

Tourism Destination Brand Identity: The Case of Slovenia

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of tourism destination brand identity from the supply-side perspective, in contrast to those studies which have focused on the demand-driven, tourists' perceived tourism destination brand image. Both researchers and practitioners have concluded that an analysis of the branding concept from both the identity and perceived-image perspective is essential and should be intertwined, where appropriate. However, this study argues that investigations of tourism destination branding have primarily been conducted from a perceived-image perspective. Therefore, the dearth of studies offering an insight into the supply-side perspective may lead to an unbalanced view, misunderstandings and oversights concerning the possibilities and limitations of tourism destination branding. It introduces a theoretical framework designed to analyse tourism destination identity, particularly for the case study of Slovenia.

1. Introduction

Despite earlier scepticism about transferring the brand concept to the tourism destination context (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy 2000), that concept has definitely attracted the interest of tourism destination researchers and practitioners of late (Curtis 2001; Anholt 2002; Cai 2002; Morgan & Pritchard 2002; Olins 2002). Although a tourism destination can be branded, considerable care should be taken in the transfer of branding principles to a tourism destination context because an approach that is too commercial might spoil place characteristics such as social relationships, history and geography which are used in the global context to construct identity and, in turn, contribute to distinguishing a place from its rivals. Raising awareness of the historical nature of the concept of culture in relation to the 'extraordinary' (Smith 1989), that tourists are in a search for, is relevant in the processes of identity formation at both global and local levels. Therefore, it is essential that the development of a tourism destination brand should adhere to a coherent theoretical framework (Ritchie & Ritchie 1998) and be jointly supported by its stakeholders.

The vast majority of tourism destination studies to date have addressed and examined the brand concept primarily from a demand-side perspective. This has resulted in numerous studies which examine tourism destinations from a consumer-perceived image approach (Hunt 1975; Gartner 1986 & 1993; Echtner & Ritchie 1993; Baloglu & McCleary 1999; Gallarza, Gil & Calderon 2002). In contrast, the supply-side, owner/managerial perspective on tourism destination branding has been all but neglected (Cai 2002). However, both scientists and practitioners who have investigated the branding concept have arrived at a common conclusion, namely that it is essential to analyse a brand from both the demand and supply perspectives (Aaker 1991; Kapferer 1998; de Chernatony 1999; de Chernatony & McDonald 2001). De Chernatony (1999) even goes on to say that modern brand analysis should treat both the brand identity concept and brand image concept as interrelated.

This paper study investigates the tourism destination brand from an internal, i.e., supply-side perspective. In particular, it seeks to contribute to an alternative view to the one-sided, demand-driven perspective on a tourism destination brand's image. Its main purpose is to examine a theoretical framework for analysing the tourism destination's identity and to apply the study's findings in the context of the tourism destination brand of Slovenia. The presented case is especially interesting because of Slovenia's recent accession to the European Union (EU) in May 2004. With the expansion of the EU both the Union and its individual member

states need to define their identity. How Slovenia, one of the EU's smallest members, is 'struggling' with the dual challenge of maintaining a sense of place, grounded in national identity, and the legitimate concerns raised about foreign influences that may irrevocably erode its cultural heritage is examined in this study. Particularly, how should Slovenia develop its tourism destination brand identity so as to find a balance between the forces of continuity and change?

2. Brand identity

Recently, much attention has been devoted in the business and management literature to the concept of brand identity (Ind 1997; Kapferer 1998; de Chernatony 1999; Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000). Although various authors have been unable to accept a common definition they do share a common opinion, namely that brand identity development is a theoretical concept best understood from the supply-side perspective. Kapferer (1998, p. 71) provides a very simple and clear explanation to gain an understanding of brand identity which underscores the significance of the supply-side perspective on the brand concept: 'before knowing how we are perceived, we must know who we are'. According to his explanation, the tourist destination, rather than the consumer, should define both its brand and content. The significance of a supply-centric perspective of brand identity is also recognised by the International Corporate Identity Group (cited in van Riel & Balmer 1997) and within the meaning of corporate identity proposed by Ind (1997).

