

CONNECTING CULTURE TO DESTINATION BRAND EQUITY DIMENSIONS: TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

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ABSTRACT

In the attempt to differentiate their brand, authorities often focus on culture. Since not all destination branding strategies yield positive results, what needs to be answered is whether culture contributes to the city branding. Based on the findings of a research-in-process, the objective is twofold: structuring the relationships developed between culture and destination branding into a model and then translating the model into a questionnaire. The model, which has been developed, links culture and destination branding at different levels. The questionnaire has been pilot-tested and is ready to use in order to validate the model constructs and relationships.

Keywords: Destination Branding, Culture, Brand Equity Dimensions

INTRODUCTION

According to Anholt (2007), a place-brand strategy is a plan for defining the most realistic, most competitive and most compelling strategic vision for a place. This vision is then fulfilled and communicated through acts including, among others, tourism and culture. Referring particularly to the process of convergence between culture and tourism, Apostolakis (2003) emphasizes heritage and cultural resources, because such attractions can be developed into a “special” niche in the industry. Having as a starting point the aforementioned importance attributed to the dimension of culture in the place and destination branding literature, the present research aims at assessing the impact of culture on two different levels: On the first level, interest focuses on certain cultural products which – along with other information sources and previous experiences - influence the creation of associations prior to visiting the city. On the second level, interest focuses on the experience with specific cultural products which - along with ambiance - influences city brand equity dimensions (BEDs).

The methodology followed in the present paper consisted of four steps. The first one was the conduct of extensive desk research and identification of relevant literature. The second step included the assessment and extraction of the constructs which are relevant to the research objective and include cultural products and cultural attributes of the cities, pre-existing associations, motivations, information sources, experience and evaluation of a place brand. Upon having identified these constructs, revealing the underlying assumptions followed. These assumptions led to the final step of structuring the constructs in the forms of relationships depicted in a model, which links culture and destination branding in different levels. The model relationships are linked to a questionnaire which is ready to be used in order to validate the model constructs and relationships.

EXTRACTING THE CONSTRUCTS & REVEALING THE UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

The present paper aims at offering a first insight into the on-going research concerning the contribution of culture to destination branding. The first step includes assessing and extracting the constructs deriving from the research objective. This was achieved with an extensive desk research, which focused on terms connected to city culture, destination branding and with the effectiveness of a destination brand. To start with culture,

“cultural goods are those consumer goods that convey ideas, symbols, and ways of life, and cultural services those activities that aim at satisfying cultural interests or needs” (UNESCO, 2000). Consequently, when talking about culture, a number of products and services, such as films, books, cultural events, festivals, art centers and museums can be taken into consideration. These are the cultural elements upon which local authorities have been working in order to establish a city brand known and appreciated for its culture and heritage. The same cultural elements have been attracting the interest of tourism and place scholars.

For assessing the effectiveness of a destination, literature indicates a number of different techniques which can be employed. Aaker’s (1991) BEDs have often been considered as the main components of a brand’s effect in the field of hospitality and tourism (Boo, Busser & Baloglu, 2009; Yoo & Donthu, 2001; van der Ark & Richards, 2006, Buhalis, 2000; Hall, 2004). The first dimension, brand awareness, represents the strength of the brand’s presence in the mind of the target audience. The second one, destination brand quality, can be assessed in terms of organisation, atmosphere and quality experiences. The leading features of the place brand in comparison with other destination brands can also be considered. Brand loyalty is defined as the attachment a customer has to a brand and is often limited to attitudinal and behavioral elements (Keller, 1993). Brand associations are reflecting consumers’ perceptions and take brand image and brand value into account. When referring to associations for a cultural brand, the concepts, which need to be taken into consideration, are those seen as important for a cultural destination, such as authenticity, hospitality and exoticness. Other proprietary brand assets, which may lead to a competitive advantage, make up the fifth dimension. In the case of a city basing its brand on culture, the items included can be monuments/ heritage sites, museums, art centers, cultural events and festivals (Richards, 2007; Evans, 2003; McKercher, Sze Mel & Tse, 2006; Prentice, 1994; van der Ark & Richards, 2006; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007).

