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"A Comprehensive Exploration of Destination Branding's Development: An Analysis of Branding Literature in the Context of Tourism"

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Abstract: *Tourism revolves around engagement and destinations strengthen their credibility with destination brands. Branding has emerged as a central tool for tourist destinations, clearly conveying the various experiences that tourists can expect when they visit a place. This paper presents a comprehensive literature review covering various aspects of tourism destination branding. It brings together various discussions from the general marketing literature and reconciles them with the complexities of the tourism industry, highlighting the specific challenges of tourism destination branding.*

Keywords: *Destination Branding, branding, brand experience, measurement, tourism destinations*

INTRODUCTION:

Brands act as a commitment from sellers to buyers, embodying implicit promises (Armstrong and Kotler, 2014; Day, 2011). Fulfilling these promises is critical to building a strong bond with consumers (Schallehn, Burmann, & Riley, 2014). Brands are more than just names or logos; they represent how consumers perceive and emotionally relate to the product's performance and give it personal meaning. Therefore, branding involves defining individual identity and culture both internally and externally (Mearns, 2007, p. 56).

Branding serves the interests of both buyers and sellers. It helps buyers identify products, ensures quality and consistency, and allows responsibility to be assigned to a specific manufacturer. In addition, brands facilitate decision making and reduce consumers' perceived risk. Aaker (1991) sees the role of the brand as mediating signals about the source of the product and protecting both consumers and producers from competitors offering identical products, which is a valuable tool in the consumer's decision-making process.

For sellers, a strong brand increases the financial value of the company. Brands provide legal protection for unique product characteristics, facilitate market segmentation, and enable effective storytelling around the product (Armstrong and Kotler, 2014). In addition, brands help with product handling, inventory, and accounting. Developing a loyal customer base through effective branding leads to predictable and secure demand for the product, allowing the company to charge higher prices. Loyal customers are willing to pay more for their preferred products, often 20-25 percent more, resulting in better revenues and profits. That value creation benefits shareholders in the long run (Keller and Kotler, 2012).

Brands have been a part of business since before the Industrial Revolution (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2011), but in the 20th century, branding, especially through the creation of brand associations, became crucial for companies. Modern marketing stands out for its focus on creating different brands. To achieve this, new market research tools are used to identify and develop new sources of brand differentiation. Companies have created unique brand associations using product attributes, names, packaging, distribution, and other strategies. The primary purpose of these brand associations was to change the perception of consumers of goods from mere goods to branded products, thus reducing the dominance of prices in purchasing decisions (Aaker, 1991).

As noted by Mearns (2007), branding has evolved into an independent enterprise that creates a unique identity for an organization that enables it to compete effectively in the marketplace. For a company to set a strategic direction, it must focus on developing and maintaining assets and expertise. Aaker (1991, 2013, 2014) defines an asset as something a firm possesses that surpasses its competitors, and a competency as something a firm does better than its competitors. Thus, a well-known brand can be considered one of the valuable assets. Thus, when a company focuses on growing its assets and competencies, it is essentially trying to create a point of differentiation, which Mearns (2007) called the basis of brand science.

BRAND EQUITY:

There are many definitions of brand equity in the marketing literature, reflecting the complexity of the concept and the various aspects studied by different researchers (Cobb-Walgren, Ruble, & Donthu, 1995; Gartner, 1989; Gertner, 2011). The intangible nature of brand equity has made it difficult to develop a universal definition (Christodoulides and de Chernatony, 2010; Martin and Brown, 1990). One of the earliest definitions, proposed in 1988 by experts at the Marketing Science Institute, describes brand equity as a combination of associations and behaviors that lead to higher sales and profit margins for branded products compared to generic products (Leuthesser, 1988) . . .

A similar point of view was later presented by Aaker (1991), who defined brand equity as a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, which either increase or decrease the value of a product or service. the company and its customers. Keller (1993) provided another widely cited definition, calling brand equity the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to brand marketing. Keller called this concept "customer-based brand equity", emphasizing that it occurs when customers know a brand and have favorable, strong, and distinctive brand associations in their memory.