The role of identity as a supply-side concept involving the decision-making powers of business owners and tourism managers is underpinned by previous definitions (Kapferer 1998; van Riel & Balmer 1997; Ind 1997). Further, some definitions (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000) identify the role of identity has having a dual purpose in analysing brands from the inside on one hand, and on the other to subsequently calculate the brand equity which involves the accumulated sum of the value consumers attach to particular brands, as well as their confidence in and loyalty to a brand (Arnould, Price & Zinkhan 2002).

Brand identity clearly specifies what the brand aspires to stand for and has multiple roles. First, it is a set of associations that the brand strategist seeks to create and maintain. Second, it represents a vision of how a particular brand should be perceived by its target audience (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000). Third, upon its projection the brand identity should help establish a relationship between a particular brand and its clientele by generating a value proposition potentially either involving benefits or providing credibility, which endorses the brand in question.

The multiple roles of the brand identity concept are reflected in investigations. For example, Kapferer introduced (1998) a hexagonal model called the brand identity prism. It is based on six central components: physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection or image and self-image. Later, De Chernatony's model (1999) adapted Kapferer's brand identity prism. The former conceptualises brand identity in terms of its vision and culture which, in turn, drive its desired positioning, personality and subsequent relationships, all of which are later presented to reflect the stakeholders' actual and aspirational self-images. In our opinion, Aaker and Joachimsthaler's (2000) brand leadership model is so far the most comprehensive in the literature for three reasons. First, the model is systematic. Branding can easily become overwhelming in the multitude of components and theories that play a role in brand identity development. Therefore, there is a need to provide guidelines enabling decision-makers to examine issues utilising a three-phased structure: a pre-analysis of strategic processes; a

tourism destination brand identity system analysis; and a post-brand implementation process. Second, the model is comprehensive, i.e., its brand leadership model underscores the subject in its breadth. The model covers both the strategic and visionary roles of managers rather than limiting the discussion to their tactical and reactive roles. It focuses on the issue of strategic brand control, i.e., setting out what a brand should stand for from the perspective of relevant stakeholders, including customers and subsequently communicating the desired corporate identity consistently, efficiently and effectively. Third, the model is pragmatic because it recognises that decision-makers should be involved in both formulating and implementing the business strategy. Both the strategic vision of the decision-makers and their corporate culture should have a significant influence on the destination's brand strategy. In practical terms, it implies that a destination brand identity strategy should not promise what a destination cannot or will not deliver (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000). While both the Aaker and Joachimsthaler model (2000) versus the Chernatony model (1999) are the most relevant, we feel that the former's comprehensive nature currently best suits the peculiar notion of the tourism destination brand context.

3. Tourism destination brand identity framework

In contrast to their marketing and management colleagues, a survey of the literature shows that social scientists who research tourism have somewhat neglected the concept of brand identity. The latter have placed their focus on investigating the tourism destination from a perceived-image perspective (Hunt 1975; Gartner 1989 & 1993; Echtner & Ritchie 1993; Baloglu & McCleary 1999; Gallarza, Gil & Calderon 2002; Konecnik 2002). Whilst these studies have helped by shedding light on our understanding of the tourism destination from a tourist-centric perspective, they have 'left us somewhat in the dark' with regard to the effects of the supply-side perspective on brand identity development, particularly in the tourism destination branding context.

This implies that the research which combines the marketing literature (focusing mostly on the brand concept) with the tourism literature (focusing primarily on a destination's image) is still in its infancy (Cai 2002). The most comprehensive and recent work to date in the literature which clearly highlights the difference between the image-formation process and branding was published by Cai (2002). This observation is significant because image formation is not synonymous with branding, albeit that the former constitutes the core of the latter. Image-building comes one step closer but it lacks a critical link, namely, with brand identity. By underscoring the significance of the brand identity concept at the destination level, Cai's work has identified the main weaknesses of previous studies which examined destination branding from a customer-centric perspective.

Further, Cai (2002) proposed a conceptual model of destination branding that centres on building a destination identity through spreading activation. The latter results from the dynamic linkages between the brand element mix, image-building, brand associations and marketing activities. Another advantage of the model is that it recognises that image formation goes well beyond the tourist-perceived approach to encompass the destination image, 'as projected by the destination management organization' (Govers & Go 2004, p. 168). Accordingly, it is possible to assess the gap between the perceived and the projected image (Govers & Go 2004). The assessment provides an appropriate input for building the desired image that is consistent with the brand identity and 'organizes social, historical, cultural and natural elements into a stream of impressions' (MacCannell 1989, p. 48). Within Cai's model of destination branding the marketing function's role is emphasised, while the

model does not go into detail on how to build and develop a brand identity for a specific destination.