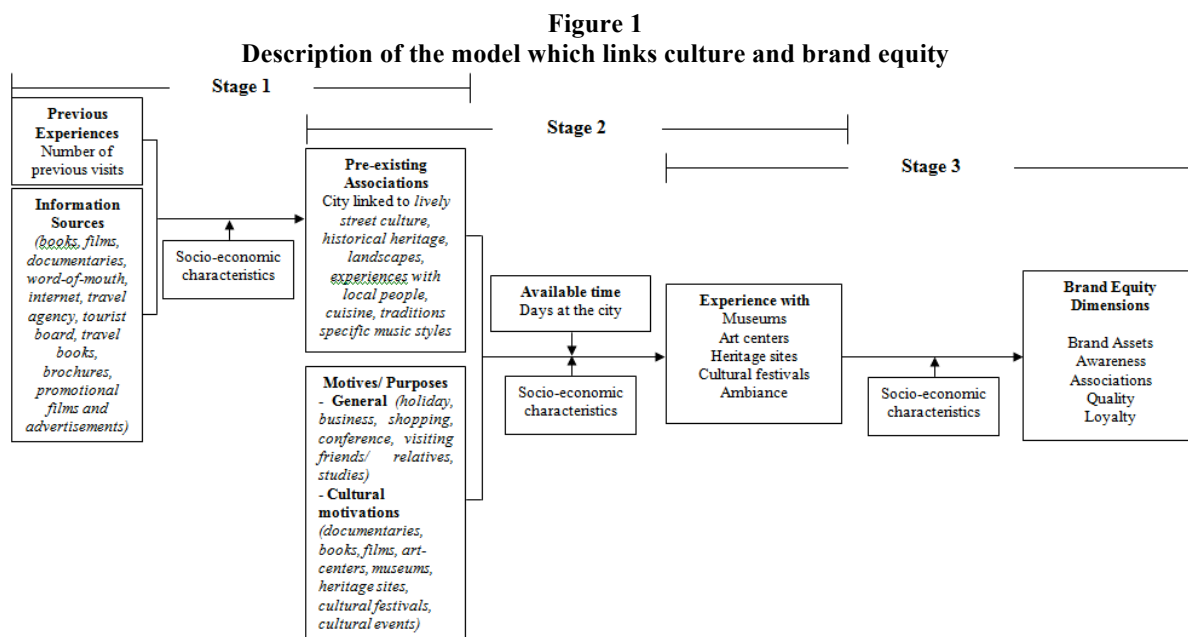
After having identified the constructs upon which the contribution of culture to destination branding is built, revealing the underlying assumptions and structuring them in the form of relationships emerges as necessary. Some cultural products set the standards for consumers’ expectations through influencing visitors’ inferences to pre-existing associations or are used as information sources. For instance, books are able to include multiple perspectives or interpretations and influence image (Gunn, 1988; Rosenstone, 1995). Recent studies also focus on how films affect tourism. For example, Frost (2006) specifically suggests that historical films may result in the desire to visit and experience places associated with the story watched. According to Frost, films can make a story known to further away places, therefore resulting in awareness. The images of a city captured in films remain unchanged and the images in a film will influence how people think and evaluate their experiences in the city of the film (Kennedy & Lukinbeal, 1997). Therefore, it can be supported that some cultural products, together with other sources, provide information about the destination and may lead to the formulation of specific associations prior to the transition at the destination. In fact, some of them may also interact with reasons for travelling and act as motives which bring tourists to the specific destination in order to experience local culture (Richards, 2007; van der Ark & Richards, 2006).

Before working on culture, defining the elements of cultural experience is also necessary. The ability of flagship cultural projects, museums and art-centers to enhance and re-engineer the image of a city and attract tourists from around the globe is recognised (Evans, 2003; Grodach, 2008). Events is another image-enhancement tool which has been used particularly for large cities (Holcomb, 1993), and cultural festivals further contribute to city image and have an effect on quality of life (Quinn B., 2005; Evans, 2003). Besides, according to McKercher, Sze Mel, and Tse (2006), cultural festivals, which are conducted in a city, can lead to improved awareness and assist in updating their role as a sustainable tourism element.