Similarly, Kotler (2003) provided a comparable definition focusing on the positive side of brand equity. He defined it as the favorable effect that brand awareness has on a customer's response to a product or service.

All the above definitions are consistent with the findings of the Marketing Science Institute (Leuthesser, 1988), which showed that both the product and the brand have their own added value (Jourdan, 2002). Lassar et al. (1995) interpreted definitions of brand equity from the perspective of the consumer and identified five important aspects in defining it. Those considerations are: (a) brand value is based on consumer perceptions, (b) it represents the global value associated with the brand, (c) its value is based on the brand name, not just the physical attributes of the product. brand, (d) it is relative to the competition, not absolute, and (e)) brand equity has a positive effect on financial performance.

Lassar et al. (1995) distinguished brand equity from traditional dimensions such as awareness, perceived quality, image and association, recommending a perceptual approach from a behavioral perspective. They identified five dimensions:

1. Performance: The consumer's assessment of the flawless and long-term physical functionality of the brand, as well as the structural integrity of the product.

2. Social Image: A consumer's perception of how his social group values a brand that adds value through the social reputation associated with owning or using the brand, especially in categories such as designer clothing and perfume.
3. Price/Value: The relationship between the price of a product and its features, where brand equity exists when the consumer perceives a positive balance between product performance and price.
4. Trustworthiness: The consumer's trust in the company and its communication, as well as the belief that the company's actions are in the consumer's interest.

5. Identification/Attachment: Refers to the consumer's emotional commitment to the brand, resulting in positive feelings, brand identification, and sentimental attachment to the brand.

Brucks and Zeithaml (1991) and Dacin and Smith (1994) also identified these dimensions in their research, which reinforces the importance of these perceptual dimensions in understanding brand equity.

The performance dimension replaces the perceived quality dimension previously used in previous models. Lassar et al. (1995) point out that performance is a more focused aspect than quality and defines it as "the consumer's assessment of the flawless and durable physical function of the brand and the flawless construction of the product".

Regarding image dimension, Lassar et al. (1995) narrow it down to the social aspect. This element refers to the consumer's perception of how his social group values the brand. This dimension adds value through the social reputation associated with brand ownership or use. In certain product categories, such as branded clothing and perfumes, this dimension plays a more important role in brand equity (Lassar et al., 1995).

The price/value dimension is about the relationship between the price of a product and its features. Brand equity is created when consumers compare a product's performance with its price, resulting in a positive balance. This dimension reflects the opinion of the consumer between the price and the benefits of owning the product.

Regarding reliability, Lassar et al. (1995) define it as "consumers' trust in the company and its communications and whether the company's actions are consistent with the consumer's interests" (p. 13). If consumers trust a brand, this dimension has an important value. On the contrary, a lack of trust leads to a lower value of this dimension, which can potentially reduce a brand.

The final dimension, identification/endorsement, concerns the consumer's emotional commitment to the brand, which is seen as a feeling rather than an action. This involvement is expressed in a sense of identification/affirmation with the brand. Lassar et al. (1995) define it as the relative strength of a consumer's positive feelings towards a brand, resulting in consumers identifying with the brand and developing an emotional attachment.

1.1 Theoretical approaches to model brand equity

Various research methods have been used to investigate the concept of brand equity. Academic research has mainly defined or conceptualized brand equity using three main approaches: approaches based on psychological, economic, and cultural studies.

Approaches Informed by Psychology

The primary approach focuses on psychologically-based methods. When studying the effects of branding from a cognitive psychological perspective, researchers often use associative network memory models to formulate theories and hypotheses. This approach is preferred because of the comprehensive and diagnostic advantages it offers. In this context, a brand is considered as a node in memory, linked by associations related to different forces. Previous research shows that consumers perceive brands as categories that become associated with certain attributes over time. These associations are based in part on the characteristics associated with the products that represent the individual members of the brand category (Keller, 2002, p. 6).