Therefore, we seek to cover the management perspective on a tourism destination's brand by introducing a theoretical framework for a tourism destination brand identity. The framework we propose has its roots in the theoretical representation and interpretation of the brand identity concept introduced in the brand leadership model (Aaker 1991; Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000). The base principles, which relate mostly to product or service brands, have been incorporated in our model. Due to the specific characteristics of a tourism destination (Bieger 2000; Ritchie & Crouch 2000; Buhalis 2000), and our categorisation of a destination brand as a combination of products, services as well as organisations (Konecnik 2005), a critical evaluation has been made to gain an understanding of whether the specific elements of a brand identity represent transferable properties and, if so, to what extent. It should be noted that in the present study context some elements of the theoretical tourism destination brand identity framework have been extended to suit the unique nature of Slovenia, particularly its tourism destination characteristics.

The strategic brand analysis framework comprises three main parts: a tourist analysis, competitor analysis, and self-analysis. First, a destination must conduct a systematic tourist analysis. It should focus on identifying relevant new trends and developing a thorough understanding of tourists' motivation for travel (Fodness 1994; Middleton & Clarke 2001). Besides providing a general orientation of the world tourist market, this exercise should involve marketing research, in particular an evaluation of appropriate destination target markets and target groups. Second, a destination should also carry out a competitor analysis. A destination needs insights into the competitors' advantages and disadvantages in order to improve its own competitiveness. For example, by capitalising on what is simultaneously an opportunity to respond to existing tourist niche markets that the rival destinations have so far not observed. Last but not least, a destination should also systematically prepare a self-analysis with the aim to recognise its true position in the market. Therefore, brand equity analyses should become an important part of investigations within the whole chain of a destination's self-analysis. Destination managers should respect the interests and wishes of different stakeholders at the destination level (Bieger 2000; Buhalis 2000) and manage them through a co-operative approach rather than a competitive one (Buhalis & Cooper 1998).

The tourism destination brand identity system represents the process of developing a destination brand identity. The core destination identity should clearly incorporate the characteristics of the destination. As Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) suggested, a destination brand identity should include six to twelve dimensions in order to adequately describe the aspirations of a particular brand. At least one of these dimensions must differentiate the tourism destination from competing destinations. Although the dimensions can vary from one destination to another, they can mostly be presented through four brand characteristics: the brand as a product, the brand as a symbol, the brand as an organisation and the brand as a person; as well as through specific destination benefits. Due to the characteristics of a tourism destination, its brand should incorporate not only product and symbol characteristics but also represent it both as an organisation and a personality. Modern tourists want to experience 'a sense of place' when visiting a destination; experiential and symbolic benefits therefore play as important role as functional benefits (Keller 1993) in a destination brand's identity.

In a tourism destination's brand identity development special consideration should be given to investigating the specific characteristics of the brand as an organisation, which should address the topic of destination culture, its local people (Anholt 2002; Konecnik 2004) and their relationship with the opposing interest group – tourists. However, one should be aware of the recognition that culture is produced on an individual basis by residents and especially small-scale artisans and artists, and is offered by entrepreneurs to foreign tourists (Clarke 2003). Matching the scale of these disparate forces – culture and (inter)national tourism – in order that both prosper and grow through an (acceptable) change process is a formidable challenge. Another challenge of tourism is seen in its role of strengthening a destination's identity rather than erasing it (van Rekom & Go 2003). A well-developed and controlled brand identity which balances out continuity and change stands a better chance of meeting the challenge of sustainably developing a tourism destination's brand identity. It should try to avoid the threat of character erosion, i.e., the transformation from a 'place' of social meaning to a 'non-place' driven solely by commercial interests, which is a characteristic of supermodernity (Augé 2000).

The system for implementing the tourism destination's brand identity should initially be oriented to the brand identity's elaboration and position, and thereafter to its marketing strategy. The final implementation step is tracking the brand-building programme, which is connected with the first process of strategic brand analysis, in particular measuring brand equity (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000).