DEVELOPING THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Having as a starting point the importance given to the dimension of culture in the place branding literature (Anholt, 2007; Garcia, 2005; Evans, 2005; Evans, 2003; Prentice & Andersen, 2003), it seemed necessary to assess the impact of a number of cultural products and attributes on the city BEDs. The 3-stage model is depicted in Figure 1. Its first stage focuses on whether or not information sources and visitors’ previous experiences create associations prior to the experience with the city (Martinez & Pina, 2003). At this stage, the role of specific cultural products (films, documentaries, books) as information sources is also considered, because stories read or watched may create a destination image, which will be based on the heritage and historical associations of a place and its scenic attributes (Frost, 2006). In the second stage, the focus is on visitors’ motivations and purposes for visiting the city. Apart from the general motives recognized for urban tourism, culture-related motivations are also taken into consideration (Ashworth & Page, 2011; Frost, 2006). In the third stage, the focus moves on the effect of visitors’ experience with specific cultural products (museums,

art centers, heritage sites, cultural events, cultural festivals) and with cultural ambiance (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991) on the city BEDs (Aaker, 1991). In this stage, what is pursued is a more holistic approach on the relationships of the aforementioned cultural products with BEDs. In order to reach the research goal, the relationships of the model are linked to specific hypotheses.



For stage one, two hypotheses are put forward for testing: 1. The various information sources create specific cultural associations about the city (religious/ historical importance, street culture, experiences with locals, landscapes, tastes). 2. Previous experience with the city creates specific cultural associations about the city (religious/ historical importance, street culture, experiences with locals, landscapes, cuisine). The reason behind these two hypotheses is the fact that information sources, such as films, as well as previous experiences create specific associations prior to the visit (Martinez & Pina, 2003; Frost, 2006). Based on previous research examining how specific motives may lead the tourists to seek experience with specific cultural attributes when at the city (Frost, 2006), **for stage two**, two more hypotheses are put forward for testing: 3. Pre-existing associations urge visitors to seek for cultural experiences with specific cultural products (museums, heritage sites, arts centers, cultural festivals, cultural events) and the ambiance of the city, 4. the purposes (general and culture-related) for visiting the city urge people to seek for cultural experiences with the aforementioned specific cultural products and the ambiance of the city. **For stage three**, five more hypotheses are put forward for testing: 5. The experience at heritage sites has a positive influence on each city brand equity dimension (CBED), 6. the experience at museums has a positive influence on each CBED, 7. the experience at arts centers has a positive influence on each CBED, 8. the experience obtained through cultural events has a positive influence on each CBED, 9. the experience a cultural consumer has with cultural festivals has a positive influence on each CBED and 10. the experience a cultural consumer has with the city's cultural ambiance has a positive influence on each CBED. These hypotheses can be justified by previous research examining how specific experience may impact on the evaluation of BEDs (van der Ark & Richards, 2006, Buhalis, 2000; Hall, 2004; Richards, 2007; Evans, 2003; McKercher, Sze Mel, and Tse, 2006; Prentice, 1994; Andries van der Ark & Richards, 2006; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007).

DEVELOPING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The base of the questionnaire, which will test the hypotheses and the model hereby proposed, is the ATLAS questionnaire for cultural tourists (Richards, 2007). However, instead of asking whether or not the tourist has visited this city before, asking the number of times one may have visited the city seems a better approach. This way, heavy users and differences in experience, perspective and evaluation will be easier to detect. For the same reasons, knowing the available time (in days) visitors have in the city is necessary. In terms of reasons for travelling, general motives, such as holidays, business, conference/ studies, visiting relatives and friends and shopping can be recognized (Ashworth & Page, 2011). These are enriched with destination-specific motives, which include the history of the city, word-of mouth, visiting heritage sites, museums and/or art

centers, attending cultural events and/or festivals, films and/or documentaries watched and books read (Ashworth & Page, 2011; Frost, 2006).

The alternatives concerning information sources used in ATLAS questionnaire can be used as well. Apart from these, recent research in the field indicates that non promotional films can act as information sources (Frost, 2006). As Frost (2006) and Martinez & Pina (2003) point out, visitors may have also linked the city to specific heritage and historical associations and scenic attributes, because of having watched a specific film. These associations can be about street culture, religious heritage, cuisine, traditions, specific music styles and experiences with local people.

In order to evaluate the cultural experience, two different approaches are necessary. First of all, the experience with specific cultural products, such as museums, art centers, heritage sites, events and festivals, can be characterized as authentic, interesting and pleasant. It can also be reflecting local values and seem in line with the atmosphere of the city (Prentice, 1994). Together with this approach, assessing the level of satisfaction seems necessary. Therefore, one more question is added for giving visitors the chance to evaluate their experience in the city with each cultural element (overall cultural experience, facilities of tourist information, organization of culture-related activities, cultural infrastructure, opportunity for adventure, heritage sites, museums, art centers, nightlife alternatives/ entertainment, street culture, cultural festivals, events, city architecture and cuisine) (Richards, 2007; Ashworth & Page, 2011).

