MEASURING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DESTINATION BRANDS: A CRITICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to provide a review of the developments regarding destination brand effectiveness published since 2001. Based on a multi-source search, 43 relevant papers were identified. Content analysis using multiple classifier variables provides further insights into specific conceptual and methodological aspects. Conclusions drawn from descriptive analysis pertain to the multidimensional character of the construct, the methodology and context of destination brand effectiveness, and lead to suggestions for future studies in this growing, highly complex research field. Finally, research outcomes offer DMOs a better understanding on how they should use them as to evaluate the effectiveness of their destination brand efforts.

Key Words: review, destination branding, effectiveness, brand equity, brand performance, evaluation

INTRODUCTION

Although still in its infancy (Hosany et al., 2006; Park & Petrick, 2006), compared to the product branding literature, the field of destination has largely attracted research interest, particularly from the perspective of the perceived image (i.e. destination image). While the concept of destination image has been put forward in the studies, the holistic notion of destination branding is a recent introduction (Gartner & Ruzzier, 2011). Nevertheless, two decade's worth of research and academic achievements in the field of destination branding have shown the significance of the research stream answering the question as to whether already accepted branding principles can be transferred to destinations.

Tourist destinations are increasingly being placed in the global tourism market and recognized in the context of a brand (Lee, 2001). Destination branding is becoming increasingly popular as Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) are trying to differentiate themselves in an environment characterized by fierce competition. Given the current status of relevant research, what seems necessary is specific guidance on how they could –and should- evaluate these branding efforts. To date, the vast majority of tourism destination studies have examined the brand concept primarily from a demand-side perspective, adopting a consumer-perceived-image approach (e.g. Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Only some years ago did researchers focus on the importance of a supply-side managerial perspective on tourism destination branding (e.g. Hankinson, 2007; Balakrishnan, 2009; Piha et al., 2010).

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The present research effort aims at delineating the knowledge areas pertaining to the extant literature of destination branding effectiveness, extrapolated from the traditional theory on branding. Thus, it offers an in-depth view of the concept, shedding more light toward terminology, methodology and context-specific issues. The paper begins with a brief description of the newly defined concept of destination branding effectiveness, continues with the methodological approach adopted and the research findings which derived from the critical review of the relevant literature. Finally, conclusions are interpreted in a way that may provide directions for further research in destination branding, as well as, offer useful input to National Tourism Organizations (NTOs), DMOs etc. to better understand the extant knowledge.

A NASCENT FIELD

According to Pike (2010:124), "there has been relatively little research reported in relation to analyzing destination brand effectiveness". In an attempt to further investigate the concept of measuring destination brand effectiveness, tourism marketing scholars coined the term destination brand equity, borrowed from the product branding literature (Keller, 1993).

Keller (1993:1) defined Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) as 'the differential effect of brand knowledge on the consumer response to the marketing of the brand'. Keller's evaluation model takes into account two components, namely, brand awareness (consisting of brand recall and brand recognition) and brand image (a set of brand associations). Brand associations are conceptualized in terms of their characteristics by type (attributes, benefits and attitudes), favorability, strength and uniqueness. CBBE occurs when the consumer is aware of the brand and holds some favorable, strong and unique associations, correspondingly. The construct of brand loyalty is introduced when favorable attitudes lead to repeat buying behavior. Aaker defined brand equity as assets and liabilities that add or detract value to a firm and/or its companies. High levels of brand equity can result in increased sales, price premiums, customer loyalty (Aaker, 1991), lower costs (Keller, 1993), and purchase intent (Cobb-Walgren, Beal, & Donthu, 1995). According to Aaker's original classification (1991), brand equity measures consist of five categories; nevertheless, only four attributes are included in the models assessing CBBE in the destination branding context (Konecnik & Ruzzier, 2008; Ruzzier, 2010) - awareness (destination name, characteristics), associations or image (perceived value, personality, organizational associations), perceived quality (perceived quality, leadership/ popularity) and loyalty (price premium, satisfaction/loyalty). Aaker (1991) considers brand assets as the fifth dimension necessary when evaluating brand equity. As mentioned in Pike (2010), commonly, when referring to products, the measurement of brand equity is an intangible balance sheet asset with key dependent variables, including future financial performance (Kim et al., 2003) and market share (Mackay, 2001). However, in the tourism literature, references to the tourism destination customer performance (Gartner & Ruzzier, 2011) highlight the customer-based character of brand equity (CBBE).