4. Developing Slovenia's tourism destination brand identity

4.1. Slovenia as a tourism destination

The Republic of Slovenia was established in 1991 and lies in the heart of Europe, where the Alps face the Pannonian plains and the Mediterranean meets the mysterious Karst. Its geographical area in Central Europe encompassing just 20,256 square kilometres makes it one of the smallest countries in the world. Although small in surface area, Slovenia's regions feature a great variety of landscapes, including mountains, lakes, coast and Karst. Such natural conditions offer ideal opportunities for the tourism industry, which is regarded as an important and one of the most promising sectors of the Slovenian economy. In 2003, Slovenia recorded around 1.4 million international and 0.9 domestic tourists (SORS 2004).

Several researchers (Hall 2000; Olins 2002) support the authors' view that Slovenia should apply a systematic approach to developing its brand identity to enhance the nation's brand value (Anholt 2000) and contribute towards building a modern and strong national economy. Hitherto no consensus has been reached on what constitutes Slovenia's brand identity despite considerable interest in the concept of brand development, especially on the part of the Slovenian Tourist Board. As the concept of brand identity, i.e., its presence or absence, impacts on the marketing performance of the Slovenian Tourist Board it should be its priority to define it in a systematic manner.

4.2. Methodology

Due to the nature of the research, a case study (Yin 1994) was seen as the most appropriate methodology. Besides documentation and archival records, interviews represented the most important information sources. The target group of our interviews was individuals who have lived through Slovenia's history and at the same time have at least some knowledge about previous branding strategies of the country Slovenia. Besides tourism organisations

(especially the Slovenian Tourist Board) there are three other organisations responsible for its marketing in foreign markets (Serajnik Sraka 1998). Our aim was to collect the views of leading opinion makers who represent the key marketing and tourism organisations of Slovenia. A semi-structured individual in-depth interview (Aaker, Kumar & Day 2004) was conveniently administered via e-mail to seven representatives of Slovenian organisations during the period from January to March 2003. Four representatives were responsible for Slovenia's marketing strategies as a tourism destination, whereas three representatives were responsible for Slovenia's general and economic marketing function in foreign markets. Although the number of seven representatives is relatively small, this represents a convenient sample regarding the criterion chosen for the sample selection.

4.3. Results and discussion

Strategic analysis

According to the respondents, Slovenia should more systematically investigate its competitors and, drawing from this comparison, take further strategic actions. Its biggest competitors are countries including Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic and Hungary. Each of these countries offers similar tourism products and attempts to attract the same target tourist markets. The respondents all agreed that, amongst these rivals, Austria should be recognised as Slovenia's main competitive tourism destination. Austria's main strengths are its superior quality level and excellent destination marketing capabilities. Its higher tourist prices represent the main weakness. The respondents evaluated Slovenia's effort better in potential tourist analyses. However, they shared the opinion that it had already taken advantage of information from secondary sources describing tourists' behaviour in Slovenia's target markets. Germany, Italy, Austria and Croatia are recognised as the main target markets. In the second place, we also have to target other European countries (i.e. Great Britain, France) as well as potential tourists from other continents (the USA, Japan). However, all respondents believed that, through proper marketing strategies, Slovenia would be able to attract more tourists from all target markets. On the contrary, the respondents thought that Slovenia should also investigate potential tourists' opinions, motivation and travel behaviour to understand in-depth their perceptions of Slovenia as a tourism destination and not only their average travel behaviour, which can be collected from secondary tourism research. Therefore, important information should also be gathered from primary tourism research. Both types of analysis should be combined and presented through a self-analysis of Slovenia as a tourism destination. Slovenia as a tourism destination should be analysed in the eyes of potential tourists and in comparison to competitive destinations. Recent analyses are presently not satisfactory for efficiently supporting marketing strategies in Slovenia's foreign markets.

Tourism destination brand identity system

Hitherto, the development of Slovenia as a tourism destination brand has been viewed for the most part in graphic design and slogan-led marketing terms as opposed to an approach which recognises a brand 'as the summation of the way' Slovenia operates, behaves and what it aspires to be and do as a tourism destination and sovereign nation. In the absence of a brand identity, the study respondents defined Slovenia's by its convergent boundaries in terms of geography, history and culture (Simon, Kulla & Zobel 1995). Its core brand identity might be represented by their following interpretation: 'Slovenia offers a mixed and safe tourism experience within a small geographical area which is, however, big enough to allow its

people's friendliness and their way of life to be shared from the sunny Alps to the green Mediterranean'.