Multiple destination-specific items are used to measure each BED and help examining construct validation (Boo et al, 2009). The items regarding the constructs of culture and BEDs and the relationships developed between them, emerge mostly from Aaker's (1991) items used to evaluate BEDs and Richards (2009) questionnaire to cultural tourists. These items are enriched through further in-depth research of each one of the five dimensions (assets, awareness, associations, quality, loyalty) and their relationship with culture. Table 1 below highlights the theoretical validation of the brand equity constructs and items used in the questionnaire.

Table 1
Building the Questionnaire Linking Brand Equity Dimensions and Culture

	Items	References
Brand Assets	What makes this city unique is:	
	Its monuments/ heritage sites	Richards (2007); Evans (2003); Prentice (1994)
	Its cultural events	Richards (2007); Evans (2003); Trueman et al(2004); Van Der Ark & Richards (2006)
	Its street culture	Evans (2003); Van Der Ark & Richards, (2006)
	Its cuisine	Konecnik & Gartner (2007)
	Its traditions	Richards (2007)
	Its contribution to world heritage	Evans (2003); Trueman et al (2004)
	Its entertainment/ nightlife options	Richards (2007); Evans (2003)
	Its cultural festivals	Richards (2007); Evans (2003); Mckercher et al (2006)
	Its museums	Richards (2007); Evans (2003); Prentice (1994)
	Its arts centers	Richards (2007); Evans (2003)
Brand Awareness	City Name (CN) is a famous cultural destination	Motameni & Shahrokhi (1998), Boo et al (2009)
	When thinking about culture, this city comes to my mind immediately	Kaplanidou & Vogt (2003), Boo Et Al (2009)
	The characteristics of this city come to my mind quickly	Yoo & Donthu (2001), Boo et al (2009)
Brand Associations	My friends would think highly of me if I visited CN	Lassar et al (1995), Boo et al (2009)
	This cultural destination fits my personality	Lassar et al (1995), Boo et al (2009)
	This city has a personality	Aaker (1991)
	This city has a rich history	Aaker (1991)
	The culture here is interesting	Aaker (1991)
	I can trust this city for a fulfilling cultural experience	Aaker (1991)
	In CN I can have an authentic cultural experience	Buhalis (2000)
CN has an exotic atmosphere	Buhalis (2000)	

	The people here are hospitable	Buhalis (2000)
	CN offers reasonably-priced cultural experiences	Ambler et al (2002), Sweeney & Soutar (2001), Boo et al (2009)
	Considering what I would pay for a cultural trip, I will get much more than my money's worth by visiting CN	Lassar et al (1995), Boo et al (2009)
Brand Quality	I can rely on there being a good atmosphere	Aaker (1991)
	CN provides quality cultural experiences	Aaker (1991), Sweeney & Soutar (2001), Boo et al. (2009)
	I admire the organization of the city's cultural aspects	Aaker (1991)
	This experience has increased my cultural knowledge	Richards (2007)
	In comparison with other cultural cities, CN is growing in popularity/ a leading city for cultural experience/ respected for its cultural heritage/ appreciated for its modern culture	Aaker (1991)
Brand Loyalty	I enjoy visiting CN	Keller (2003), Yoo & Donthu (2001)
	CN would be my preferred choice for a cultural holiday	Keller (2003), Yoo & Donthu (2001), Boo et al (2009)
	CN met my expectations	Aaker (1991)
	I would recommend my friends/ relatives to visit CN	Arnett et al (2003), Boo et al (2009)

Likert's scale is suggested for the specific questionnaire. Making it possible to add additional responses, if wanted, is necessary in order to have a clear insight on visitor views and evaluations. For the question on satisfaction, the example of Martinez & Alvarez (2010), who suggest the use of facial expressions that range from anger ☹ to happiness ☺ instead of traditional numerical anchors, is preferred. The profile questions include place of residence, nationality, gender, age and income group, level of education and professional profile.

The questionnaire, which has been analytically presented here, has already been pilot-tested through a face-to-face process which was affected in Athens. To be more specific, 15 tourists visiting the Panathenaic Stadium of Kallimarmaro were approached randomly in May 2010. The choice of writing down an additional answer not included in the ones already given in the structured questionnaire was suggested by the respondents. Therefore, the alternative 'other' was added in the final questionnaire for the items concerning pre-existing associations, information sources, reasons for travelling and unique and leading characteristics of the city.

