KEY CONSIDERATIONS WHEN DEVELOPING A COUNTRY'S TOURISM BRANDING STRATEGY

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Abstract

Brand identity, brand positioning and brand image are three of the most important concepts that need to be considered when developing a successful tourism branding strategy. A credible positioning is based on a distinctive and coherent identity, therefore the relationship between these two elements needs to be carefully managed. Also, the brand image is formed following the positioning process, it aligns with the brand identity and it symbolizes the perception of consumers. Thus, the successful development of the national tourism brand of Romania is dependent on the ability to create a coherent identity of the country and a distinctive positioning as a unique tourism destination among the competitors in the region that offer similar travel experiences and benefits. In this context, the paper presents the methodology, main results and conclusions of a quantitative research, that was conducted among 246 respondents in order to validate a conceptual model regarding the relationship between brand identity, brand positioning and brand image in case of Romania's tourism brand. The model was designed considering the most important determinants of the national tourism brand identity, namely the brand attributes, the brand iconography and the brand personality, and also of the brand positioning, namely the differentiation elements and the target group. The brand image took into consideration the benefits and associations made with the national tourism brand. The analysis and validation of the proposed conceptual model was accomplished using structural equations modelling.

Keywords: *national tourism brand, tourism marketing, brand identity, brand positioning, brand image.*

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, which has led to the accelerated development of countries under competitive pressure and, at the same time, of international market positioning, country branding and building a national tourism brand is a matter of great importance and complexity. Although it is based on principles very similar to product or service branding[1], country branding presents a special complexity and it represents a long-lasting process consisting of a set of programs that help a country differentiate itself from other countries[2] or, in other words, a process through which the destination develops and promotes a different identity from other destinations with which it competes[3].

Taking into account the importance of this topic, this paper aims to focus on three of the most significant elements that contribute to developing a successful national tourism brand, namely brand identity, brand positioning and brand image. Analysing the relationship between these elements has the role of pointing out how those three key branding elements support and influence each other. The paper presents, besides a number of theoretical aspects, the results of a marketing research whose purpose was to define, test and validate a conceptual model that aims to analyse how the attributes, the iconography and the personality of the national tourism brand influence the identity of the national tourism brand of Romania and then in what way the identity of the national tourism brand influences its positioning and its image.

2. The relationship between brand identity, brand positioning and brand image in case of a national tourism brand

In a narrow sense, a destination brand is "a name, a symbol, a logo, a keyword or any graphic sign that identifies and differentiates the destination"[4]. In a wider sense, a destination brand expresses the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination, thus serving to strengthen the link between the visitor and the

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[1] Popescu, Ruxandra-Irina, Corboș, Razvan-Andrei. *Creșterea competitivității unei destinații turistice prin strategii de branding.* Bucharest: ASE, 2013.

[2] Popescu, Ruxandra-Irina. "Rolul strategiei de brand a Japoniei în dezvoltarea turistică a țării." *Revista Transilvană de Științe Administrative,* vol. 1, no. 28 (2011): 144-165.

[3] Cosma, Smaranda. "Romanian Tourism Brand." *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai, Negotia,* Liv, 3 (2009): 19-29.

[4] Stăncioiu, F., Teodorescu, N., Pârgaru, I., Vlădoi, A.D., Băltescu, C. "Imaginea destinației turistice-element de susținere în construcția brandului turistic regional. Studiu de caz: Muntenia." *Economie teoretică și aplicată*, vol. XVIII, no. 2 (2011): 140.

destination[5]. Viewed from the visitor's perspective, the destination brand refers to the personality of the place and the emotional relationship that is established between the destination and the visitors[6]. Therefore, the destination branding is a powerful marketing tool[7], which establishes the link between individuals and places or countries and ensures the visitors of the quality of the experience, while providing a way for destinations to establish a unique proposal in the minds of individuals[8].

At the base of building a country's tourism brand there are two key concepts: the identity and the image of the country, "brand identity and brand image being the ingredients needed for a successful destination branding"[9]. Brand identity must be understood as being created by the organizations dealing with the destination marketing, while brand image exists primarily in the minds of consumers. The identity of a tourism destination can be defined as "the main mean of identification, but also the source of the associations made by the consumer"[10], the identity being the one "creating a relationship between the brand and consumers, proposing a value that consists of functional and emotional benefits"[11]. The ultimate goal of any marketing program designed to develop a national tourism brand is to interweave the identity and the image so that the brand image to be a reflection of brand identity. Thus, destination marketing must reduce the gap between what an area truly is (identity), what visitors think about it (the image) and how it wishes to be perceived by outsiders (the brand or desired reputation)[12].

