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**DIMENSIONS OF POWER AND COLLABORATION IN THE CONTEXT OF
DESTINATION BRANDING: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Giuseppe Marzano
The University of Queensland
Australia
Email: g.marzano@uq.edu.au

Noel Scott
The University of Queensland
Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present a theoretical framework for the study of power and collaboration in the process of branding a tourism destination. The study has the objective to discover how stakeholder power influences the destination branding process that has generally been discussed as a collaborative process. This research draws upon sociological theory and within it focuses on power and collaboration theories. The process of destination branding provides a context for the research along with the related concepts of tourism destination, destination branding and stakeholder theory. A theoretical framework that integrates these concepts is provided together with three research questions. The theoretical framework is useful in improving the efficiency of collaborative stakeholder based processes such as destination branding.

Keywords: Destination branding, power, collaboration, stakeholder theory

INTRODUCTION

Destination branding is a central topic both in academic tourism research as well as in the activities of national, regional and local tourism organizations. It is considered a critical part of tourism destination strategy and planning (Heath & Wall, 1992; Prideaux & Cooper, 2002) and in Australia, it plays a significant role in the tourism strategy both at national as well as at a regional and local level. Within the context of destination branding, the aim of this research is to reveal how stakeholder power influences the collaborative process of destination branding. This research is justified by several gaps found in the literature. In general terms, the analysis of power as a critical component of a collaborative process (Gray, 1989) and, specifically, the understanding of stakeholder power in the context of destination branding has not been previously studied.

Looking at destination branding as an area of research, Pike (2004) observes that ‘there is a lack of published research relating to tourism destination branding’ (p. 74). Recognizing the peculiarities of destination branding, Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott (2003) consider that there is a need to study the processes underpinning the support in the public and private sectors for place branding. Hankinson (2004) considers it necessary to determine the role of stakeholders in the development of a destination brand. Further, while destination branding is a collaborative effort among stakeholders (Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott 2003), Framke (2002) indicates that the meaning of collaboration has not been studied and understood in tourism. Within this collaborative context, it has also been observed that the study of ‘power, and the processes that structure its influence’ is still ‘relatively peripheral’ (Morgan & Pritchard, 1999; p.10).

Looking specifically at power in the context of the collaborative process within a tourism destination, Jamal and Getz (1995) claim that ‘the stages and implementation of the collaboration process need to be investigated, with attention paid to the development of appropriate structures for ongoing management of the planning domain. In order to address the above issue, this research aims to understand how stakeholder power influences the collaborative process of branding a tourism destination.

Following a long stream of epistemological discussion that considers tourism as a context for research instead than a discipline in its own rights (Cooper, Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert & Wanhill, 2005; Jafari & Ritchie, 1981), sociology offers the theoretical underpinning to this study. In particular, the theoretical framework of this research is based on the discussion of two parent theories such as collaboration and power. The process of branding a tourism destination is considered as the context of application of the above theories. Within this context, the concept of tourism destination, the theory of destination branding and stakeholder theory are discussed in order to link the discussion of the concepts of collaboration and power to the interactions among stakeholders in the process of branding a tourism destination. The unit of analysis (Dubin, 1978) of this research is the process of destination branding (Cai, 2002) as opposed to the destination brand which is seen as the outcome of this process (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Destination branding is defined as ‘[the] process used to develop a unique identity and personality that is different from all competitive destinations’ (Morrison & Anderson, 2002; p.17). A tourism destination is a complex entity made up of an amalgam of products, facilities and services that all together comprise the travel experience (Buhalis, 2003) and it is characterized by the interaction of multiple stakeholders (World Tourism Organization, 2004). Within a destination, the process of destination branding has been conceptualized as a collective phenomenon; a characteristic that is not normally found in the generic marketing/branding situation (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998). The tourism literature shows consistency in considering the process of branding a destination as a collaborative effort (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2003; Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott, 2002; Morgan et al., 2003; Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2004; Morrison & Anderson, 2002). Alternatively, due to the lack of clear ownership and control, the concept of destination brand has also been considered as a myth and a fallacy (Mundt, 2002). While recognizing the existence of different standpoint in respect to destination branding, this research fits within the general discussion of destination branding as a multi-stakeholder collaborative effort.