One of the most recognized brand equity models based on this cognitive psychology is the model proposed by Aaker (1991). As mentioned earlier, Aaker (1991) defines brand equity as the set of brand-related assets and liabilities associated with the brand, its name and symbol. These assets or liabilities increase or decrease the value that the product or service provides to the business and/or customers. Aaker's (1991) model distinguishes four categories of brand equity: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and brand loyalty. However, Aaker (2016) in his more recent work maintains the same definition of brand equity, but emphasizes three main dimensions: brand visibility, which includes brand awareness and credibility, brand associations, and customer loyalty.

Another perspective rooted in cognitive psychology comes from Keller (1993, 1998). Keller approaches brand equity from the perspective of consumer behavior and calls it customer-based brand equity (CBBE). According to Keller's model, a brand has positive customer-oriented brand equity when customers respond more favorably to the product and its marketing strategies when the brand is recognized than when it is not. Customer-oriented brand value is created when the consumer has high awareness and knowledge of the brand and has strong, favorable and distinctive brand associations in his memory (Keller, 2002, p. 7). In Keller's model, brand knowledge plays a central role as a critical antecedent of brand equity and is theoretically considered to be the node of the brand in memory.

Keller (1993, 1998) presented an alternative perspective based on cognitive psychology known as customer-based brand equity (CBBE). In this model, brand equity is viewed from the perspective of consumer behavior. According to Keller, a brand exhibits positive customer-centric brand equity when customers respond more positively to the product and its marketing when the brand is recognized than when it is not. This positive brand equity occurs when consumers are highly aware and familiar with the brand and have strong, favorable and distinctive brand associations in their memory (Keller, 2002, p. 7). In Keller's model, brand knowledge plays a critical role as an antecedent of brand equity and is understood as a brand in memory.

Keller (2008) used the influential associative network memory model developed by psychologists to explain his model. This memory model consists of a network of nodes and links. Nodes store information and concepts, while links represent the strength of relationships between information and concepts. According to brand knowledge, a brand node in memory would be associated with various associations associated with that brand. For example, when consumers think of Apple computers, they may have associations such as "creative" and "usable" (Keller, 2008). Similarly, other brands such as Volvo's "safety" and Mercedes Benz's "status" can also be associated with certain characteristics (Keller, 2008).

Brand awareness refers to the strength of the brand node and refers to consumers' ability to recognize the brand. Brand image, on the other hand, reflects consumers' perception of the brand based on associations stored in their memories. These brand associations are interconnected data nodes that are related to the brand node and contain the meaning of the brand to consumers (Keller, 1993).

Keller (2008) further explained that customer-oriented brand equity involves a sequential process with different steps, each of which is based on the goals achieved with the previous one. In the first phase, the goal is to develop brand visibility, which focuses on increasing brand recognition. In the second stage, the meaning of the brand is created, which consists of two building blocks: performance (related to tangible product aspects) and image (related to intangible aspects of the brand). The third stage, called response, involves judgments (personal opinions of consumers and evaluations of the brand) and emotions (emotional reactions of customers to the brand). The purpose of this stage is to generate positive reactions to the brand. Finally, the fourth and last stage is resonance, which aims to create strong and active brand loyalty (Keller, 2008).

Approaches Informed by Economics

Another approach, as mentioned before, is related to the financial perspective. Erdem and Swait (1998) demonstrate this approach in their research. These authors adopt a knowledge economic perspective to understand how consumers attribute value or equity to brands. According to this view, trustworthiness is a key factor that determines what they call "customer-based brand equity". According to Erdem and Swait (1998), when consumers face uncertainty about product attributes, firms can use brands to convey information about the status of the products and convey the credibility of their product claims. In this context, brand content, clarity, and credibility act as indicators of product position. These three factors can improve the perceived quality of a brand and reduce information costs and consumers' perceived risk (Erdem and Swait, 1998).

As a result, perceived quality and risk and information costs improve in expected utility of consumers, which is essentially the added value that the brand brings to the product.