In the context of marketing 3.0, characterized by value orientation and people viewed as a whole, not only as potential/actual consumers, Kotler, Kartajaya, and Setiawan (2010) define a new brand model focused on three dimensions (Figure 1), represented in the form of a triangle, in which besides the brand, the positioning and the differentiation process, are also included three more elements (3i): brand identity, brand integrity and brand image.

According to this model, it is very important for any brand how it is positioned and differentiated on a market. Through the positioning process, the brand identity is made known and the way the brand is positioned should be unique and relevant to the consumers. At the same time, positioning is in close relationship with differentiation, which gives the

consumer the opportunity to check the extent to which the brand promises are respected. Differentiation is generated by the total, functional and emotional, experience which the consumer has with the brand[13]. Regarding the brand integrity, this is in fact the brand credibility, the extent to which it retains its promises, while the brand image represents "acquiring a substantial part of the consumer's affection"[14].

Figure 1. Components of the 3i model
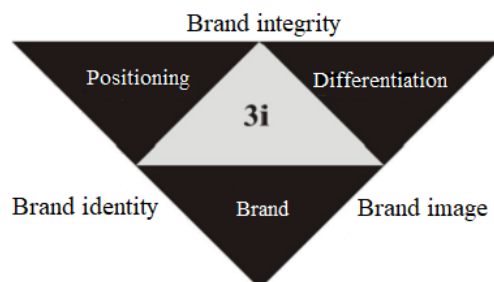
Source: Kotler, Kartajaya, and Setiawan, "Marketing 3.0", 59.

Analysing another model (Figure 2), proposed by Damnjanovic et al., (2009), it can be more clearly and linearly observed the relationship between the identity, positioning and image of the destination brand.

Figure 2. The relationship between brand identity, brand positioning and brand image
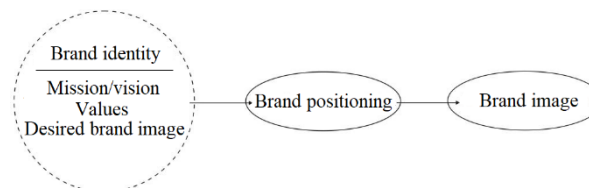
Source: Damnjanovic, Kravic, and Razek, "Tourism Branding", 107.

This model proposes a framework for building a branding strategy for a destination. According to this model, the brand identity is composed of the mission/vision, values and desired brand image, leading to a desired positioning, while the brand image is formed following the positioning process and represents "the current image of the brand on the market"[15]. Positioning involves "identifying the brand elements that are important for a better positioning of the destination brand on the market, as well as an

[5] Stăncioiu, F., Teodorescu, N., Pârgaru, I., Vlădoi, A.D., Băltescu, C. "*Imaginea destinaţiei*", 140.

[6] Briciu, Victor Alexandru. "Differences between Places Branding and Destination Branding Strategy Development." Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov, series VII, vol. 6 (55), no. 1 (2013).

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[10] Nedelea, A.M., Brânduşoiu, C., Candrea, A.N., Cotîrlea, D.A., Dragolea L.L., Isac, F., Mazilu, M., Rusu, S., *Turism: Teorie şi practică*, Bucharest: Casa Cărţii de Ştiinţă, 2014: 120.

[11] Nicolaescu, Luminita. *Imaginea României sub lupă! Branding şi rebranding de ţară*. Bucharest: ASE, 2008.

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[13] Alexe, Florin-Alexandru. *"Branding de oraş. Studiu de caz: Bucureşti."* Ph.D. Thesis, Romania, 2013.

[14] Kotler, P.; Kartajaya, H.; Setiawan, I. *Marketing 3.0: de la produs la consumator şi la spiritul uman*. Bucharest: Publica, 2010: 60

[15] Pike, Steven. *Destination Marketing Organisation*, London: Elsevier, 2004.

effective communication to target groups"[16]. Therefore, the positioning strategy "represents the act of designing the offer and the image of a company so that it occupies a distinct and appreciable place in the attention of the target buyers"[17] starting from what already exists in the mind of the consumer.