The main identity characteristics should be presented as a combination of Slovenia's attributes, which will be further evaluated from the potential tourist's point of view. Therefore, a range of Slovenia's attributes should be combined to form Slovenia's heterogeneous offer (nature, mountains and lakes, beaches, towns and cities, health resorts, opportunities for recreation activities and adventures) with its 'active' component (Slovenians, historical and cultural attractions, nightlife and entertainment). However, all respondents stressed the extremely important role of Slovenian people, who should 'live the brand' (Konecnik 2004) and in this way allow tourists not only to admire Slovenia's natural attractions but also to experience them. Slovenian local culture and history, which is a mixture of Romanic, Germanic and Slavonic cultures, should be offered by cultural entrepreneurs to foreign tourists in a way which will strengthen its authenticity. Some of Slovenia's representatives believe our identity should also emphasise the safety issue of Slovenia's brand as one of our most important intrinsic quality cues of the Slovenian tourism brand.

Implementing the tourism destination's brand identity system

The last part of the qualitative research was oriented to the process of Slovenia's brand implementation as a combination of the proper marketing tools and strategies implemented in foreign markets. The respondents stated that all traditionally recognised promotional tools (advertising, public relations, sales promotion, indirect marketing) and tourism-specific tools (brochures) have an important role in Slovenia's marketing strategies in foreign markets. These tools should, due to the limited marketing budget, be optimally combined and developed with strategic aims for different foreign markets. Although advertising was recognised as the most important marketing tool in Slovenia's brand implementation, more than half the respondents also stressed the importance of public relations and the Internet. Contrary to the respondents' opinions, the authors consider the input of local Slovenian residents as a vital course of action. Their participation and assistance can support Slovenia's tourism marketing campaign, particularly through the provision of (fine-grained) information and hospitality Slovenian residents can help influence the awareness and knowledge of Slovenia as a tourism destination.

5. Conclusions

The importance of the brand identity concept is commonly accepted in the branding literature, whereas the tourism research line has so far mostly neglected this important perspective on brand investigation. Therefore, the presented paper underpins the tourism destination brand from the owner's perspective and thereby completes the many previous studies concerning investigations of the tourism destination phenomenon. Combining the previous findings of the marketing and tourism literature we introduced a theoretical framework for a tourism destination's brand identity which provides us with a base orientation for investigating our investigated tourism destination brand – Slovenia.

Although the Slovenian Tourist Board has undertaken many valuable actions in the last two years aimed at Slovenia's destination brand-building, a clearly specified identity for Slovenia has not been proposed. Therefore, we regard our suggestion for Slovenia's identity as a tourism destination as a very important step toward further brand implementation. The second most important finding of Slovenia's brand investigation from a management perspective is

seen in its strategic-analysis discussion. Within the topic of strategic-analysis discussion, we also opened up some possible and important areas for further investigations on Slovenia's brand. The last discussion, concerning development of the identity process, was oriented to its implementation.

The study results are subject to several limitations and qualifications. Further improvements are needed on the theoretical and especially the practical level. First, our proposed theoretical framework for a tourism destination identity should be further refined and developed. Second, additional investigations are needed in the process of building and developing Slovenia's identity as a tourism destination. Due to the lack of information on the investigated topic, we invited Slovenia's representatives responsible for its marketing function in foreign markets and asked them what represents the essence of the brand Slovenia. In our research the selected representatives represent just one interest group of the tourism destination Slovenia. Accordingly, the conducted qualitative research should be treated as exploratory. The next step would be to invite more representatives to express their opinions and especially to invite representatives from different areas which also constitute the destination's stakeholders. However, this is in our opinion a long-term process and we thereby regard our suggestion as a first step in further investigations of Slovenia's identity as a tourism destination.

Future research could replicate the study by surveying different interest groups of the destination Slovenia. Not only the commonly accepted different tourism destination interest groups (such as inhabitants, tourism industry representatives) but also other destination groups (such as ethnologists) should be included in the interview process (Augé 2000). By combining and comparing their responses we would be able to collect a comprehensive overview constituting Slovenia's identity as a tourism destination in relation to other important perspectives on the country brand Slovenia. It would be challenging to incorporate an even more comprehensive approach to its development such as ethnography (Meethan 2001) or some narrative analyses (Boje 2001).

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