In an attempt to depict the main constructs used to operationalize destination brand effectiveness, a great deal of studies is guided by Aaker's (1991) and Keller's (1993) pioneering works. Taking the increasing number of the relevant exploratory studies into account (Gnoth, 2002; Kaplanidou &Vogt, 2003; Pike, 2004; Blain et al., 2005), the lack of a comprehensive model in the nascent field of measuring the effectiveness of destination brand urge for a broad review of the current body of knowledge.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of the study, the developments in the recently conceived theoretical background of destination branding effectiveness and the patterns of corresponding scholarly research can better be traced through the review of the international refereed journals available on relevant databases (some editor-specific databases and search engines). Granting access to more than 4.000 journals, the databases used for the review of the literature (e.g. Business Source Premier, Sage, Emerald, Elsevier, JSTOR, Heal-Link, Reference lists etc.) yielded to the identification of 43 articles that were published in a period of 10 years (2001-2011). The multi-source search resulted in a pool of studies that were content analyzed (e.g. Clark, 1990; Papastathopoulou & Hutlink, 2010) against multiple-classifier variables falling into three broad categories, namely, methodological approach, focus of studies and terminology used.

In further detail, the iterative and retrieval procedure (i.e. database search) started with developing a set of search concepts related to destination branding effectiveness, thus relating to different ways of

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conceptualizing brand effectiveness (equity, measurement, assessment, evaluation, performance). These terms in different combinations were used as entries in all searches. This process in various literature databases was conducted by one person in order to maintain consistency after a comprehensive discussion among the authors followed by a review of previous studies. An inter-rater reliability check was conducted by three authors. The journals included, among others, the following: *Annals of Tourism Research, Tourism Management, Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research, Journal of Vacation Marketing, Journal of Advertising, International Journal of Tourism Research, Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism, Journal of Place Management and Development, Journal of Travel Research*. The major findings are summarized in the section below with the aid of the descriptive analysis (frequencies and mean) undertaken in continuation of the content analysis already described.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

As already mentioned, the very start of destination branding literature dates back almost 20 years, yet interest in the field is still growing. Focusing on the relatively new research stream of destination brand effectiveness, the review in this nebulous field sheds light in two different levels: a) methodological, and b) conceptual.

At a methodological level, Table 1 describes the methodological approach followed by scholars who have contributed to the field of destination brand effectiveness in these 10 years of research. The vast majority of the papers (69.77% of them to be exact) follow an empirical approach and only 9 of the 43 papers (which means 20.92% of the sample) a conceptual one. To be more precise, 37.21% of the methodological approach followed by the 43 papers, which contribute to the field of destination brand effectiveness, can be described as empirical-quantitative (EQN), 32.56% as empirical-qualitative (EQL) and 20.93% as purely conceptual-normative (C/N). The remaining 9.31% followed a mixed method (both qualitative and quantitative).

Table 1
Methodological Approach

Research Design	Frequencies (N=43)	Percentage (%)
EQN	16	37.21
EQL	14	32.56
C/N	9	20.92
M	4	9.31

*(EQN: Empirical-Quantitative, EQL: Empirical-Qualitative, C/N: Conceptual/Normative, M: Mixed)

Going deeper into the methodological background of the field of destination brand effectiveness, Table 2 summarizes the results of the analysis considering the research focus of the studies. The six papers which follow a merely conceptual approach and are based on literature reviews with no referred sector side are not included in this analysis. Therefore, the number of research papers considered in Table 2 is reduced from 43 to 37. What becomes obvious is the fact that scholars tend to avoid conducting cross-sectional studies and prefer focusing on a specific target group. As expected, most of the sector-specific studies address to the demand-side and specifically to tourists. To be more specific, 65.11 % out of 43 papers focuses on a specific sector and only the remaining 20.93% can be considered as cross-sectional. Further analysis indicates that the cross sectional research consists of five supply-side studies and not more than four supply- and demand-side studies (e.g. tourists and firms).

Table 2
Focus of the Studies

Cross Sectional = 9 (N=37)		Percentage (%)	Sector Specific Side = 28 (N=37)			Percentage (%)
Supply-Side	5	13.51	Demand-Side	Tourists	24	64.86
Supply & Demand-Side	4	10.81		Locals	2	5.42
			Supply-Side	Firms	1	2.7
				NTOs	1	2.7

*(CS: Cross-Sectional, SS: Sector-Specific study)

At a conceptual level, one of the first issues to be addressed is the confusing parallel use of the terms 'brand' and 'destination' as synonyms (Yüksel & Yüksel, 2001: 338). Similarly, others have omitted the term

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'brand' from their analysis and developed subsequent theories referring to 'destinations', 'places' or both of them (Simpson & Siguaw, 2008). A closer look at these cases made it clear that, despite the verbal differences, there is a common research area. Based on that concession, the authors proceeded to the analysis of the findings as follows.