3. Romania's tourism brand

In 2010, the new tourism brand of Romania was launched, under the slogan "explore the Carpathian garden". The campaign for promoting the new tourism brand was part of a large project, financed by European funds, whose objective was to create a positive image of Romania by realizing and promoting the country's tourism brand and by increasing the attractiveness of our country internationally. The Romanian Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism developed a Model of the National Brand and created a strategy regarding the positioning of the national tourism brand on the international market. Through the National Brand Model the Ministry designed a brand iconography, established and defined the target group, established the frame of reference (namely what Romania can offer to visitors and the benefits that the traveller gets), identified the key differentiators and the arguments that support and determine the credibility of the differentiation elements, and determined the attributes, benefits and brand personality[18].

4. Research methodology

The research presented in this paper aimed to study the influence of brand identity on brand positioning and brand image, in case of Romania`s national tourism brand. In order to achieve this purpose, it was developed a quantitative research based on a survey. Data were collected using an online self-administered questionnaire, on a sample of 246 respondents. Then, data were analysed using structural equation modelling (SEM) through variance method and partial least squares technique. Taking into consideration all the theoretical aspects presented above, the conceptual model regarding the influence of brand identity on brand positioning and brand image in the case of Romania's tourism brand was developed based on the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a direct and positive effect between national tourism brand identity and national tourism brand positioning.

H2: There is a direct and positive effect between national tourism brand identity and national tourism brand image.

H3: There is a direct and positive effect between national tourism brand positioning and national tourism brand image.

Figure 3 presents the three hypotheses, as well as how each variable was formed and measured.

All the variables were measured using a 5-point semantic differential (from 1-to a very small extent to 5-to a very large extent) aiming to determine the extent to which the respondents associated each of the research items with the national tourism brand of Romania. The items used to measure the variables of the conceptual model were adapted from the variables used in Romania's National Tourism Brand Model developed by the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism, as shown in Annex 1. The relationships between these variables have been proposed taking into account the model of Damnajovic, Kravic, and Razek (2009).

Figure 3. The conceptual model regarding the relationship between brand identity, brand positioning and brand image in the case of Romania's tourism brand
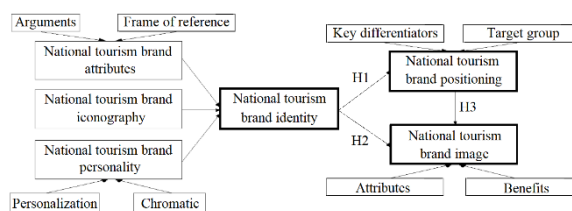
The variable *National tourism brand attributes* is based on the variables *Arguments* and *Frame of reference*. The attributes of the national tourism brand represent the totality of the descriptive elements that characterize the brand[19].

The variable *Arguments* represents "the factors that determine the credibility of the elements of differentiation of Romania"[20] respectively, what Risitano (2009, 7) calls "the culture of the destination brand". This variable is measured based on three items, selected from the structure of the Romanian national tourism brand model, namely: unique Latin-Byzantine heritage; high share of protected nature; one of Europe's most rural countries.

The variable *Frame of Reference* represents the benefits that visitors will gain from their travel in Romania. It is measured on the basis of three items: itineraries for exploration; destinations offering rewarding travel experiences; unpolluted historically loaded areas. The first two items were selected from the structure of the Romanian national tourism brand model and the last item was proposed as a new element

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[16] Damnjanovic, V.; Kravic, M.; Razek, T.A. "Tourism Branding Strategy of the Mediterranean Region." *International Journal of Euro-Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2009): 107.

[17] Kotler, Kartajaya, and Setiawan, "*Marketing 3.0*".

[18] MDRT.

[19] Keller, Kevin Lane. "Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity." Journal of Marketing, vol. 57, no. 1, (1993): 4.

[20] MDRT.

that would reflect the attributes of the national tourism brand.

The variable *National tourism brand iconography* is made up of all the representations and graphic symbols that represent the country tourism brand. This variable was measured by two items: logo and slogan, chosen based on the model described by Risitano (2009).

The variable *National tourism brand personality* is composed based on the variables *Personalization* and *Chromatic*. Brand personality has been defined as the sum of human characteristics that are associated with the destination brand.

The variable *Personalization* translates into those human qualities that characterize the brand.

The variable *Chromatic* refers to the totality of the chromatic elements included in the graphic representations (logo) of the brand.

The variable *National tourism brand identity* is composed on the basis of the national tourism brand attributes, iconography and personality. The identity of the national tourism brand is supported by the natural and anthropogenic resources of the destination, but also by the iconography of the brand and its personality[21].

