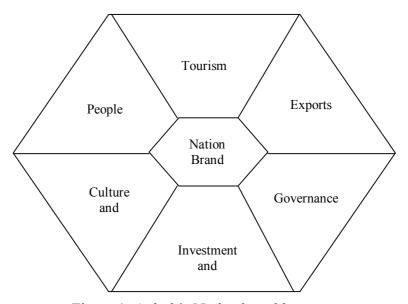

Figure 1: Anholt's Nation brand hexagon

Source: [3].

On the basis of the given model it should be mentioned that every country has its own brand strengths and weaknesses, so there is a different "winner" for each point of the given hexagon. The overall "Top nation brand" is the one with the highest marks across all the important dimensions of the hexagon:
- exports typically refer to the country-of-origin effect, which determines the public image of products and services of a country, and whether consumers are actively looking for or avoiding products from a certain country;
- governance refers to the measurement of public opinion on the degree of national

government competency and fairness, as well as the perception of its commitment with the wide range of global issues (peace, democracy, justice, poverty and environment and so on);

- culture and heritage encompass the perception of each nation's cultural and historical heritage as well as the appreciation for its contemporary culture, including art, cinema, music, literature and sports;
- people – the dimension, which is assessing the population of a country's reputation in terms of competence, education, openness, friendliness, among other qualities, but also its potential hospitality and tolerance;
- tourism reveals the appeal of a country as a tourist destination and its wealth in natural resources and tourist attractions;
- investment and immigration is a statement of a country's economic and social situation and is measured by the ability of a given country to attract residents, workers, students and potential investors [12, p. 2; 9, p. 3; 4, p. 231].

In addition, it is the most cited model of how a nation image is created, because it is essential for each country to understand how it is seen by people all over the world, how its main achievements and failures, assets and liabilities, residents and products are reflected in the complex brand image. Practically, the concept of nation branding, proposed by Simon Anholt, gave birth to an important field of destination branding research, which will be discussed further.

The term "destination branding" is recognized as the most commonly used in the contemporary tourism literature to describe the method of creating a unique identity for a particular destination that enables potential visitors to differentiate one destination from another [8, p. 29]. It is self-evident that branding allows destinations to show the main strengths, to send clear message to the target consumers and to attract the potential investors in the tourism industry.

We identified that destination branding is the set of marketing activities that are able to:
- support the creation of a name, symbol or logo, necessary for the identification of a tourist destination;
- convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination;
- consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the tourist destination;
- and, finally, reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk [10, p. 4].

It could be argued that a combination of the above-mentioned activities allows everyone, interested in pursuing the research, to create a positive destination image, which can greatly influence the consumers' destination choice. Consequently, destination branding influences not only the selection process but also future tourist behaviors such as the intention to revisit the destination and to spread positive word of mouth.

The existing relationships between decision-making processes, perceptions, tourist destination identity and the creation and maintenance of brands are shown in Figure 2.

According to the given model, tourist branding is not conceived as the way to manage a particular geographical location; rather, it is seen as an effective tool for the building of a stable and positive image [7], intended to improve the perceptions held by numerous social groups. It should be understood that branding cannot change a city or a country, but it can help to increase its competitiveness.
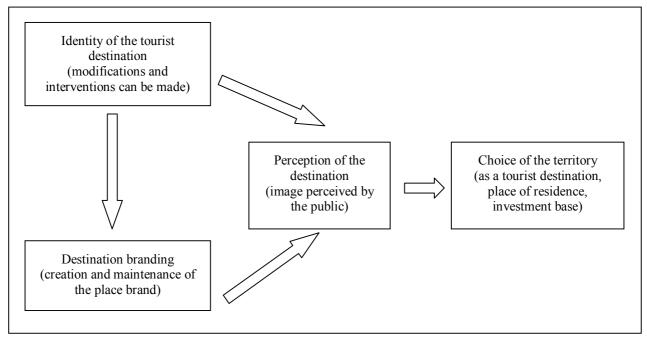
Figure 2: The branding process of a tourist destination

Source: [7].

Moreover, the purpose of tourist branding is not to transform territories, but to convey them in the most efficient manner in order to increase their appeal investment attractiveness; to improve their competitive position on the global tourism market.

Nowadays, destination branding has become one of the most exciting and entertaining aspects of the modern tourism industry. The destination brand must therefore work to unite and inspire the people. That is why governments of the developed and the developing countries all over the world are investing billions of national revenues each year into establishing destination brand appeal.

With the global tourism industry becoming more and more competitive, crowded and creative, destination brands often act as the "VOICE" of the nation:

"V" (Vision) – a powerful destination brand reflects the spirit of the residents of a particular tourist destination. It expresses the energy and bright personality of the destination, forming its natural, cultural and economic destiny. Tourist destinations with a rich history, centuries-old culture and traditions can showcase and celebrate these features as pillars of the brand's positioning and personality which inspire the future of the destination.