Approaches Informed by Cultural Studies:

This method is based on brand research that includes cultural and anthropological perspectives. A place derives its identity from its culture, and branding any place must consider understanding the culture(s) that define that place (Evans, 2003). Some scholars focus on examining the broader cultural meaning of brands and products. Branding can be seen in tangible objects that represent cultures. Throughout history, objects such as sword blades and wine glasses have been decorated to confirm their authenticity. Brands are reflections of companies that respond to the desires of a particular culture (Schroeder, 2009). Researchers such as Keller (2002) delved into topics such as brand communities, brand relationships, consumer perceptions, and the influence of cultural background on the consumer's subconscious.

Each of these three approaches has its strengths and weaknesses. However, examining these three different methods can provide a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of branding and brand equity (Keller, 2002, p. 9).

1.2 Measuring brand equity:

There have been many attempts to develop measures of brand equity and researchers have adopted different perspectives (Jenkins, 1999). Consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) is assessed using both direct and indirect approaches. The direct approach aims to measure CBBE by directly focusing on consumer preferences or goods (Christodoulides and de Chernatonyy, 2010). This method aims to measure CBBE by examining how brand knowledge affects consumer reactions to different elements of the marketing mix. In contrast, the implicit approach measures potential sources of brand equity by identifying and monitoring consumers' brand knowledge and includes thoughts, beliefs, images, and perceptions (Keller, 2002).

To separate brand value from product value, direct approaches use experiments to measure the effect of brand knowledge on consumer responses to the marketing mix. In these experiments, one group of consumers responds to an element of the marketing mix associated with a specific brand, while another group responds to the same element but associated with an unknown or fictitious brand. By comparing these responses, in addition to familiarity with the main product, an assessment of brand-specific effects can be made (Keller, 1993).

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An alternative direct approach to measuring CBBE involves using a multi-attribute model. One prominent approach developed by Park and Srinivasan (1994) uses a survey-based method to measure brand equity at the individual consumer level based on a multi-attribute preference model. This method involves obtaining everyone's general brand preference and multi-specific brand preference based on objectively measured attribute levels. By scaling both preference dimensions and subtracting multifactor brand preference from total brand preference, measures of individual-level brand equity are derived (Park and Srinivasan, 1994, p. 272). This model also divides brand equity into attribute-based and non-attribute-based components. The attribute-based component refers to the effect of branding strategies on consumer attribute perceptions, while the attribute-based component concerns brand associations that are not directly related to product attributes (Park and Srinivasan, 1994).

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Indirect approaches, on the other hand, take brand equity more holistically. They try to measure brand equity through its obvious dimensions or performance variables such as price premium (Christodoulides and de Chernatony, 2010). One widely cited approach in this category is that presented by Vázquez, Del Río, and Iglesias (2002). Their proposed measure focuses on the benefits consumers receive from the brand after purchase, including both functional and symbolic benefits. Identifying the four main dimensions of Vázquez et al. (2002) helps to assess the sources of a company's brand equity and allows a comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of brands compared to competitors. It takes into account both the functional benefits associated with the product and the symbolic benefits associated with the product, as well as the functional benefits associated with the brand and the symbolic benefits associated with the brand name.

In 2007, Koçak, Abimbola, and Özer Vázquez and others (2002) reproduced the scale in a different cultural context. Their findings suggest that cultural conditions influence consumer evaluation, which means that global brands must be flexible enough to adapt to cultural differences and adapt to different product preferences of consumers. These findings are consistent with theories that suggest that while customers may value brands in different cultures, it is not enough that seemingly similar markets are treated in the same way (Koçak et al., 2007, p. 169).

Another indirect approach was developed by Yoo and Donthu (2001) to create a comprehensive individual measure of brand equity. Their research tested Aaker's (1991) and Keller's (1993) concepts of brand equity. Their proposed measure of brand equity consisted of ten items representing three dimensions: brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand awareness/associations. One of the strengths of their scale is its suitability for different product categories without further adjustments. In addition, the instrument is easy to control and retain, which makes it convenient to use even for brand managers. Yoo and Donthu (2001) adopted an ethical approach to scale development, ensuring its cultural validity. Their research went through a rigorous multi-step validation process. The only weakness noted by Christoulides and de Chernatony (2010) is that the dimensions of brand awareness and brand associations, which are separate constructs, were combined into a single dimension. Despite this, Christoulides et al. (2010) argue that among indirect approaches, the study of Yoo and Donthu (2001) stands out with the strongest and fewest weaknesses.