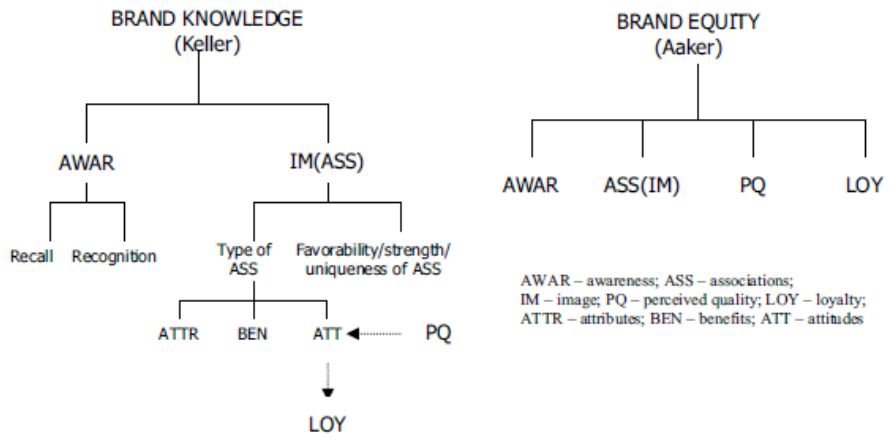
Content analysis revealed that the effectiveness of destination brands is the "umbrella-construct" expressed with the use of one of the six terms, notably, equity, evaluation, effectiveness, performance, measurement and assessment (Table 3). A closer look at the results presented in Table 3 reveals that these terms have been assessed 93 times in 43 papers, which implies that in the majority of the studies, at least two (mean: 2.2 times) of these terms have been used interchangeably. This indicates that none of the papers refers to just one of the terms. For instance, Pike (2010) refers to brand performance measurement, destination brand effectiveness, and destination brand measurement, Gartner & Ruzzier (2011) to brand equity (BE), evaluation, measurement and tourism destination performance, while Boo, Busser & Baloglu (2009) to all six terms. Consequently, a critical review of the literature would unveil if the term actually adopted is related to the construct used to measure the effectiveness of a destination brand.

Table 3
Terminology Used

(Destination/ Brand/ Place…)	Frequencies = 93 (N=43)	Percentage (%)
…Equity	33	35.48
…Evaluation	16	17.20
…Effectiveness	5	5.38
…Performance	21	22.58
…Measurement	13	13.98
…Assessment	5	5.38

Regarding the operationalization of brand performance, the construct of Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) offers a structured approach for adaptation by DMOs to identify the extent to which brand identity and image are related, and may act as indicators of future market performance (Pike, 2007). The reason lies in the argument expressed by Hem and Iversen (2004: 86) according to which "*image formation is not branding, albeit the former constitutes the core of the latter. Image building is one step closer, but there still remains a critical missing link: the brand identity. To advance destination image studies to the level of branding, the link needs to be established*". Apart from brand identity and image, often handled as intertwined sub-constructs, other measures are also assessed as components of CBBE alike. Among others, destination brand salience and/or awareness and, mostly, destination brand loyalty are frequently used in this case, while the latter has been seen as a function of not only brand performance but also of non-performance (Xiang, 2010). Despite the fact that others also incorporate the construct of brand value, or may use different approaches, like Evangelista & Dioko (2011: 3) who view destination brand equity as a construct comprised of five dimensions, namely, performance, value, image, trust and attachment, the dimensions most commonly applied in Destination Brand Equity (DBE) are mainly borrowed from the works of Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), as they have been summarized by Konecnik & Ruzzier (2008) in Figure 1 and assessed in the first part of the paper.

Figure 1
Categorization of CBBE measures – comparing two scholars' schemes (Source: Konecnik&Ruzzier, 2008)



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Although research in the field of CBBE follows the works of Keller (1993) and Aaker (1991), some important differences can be detected. The CBBE model appears relevant to DMO stakeholders, for which the financial measure of a destination brand would be of little practical value (Pike, 2007) with only few exceptions of licensing opportunities (i.e. 'I ♥ NY'). Competitive advantage and competitiveness, both also connected to other proprietary brand assets (Aaker, 1991), are attracting some interest (Yüksel, A. & Yüksel, F., 2001; Pike et al., 2010; Mechinda et al., 2010) in the literature of destination brand equity. Yet, destination marketers have mostly been focusing on brand equity dimensions other than brand assets, on the grounds that financial valuation is of little relevance if managers do not know how value is created from the customer's perspective and how to capitalize on it in order to develop successful brand strategies (Keller, 1993). Therefore, the dimensions on which they mostly focus include awareness, image/associations, quality and loyalty. However, instead of awareness, scholars lately may also prefer the brand salience measure (Pike, 2010; Pike et al., 2010; Bianchi& Pike, 2011), as "*a representation of memory structure providing an indication of the breadth of linkages between destinations and cues present in the purchase and consumption environments*" (Trembath et al., 2011).