"O" (Originality) – the brand must display a unique, authentic, compelling story about its destination. The creative expression of the brand acts as a mirror of the creative spirit of the tourist destination itself.

"I" (Icons) – almost every tourist destination has its own highly memorable and inspiring symbols, which reflect the energy, possibility and pride of the nation.

"C" (Competitiveness) – a destination brand must be able to grab and hold the attention and interest of travelers very quickly.

"E" (Experiential) – a destination brand should contribute the emotional connection with each traveler [14].

It is worthwhile to mention that destination brands communicating with a clear "voice" open themselves up to a world of possibility in growth, development and appreciation.

Actually, the idea of transforming a tourist destination into an identified brand increases fast in recent years due to the following reasons.

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First of all, destination branding will be able to help tourist destinations to form a long term developing structure based on the destination's characteristics, and how they can reach their aims.

Secondly, destination branding encourages places to think beyond their current situation and brings future opportunities to the geographical locations. It is an integral part of a sustainable and continuous process of wealth-creation of the particular destination. Tourism branding usually brings opportunities for developing countries with an effective brand image, inward investments etc.

Finally, tourism branding means to encourage destinations to create a dynamic environment which will attract not only new visitors, but domestic and overseas investors. Through communication, a tourist destination can create a distinctive image and value to attract potential customers.

According to the last research of the essence of the nation brands, published by Simon Anholt, most people and corporations don't have enough time to learn much about other destinations in the global world. We usually navigate through the complexity of the modern world armed with a few simple clichés, and they form the background of our opinions, even if we aren't fully aware of this and don't always admit it to ourselves [1, p. 6]. For example, Paris is about style; Switzerland is about watches of a high quality, Japan is about technology; Brazil is about football and a bright carnival; most African nations are, unfortunately, about poverty and disease. When you haven't got time to read a book, you judge it by its cover. Like these readers, most of people all over the world are too busy worrying about themselves and their own countries to spend too long trying to form complete, balanced, and informed views about six billion other people and another two hundred countries.

As a matter of fact, all responsible governments, on behalf of their people, their institutions, and their corporations, need to measure and monitor the world's perception of their nation and to develop a strategy for managing it successfully [1, p. 6]. It is an integral part of their job to try to earn an impeccable reputation; true; powerful; attractive and useful to their economic, political, and social goals; and honestly reflective of the spirit, the beliefs and the will of the people.

4. Conclusions

Through this research we have come to certain conclusions.

While most people all over the world think of tourism as simply a leisure activity, the tourism industry in the modern world is actually an important business sector of the global economy. Considering the increasing competition in the tourism industry, the governments realize that destination branding has become an effective tool to differentiate their countries and gain competitive advantages by improving their image as a developed tourism destination.

In the context of the current global economic environment, tourism destinations are in a permanent territorial competition. Since many destinations offer the similar product (geographical location, infrastructure and education system), they must identify and promote their competitive (and/or unique) advantages that they held, in order to compete successfully for the necessary amount of investments, tourism, political power and so on.

A tourist destination with a positive brand emphasizes the following elements: unique nature, scenic landscapes, favorable weather, relaxing ambiance, accessibility, infrastructure (all these elements form "the artistic image"), and also historical traces, art monuments, regional culture (customs and traditions, specific events), tourism reception facilities (hotels, motels, restaurants, bars and similar infrastructure), regional gastronomy (the elements, which form "the psychological

image"). By the way, an effective brand stimulates the regional economy (through own products and services that are offered and consumed) and may contribute to the sustainable development of the whole region [13, p. 142].

Nowadays, destination branding has a significant importance, because there is a need for a particular destination (a region, country, city, etc.) to be positioned in consumers' and stakeholders' awareness. In this case, the power of branding is in making people aware of the particular destination and then linking desirable associations. Increasing mobility of both people and businesses and growth in the tourism industry has contributed to the rise of place marketing.

Tourist destination marketing can be a powerful strategy, complementing the efforts of the authorities to promote the natural attractions of a region. Ideally, destination brand marketing closes the gap between what an area really is ("destination's identity"), what people think about it ("destination's image") and how the location wants to be known in the global world ("destination's brand" or desired reputation). To achieve this, it is necessary to communicate and promote the tourist destination's particular attraction and competitive advantages.

Coming to the conclusion, it should be mentioned that each destination must find a balance between its own identity, image and the desired reputation, as well as its existing brand. If these above-mentioned items are found, the brand of a specific tourist destination may be the common denominator between the wide range of the key elements (economy, infrastructure, education and culture) and participants (residents, entrepreneurs, governments etc.) that sum up the destination.

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