It should be noted that each methodology has its strengths and weaknesses, and so far researchers have not succeeded in combining the strengths of different approaches into one brand equity measurement method. Despite many studies, there is still no established "correct" method to universally measure brand equity.

1.3 Destination branding

Destination branding began to gain visibility in the late 1990s when the Travel and Tourism Research Association Annual Conference (1998) played an important role in increasing its visibility (Ritchie and Ritchie, 1998). Various examples of destination branding were presented at the conference, such as Canada, Oregon, New Orleans and Hawaii. Although the concept of destination branding seemed new at the time (Gnoth, 1998; Hernandez et al., 2016), researchers previously studied it as a topic of destination image research (Ritchie and Ritchie, 1998).

As early as the 1980s, cities such as New York and Glasgow laid the groundwork for destination branding through image-building marketing efforts using slogans such as "I love New York" and "Glasgow is a mile better" (Morgan et al., 2011).). Following in the footsteps of these successful strategies, destinations such as Spain, Hong Kong and Australia have adopted a strategic approach to brand development. Later, cities such as Las Vegas, Seattle and Pittsburgh adopted this strategic approach to improve their competitiveness, create effective decision-making frameworks and increase accountability to stakeholders (Biel, 1992; Morgan et al., 2014).

According to Ritchie and Ritchie (1998), destination branding is defined as: "a name, symbol, logo, wordmark or other graphic that both identifies and distinguishes a destination; in addition, it conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; it reinforces and also reinforces beautiful memories of the destination experience" (p. 18). That definition includes elements related to the concept of "experience" because it is important in tourism theory and management. The first part of the definition emphasizes the traditional role of a trademark in identification and differentiation. In the second section, Blain, Levy and Ritchie (2005) reviewed the definition of destination branding based on research conducted with destination marketing organizations (DMOs). Based on the definition of branding proposed by Ritchie and Ritchie (1998), they presented a new definition of DMO managers. The revised definition took a more inclusive approach, covering topics such as identification, differentiation, experience, expectation, image, consolidation and reinforcement. In addition, DMO leaders introduced new topics that they thought were necessary: recognition, consistency, brand messages and emotional responses. Based on these findings, Blain et al. (2005) proposed the following definition:

Destination branding is a set of marketing activities that (a) support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, wordmark or other graphic image that easily identifies and distinguishes the destination; that (b) consistently conveys expectations of a memorable travel experience uniquely associated with the destination; which (c) strengthen and strengthen the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; and (d) reduce the search costs and the perceived risk of consumers. Together, these characteristics create a destination image that positively influences the consumer's choice of destination. (page 337)

To gain a comprehensive understanding of destination branding, it is essential to recognize the unique characteristics that distinguish it from product or service branding. Destination branding involves the marketing of a comprehensive product offering that consists of multiple facilities and venues that represent multiple independent service businesses, both in the public and private sectors. Such a multi-faceted product necessitates the involvement of both public and private sector entities (warnaby, bennison, davies & Hughes, 2002).

To fully comprehend the difference between destination branding and traditional product brands, Gartner's (2014) highlighted that destinations are "places of life and change" which inherently makes destination brands less stable than most product brands. At the same time, multiple market segments consume destinations at the same time, each one creating a unique product out of the services offered. As a result, destination marketers have less control over their brand experience and offer different experiences to different travelers. Furthermore, destinations can’t be returned like physical products if a consumer isn’t happy (Gartner (2014)). This makes destination brands more risky as many of the factors that contribute to a brand can be changed (either intentionally or naturally).