Another useful finding of the authors' review is the proliferation of studies on destination brand competitiveness, satisfaction and loyalty which did actually stem from the authors' search. Although expected due to the linkages of each of the three constructs with destination brand equity, not all academic works discuss these theoretical connections. The present research originally aimed at providing an insight into destination brand effectiveness overall, therefore research efforts where competitiveness, satisfaction and loyalty were handled as "stand-alone constructs" extrapolated from the branding literature, were not finally included in the present study.

According to Gartner & Ruzzier (2003), there is a difference in importance for the dimensions of awareness and loyalty between renewal and repeat tourists. The results of a field research realized by Gartner & Ruzzier (2003) also imply that the dimensions of image and quality play the most important role in tourists' evaluation of a destination, regardless of whether they are first-time visitors or repeaters. Furthermore, following the example of Pike et al. (2010), cross-cultural evaluation of brand effectiveness for a destination, which involves samples in its closest and most important market(s), established long-haul market(s) and emerging close and long-haul market(s) seems necessary for successful planning. In fact, findings indicate that the destination brand effectiveness has to be seen in relation to the market segments evaluating it, the competitive brands (Pike, 2007) and the way it is evolving over time (Pike, 2010). Apart from these relationships and comparisons, however, the effect of specific elements of the destination brand on its effectiveness cannot be overlooked. In order to capitalize from destination umbrella brands, the effectiveness of its "sub-products", such as art exhibitions (Camarero et al., 2010), culinary (Horng et al., 2011) or wine tourism (Lockshin & Spawton, 2001) and world heritage (Poria et al., 2011), has to always be taken into consideration.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the published research is expected to provide conceptual and methodological recommendations to academic scholars in continuing scientific progress. The main contribution of the paper is a contemporary and comprehensive overview of the field as such. The 43 paper-review over the last decade demonstrate that borrowing models and interchangeable terms, complex linkages and alternative notions are the main characteristics of the literature on destination branding effectiveness.

In terms of terminology used, it is alleged that the use of numerous terms would be expected in a new and rapidly growing research area, although it does not ease the process of common understanding. Efforts should be undertaken toward the direction of establishing the pillars for the new construct to be built upon. Combined with the fact that there is congestion in its operationalization (specific attributes, number of dimensions etc.), the complexity in the field appears to be inherent. Nevertheless, it should not be underestimated that the initial theory from which principles were transferred has already been grounded (product branding) offering some stimuli for future research directions.

In line with what previous scholars suggest (e.g. Boo et al. 2009), even though the vast majority of the papers adopt are empirical or mixed (quantitative and qualitative method used in the same study), the exploratory character of this research field is still confirmed by the aggregated number of conceptual/normative and qualitative studies which is higher than the one of the quantitative-only studies. The potential for the

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research agenda in the years to come is really high since there is not a critical mass of studies discussing on an integrated framework which is also empirically tested.

Regarding DMOs' side, a gap is particularly observed in sector-specific studies with an emphasis on the supply side. Research up to date is mostly applied to specific sectors based on the demand-side, and more specifically tourists. This finding is also coaligned with the line of reasoning already discussed in the paper about the recent studies adopting a supply-side perspective.

In an effort to create a reference guide with the constructs used and the main research streams existent in the field of destination branding effectiveness, the authors carefully examined each scholarly work. Apart from the seminal works in the branding literature widely known and agreed upon, no clear pattern is unveiled in order to map well with industry reality and needs. A matrix constructed in accordance with current work, analyzing the construct used into its dimensions would lead to a complicated figure that would not add subsequent knowledge. Thus, research efforts should be further enhanced putting forward the concept of destination brand effectiveness and not only some of its attributes.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to review destination branding literature focusing on this specific field. It is anticipated to contribute to the rapidly evolving body of knowledge. Potential refinement of the study would be more than welcome. Finally, literature should be closely monitored and reviewed in order to track the first models to be empirically assessed and better understand branding endeavors in the tourism destination context.

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