The variable *National tourism brand positioning* is composed of the variable *Key differentiators* and the variable *Target group*. Brand positioning implies "identifying the brand elements that are important for a better position of the target brand, as well as effective communication to target groups"[22].

The variable *Key differentiators* represents the sum of the factors that give uniqueness to a country in relation to other destinations that offer similar travel benefits[23].

The variable *Target group* is made up of those categories of tourists that meet certain characteristics pursued by the national tourism brand model.

The variable *National tourism brand image* represents "brand perceptions reflected by brand associations preserved in the memory of consumers"[24] and is composed based on the attributes and benefits of the tourist destination.

The variable *Attributes* represents the totality of the elements that the respondents associate with the national tourism brand. The variable *Benefits* is represented by the personal advantages that consumers give to the attributes of the brand[25].

5. Research findings

The sample used in this research was composed of 78% women and 22% men, 36.6% were aged between 25-34 years old, 39% were aged between 35-44 years old, 22% were aged between 45-54 years old and 2.4% were aged over 55 years old. Regarding their

level of studies, 4.9% were high school graduates, 36.6% were bachelor studies graduates and 58.5% were postgraduates. As to the residence, 97.6% of respondents lived in urban areas, while 2.4% in rural areas.

In order to develop the SEM analysis, it was necessary to evaluate the accuracy of the measurements and therefore it was conducted a reliability analysis based on the internal consistency of measurements for all the variables, using Cronbach Alpha and composite reliability coefficients. As shown in Table 1, all the values of Cronbach Alpha and composite reliability coefficients are above the recommended threshold of 0.7. The Cronbach Alpha coefficients are ranging from 0.727 to 0.929 and the composite reliability coefficients are ranging from 0.802 to 0.966, proving a very good reliability.

Table 1. Reliability coefficients

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability
Arguments	0.727	0.846
Frame of reference	0.792	0.878
Iconography	0.929	0.966
Personalization	0.853	0.896
Chromatic	0.793	0.906
Key differentiators	0.735	0.842
Target group	0.781	0.802
Attributes	0.834	0.884
Benefits	0.919	0.935

The validity of the measurements was tested using predictive, convergent and discriminant validity. Predictive validity was measured through Q-squared coefficients. As shown in Table 2, the values of Q-squared coefficients are ranging from 0.784 to 0.991 and are all above the threshold of 0.1, proving that the scales used for measuring the variables have a good predictive capacity.

Table 2. Q-squared and R-squared coefficients

	Brand identity	Brand positioning	Brand image
Q-squared	0.991	0.784	0,908
R-squared	-	0,808	0,910

The convergent and discriminant validity were determined based on the exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. Before running the factor analysis, were conducted the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin and Bartlett tests. The KMO test has a good value (0.530), above the threshold of 0.5. Also, the significance value of Bartlett's test is under the threshold of 0.05, proving that the data are suitable for factor analysis.

The next step in performing the SEM analysis consisted in determining the path coefficients and the p values for all the relationships included in the conceptual model. In this manner it is possible to validate the research hypotheses. The validation of the

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[21] Risitano, Marcello. *"The role of destination branding in the tourism stakeholders system: The CampiFlegrei case"*, 7.

[22] Damnjanovic, Kravic, and Razek, "Tourism Branding", 107.

[23] MDRT.

[24] Keller, "Conceptualizing", 3.

[25] Keller, "Conceptualizing", 4.

research hypotheses is possible if the values of the path coefficients are above the threshold of 0.1 and the p values are under the threshold of 0.05. The path coefficients and the p values are shown in Table 3. As it can be seen, all the path coefficients have values above 0.1, ranging from 0.19 to 0.38 and all the p values are under 0.01. Therefore, all the research hypotheses were validated.

Table 3. Path coefficients and p values

Hypothesis	β	p
H1	0,38	<0,01
H2	0,19	<0,01
H3	0,32	<0,01

Also, in order to validate the model, fit and quality indices of the model must be analysed. In this case, the values of APC and ARS associated probabilities must be p<0.05 and the value of AVIF is considered acceptable if AVIF≤5 and ideally if AVIF≤3.3. As shown in Table 4, the model is validated.

Table 4. Model fit and quality indices

Indicator	Value	Validation
Average path coefficient	APC=0.400, p<0.001	Yes
Average R-squared	ARS=0.843, p<0.001	Yes
Average block VIF	AVIF=1.945	Yes

6. Conclusions

This article aimed to analyse how Romanian tourists perceive the constituent elements of the national brand and what is the relationship between brand identity, brand positioning and brand image. The conceptual model used in this research was developed starting from the directions outlined in the model of the Romanian national tourism brand, launched by the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism in 2010.