This questionnaire has been drawn to address the needs of big cities. Field research to be conducted in Athens, Istanbul and Rome is going to use this questionnaire and validate the model constructs and relationships. For testing and estimating the causal relations statistical analysis of the results is necessary. This analysis will validate the possible moderating influence of various other relevant parameters, such as visitors' socio-economic profile. Applying a technique, such as Structural Equation Modeling, is also necessary.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In tourism markets, as it is difficult to differentiate products or services based on a tangible quality (Christou, 2002), culture and heritage offer Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) the potential to create a differentiated brand based on the unique and collective attributes of the city or place where they operate. In fact, literature review indicates that culture is related to destination branding in various levels. Some cultural products are used as information sources which, together with the information sources traditionally incorporated by tourism officials, may act as "image-makers" and create specific associations before the tourists actually visit the destination. These cultural products, as well as other carriers of culture, are likely to influence the decision to visit the destination and urge visitors to seek to experience specific culture and attributes when at the destination. Finally, according to the characteristics and evaluations of their cultural experience, visitors may proceed to a different evaluation of the destination brand. To access these evaluations Aaker's (1991) BEDs can be used. The BEDs offer authorities specific information on the degree according to which specific cultural elements are recognized as unique characteristics and, therefore, can be perceived as the brand assets in which authorities should preferably invest. Furthermore, assessing brand awareness, associations, quality and loyalty and recognising the factors which influence them, offer DMOs guidance in the cultural products and attributes towards which they should join their forces in order to maximize the effectiveness of their branding efforts.

To be more precise, a specific model can be used in order to reveal the underlying relations connecting culture and destination brands. This model derives through extensive desk research in various fields and suggests that culture (in the form of cultural products, when the definition of UNESCO is incorporated) has an impact on destination branding both before the potential tourist decides to visit the specific destination and when the tourist is at the destination. In the first case, specific cultural products, such as films, documentaries and books, act as information sources which influence pre-existing associations. These cultural products, along with museums, heritage sites, festivals and other cultural products, which can be experienced when at the destination, may act as motives for preferring the specific destination brand over the others. In the second case, experience with specific cultural products may lead to positive brand equity, therefore suggesting a successful destination branding strategy. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time a more holistic approach in the relationships developed between culture and destination branding is attempted. Therefore, the relations deriving from the literature review are yet to be tested. The present model and questionnaire are first to be put in use in research realized in Athens, Istanbul and Rome.

IMPLICATIONS

Local authorities count on place and destination branding strategies in order to differentiate their brands and gain a competitive advantage. Culture is often used in their branding strategies and, because it is a wide term, it may include many different elements which have the potential to influence the effectiveness of a city brand; first of all, in the way it is perceived and the associations created even from a distance, and then in the way it is experienced when at the site. Furthermore, the branding strategies incorporated by local authorities are not necessarily successful. Therefore, developing a tool, which will help assessing the contribution of culture to destination branding and the BEDs, steps out as necessary.

Towards this direction, a model which incorporates the constructs and relationships was developed and linked to specific hypotheses and a questionnaire. This questionnaire will offer DMOs a clear view of the importance of various cultural products when visitors evaluate the destination brand. Analysis of the questionnaire will provide local DMOs access to the evaluation of their destination brands through the impact of specific cultural products and services, which are in various ways connected to the specific place and influence visitors' motives, experience and evaluation. This questionnaire is scheduled to validate the model in the cases of Athens, Istanbul and Rome. These cities have been chosen not only because of their rich history, but also because of the preference shown to them by those seeking a cultural holiday (Richards, 2007), the city ratings in terms of authenticity and exoticness (van der Ark & Richards, 2006) as well as the preference shown by tourists to Mediterranean destinations in general (Buhalis, 2000). On the other hand, upon validating the model, the questionnaire can be adjusted as to address the needs of smaller towns. Keeping in mind that both the budgets and the pulling power of smaller towns may differ in size than those of bigger cities, emphasis is likely to focus on different cultural elements, such as ambiance, cuisine, music and traditions, which can either be connected to specific festivals or not. Yet, the quality attributes of the cultural experience, including, for instance, authenticity, hospitality and exoticness, may still be the elements upon which the differentiation of the destination brand and its competitive advantage will be based.

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