Branding destinations have their own set of challenges, and one of them is the complexity of the decision-making process of tourists. Tourists buy a package of products and services, and there's usually a lot of uncertainty and a lot of money involved. Unlike with traditional products, tourists can't test the destination before making a purchase, so they have to do a lot of research to make sure they're getting the best value for their money. The destination image is a key factor in the destination selection process.A lot of the research has been done on case studies of destination branding programs, but it's not enough to just develop logos and taglines. It's important to understand the experiential side of things and how tourists make decisions.Hankinson (2009) said that a theory of destination branding is needed to give managerial solutions and to guide future research. He also said that some experts have tried to use core branding theories for tourism destinations, but they don't have the same attributes as traditional products and services.

The goal of nation branding is to develop a clear, emotionally-driven concept that appeals to different target audiences in different contexts. Emotional attributes, expressed both verbally and visually, reflect the nation’s spirit and common values, which are timeless (Gilmore (2002)). This spirit is shaped by the environment, culture, resources and economy. Nation branding should cover the political, culture, business and sports environments. Strategic place marketing is essential for positioning a country in the global market. It requires a knowledge of environmental forces and a knowledge of the country’s strengths and weaknesses.In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish places based on ‘hard factors’ such as infrastructure and economy, as many countries outperform in these areas. Instead, ‘soft factors’ like the environment, local people’s friendliness, cultural traditions and leisure activities are becoming increasingly important with tourists and investors.

2.1 Further discussion: Challenges in destination branding:

The development of a destination brand presents a number of difficulties for destination marketing organisations. A major stumbling block is the involvement of multiple parties in the brand development process, resulting in a lack of management control and a lack of well-developed brand identities (see Morgan et al. 2002). Furthermore, in addition to the issues previously discussed, destination managers have to contend with two additional issues: politics and lack of resources (see Pride, 2001; cited in Morgan, 2002).

The involvement of various agencies and organizations, including local and national governmental bodies, environmental organizations, chambers of commerce and trade associations, add political pressure as they try to balance their interests at local and national level. Combining creative advertising and public communications with the management of local, regional and national policies becomes a major challenge (Morgan, 2002). Misconceptions about nation branding among professionals and government functionaries complicate matters (Olins, 2011). Government functionaries may view nation branding as a way to promote internal cohesion as well as external economic and political trends, but lack insight into how the branding process works.

Another major constraint is the need to work within tight budgets in order to build global destination brands, and to compete in a competitive market.Destinations need to be smart in their budget spending in order to remain competitive.DMOs are hit especially hard by cuts in public funding as a result of the financial crisis.As a result, DMOs need to re-evaluate their experience, resources and management processes in order to reach their full potential.According to Fyall (2011), it is crucial for destinations to build sustainable reputations in the eyes of all relevant stakeholders and their relevant markets.

Another big issue with destination branding is authenticity. To be successful, your brand needs to be honest and have value. It should be an extension of what's already there, not a new invention. A country's position should be based on reality and the main truth of the destination, not something that's artificial or misleading.Another challenge with destination branding is measuring the success of your brand. This is a really important part of the process. Blain (2005) said that DMOs may not measure visitor perceptions or how successful their marketing efforts are because they're not sure what to measure or how it should be measured. They said that more research is needed to figure out why DMOs don't do this.

Measurement of brand performance is the last stage of a four-stage conceptual model for creating a target brand experience (Hudson and Ritchie, 2009). It's important to keep an eye on and evaluate the communication strategy all the time. Brand managers should be flexible and ready to adjust strategies based on measures of effectiveness. However, it can be difficult to measure the effectiveness of a brand strategy. One way to measure effectiveness is through brand equity. Brand equity has become a key strategic tool, and it's important to monitor and support it if a company wants to get the most out of it in the long run.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Over the past few years, destinations have started to understand the importance of brand equity and have started to incorporate brand theory into their destination planning. Marketers need to understand consumers' perception of value, how much they're willing to spend, and how they react to price changes. Knowing these factors helps marketers create a pricing strategy that helps to build and strengthen brand equity for their products and services. Perceived value can be a distinguishing factor that meets the following criteria: Generating customer value, offering perceived value and difficult to imitate.

For this strategy to work, you need to work with the different service businesses that make up the destination product. As Hankinson (2009) points out, the destination product is made up of a mix of buildings, places, and events. That's why it's important to involve all these businesses in the pricing and other strategic planning.

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