The most important conclusion that can be drawn is that the proposed conceptual model was validated. The research demonstrated that brand identity has the capacity to influence brand positioning and brand image. Thus, all hypotheses were validated. The model shows that there is a direct and positive link between national tourism brand identity and national tourism brand positioning, the value of the associated beta coefficient being 0.38. There is also a direct and positive effect between national tourism brand identity and national tourism brand image, the value of the associated beta coefficient being 0.19. The national tourism brand positioning has a direct and positive effect on the national tourism brand image, the value of the associated beta coefficient being 0.32.

Another important conclusion is that all the measurement scales that were used in this research are valid and the measurements have a good explanatory and predictive capacity. The R-squared coefficients reflect the percentages of explained variance associated with each latent variable. For the national tourism brand positioning, the calculated value of the determination coefficient R^2 indicates that the variable national tourism brand identity explains the variation of this variable in a proportion of 80.8%. The variable national tourism brand image has a calculated value of the determination coefficient R^2 of 0.910, which indicates that the identity and positioning explain the variance of this variable in a proportion of 91%.

Tourists choose a certain destination according to several criteria, and the image intertwines with the identity during this selection process. A tourist's cognitive and emotional evaluations are comprised of all the tangible and intangible components of that destination. Basically, the choice is based on the particularities of that place, such as certain tourist attractions, natural monuments, etc. (which represent the identity of the tourism destination), as well as certain intangible characteristics, such as the feeling of freedom or relaxation or other benefits (which represent the image associated with that destination)[26].

The process of creating a national tourism brand image is a complex process during which "a country actively seeks to create a unique and competitive identity in order to position itself both internally and externally as an attractive destination"[27]. The research results showed that respondents associate Romania as a tourist destination with attributes such as: rural character, authenticity / originality, welcoming character, spirituality, pure character and honesty, and the main benefits they associate with our country are: the connection to nature, health and relaxation and contact with an intact nature. In fact, the main argument that defines Romania from a tourist's point of view, was the fact that it is one of the most rural countries in Europe, followed by the fact that it has a large area of protected nature. Another important conclusion has to do with the visual identity of the national tourism brand and consists in the fact that the respondents consider that the slogan reflects to a greater extent the tourism brand of our country than the logo used.

The research limits derive from the chosen sampling method and from the size of the proposed sample. Therefore, the sample of Romanian tourists was not representative either in terms of its size nor its structure, the chosen sampling method being a non-probability method, namely the oriented method. For this reason, the research results cannot be generalized at the level of the entire target population analysed. Therefore, the research could be improved by analysing a representative sample of respondents.

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[26] Stăncioiu, F., Teodorescu, N., Pârgaru, I., Vlădoi, A.D., Băltescu, C. *"Imaginea destinaţiei",* 141.

[27] Nicolaescu, *"Imaginea României",* 16.

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- "Realizarea   brandului   turistic   al   României",   MDRT,   2010, https://issuu.com/mdrt/docs/romania_tourism_brand_values_and_visual_identity.

Annex 1. Measurement scales of the variables

Variable			Items
National tourism brand identity	National tourism brand attributes	Arguments	Unique Latin-Byzantine heritage; High share of protected nature; One of Europe`s most rural countries
		Frame of reference	Itineraries for exploration; Destinations offering rewarding travel experiences; Unpolluted historically loaded areas
	National tourism brand iconography	Logo	
		Slogan	"explore the Carpathian garden"
	National tourism brand personality	Personalization	Kindness; Elegance; Purity; Maturity; Innocence
		Chromatic	Green; Blue
National tourism brand positioning		Key differentiators	Intact nature/wild landscapes; Hospitable people; Unique cultural heritage; The authentic lifestyle of people living in rural areas
		Target group	I like destinations with intact nature and wild landscapes; I like to travel to destinations with authentic culture features; I like destinations where I can experience the lifestyle of people who live in rural areas
National tourism brand image		Attributes	Authentic / Original; Rural; Spiritual; Welcoming; Pure; Honest
		Benefits	Connection with nature; Health and relaxation; Contact with an intact nature; Discovery and exploration; Simple and good life; Experience of living culture; Contact with people; Escape and slowdown of life; Feeling of courage / adventure; Positive surprises; Respect for people; Safety