The involvement of multiple stakeholders in a destination is a common theme in tourism. The essential feature of successful tourism planning is the involvement in the process of multiple stakeholders (de Araujo & Bramwell, 2000; Gunn & Var, 2002). Moreover planning for tourism without at the same time taking into account the detailed needs of all stakeholders in the area it has been considered pointless (Laws, 1995). In addition, the interaction among stakeholder in tourism has been described as synergetic (Laws, Scott & Parfitt, 2002) and the destination brand has been considered as the positive outcome of the achievement of unity and collaboration among stakeholders (Prideaux & Cooper, 2002). The consideration of destination branding as a ‘highly complex and politicised activity’ (Morgan et al., 2003; p.286) is enhanced by the consideration that unity and collaboration amongst stakeholders in destination branding is needed to achieve consistency in the delivery of the destination brand values through a set shared meanings. This in accordance with Keller (1998) who maintains that the cohesiveness of an image is related to the success of a brand and it ‘depends on the extent to which the brand elements are consistent’ (p.166).

Collaboration among stakeholders in the process of destination branding deserves therefore to be described not just in normative terms (Evan & Freeman, 1993) but must also take into consideration the competitive advantage that the destination achieves through consistent delivery of the shared values expressed by the destination brand.

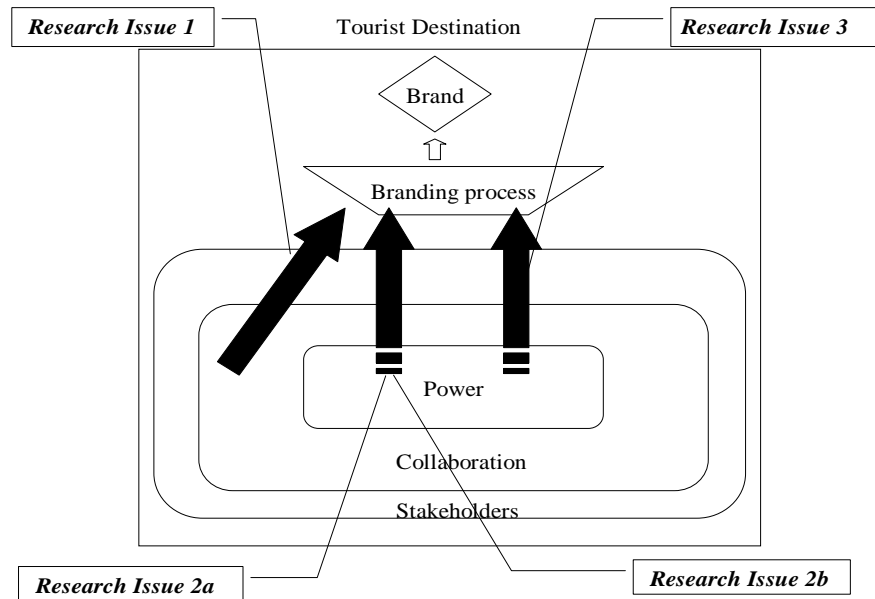
Collaboration ‘occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engages in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain’ (Wood & Gray, 1991; p.146). According to Wood and Gray (1991) the elements that characterize this definition of collaboration are the stakeholders of problem domain, the autonomy of the stakeholders, the interactive process, the shared rules, norms and structures, action or decision, domain orientation and the outcome. Trist (1983) maintains that stakeholders combine forces with each other in order to solve problems that are complex, wide in scope and beyond the means of a single organization (Trist, 1983). Through collaboration, domain stakeholders attempt to influence the course of shared issues (Selsky & Barton, 2000). It must also be noticed that a process which is described as collaborative does not imply that it is fully inclusive of all stakeholders (Gray, 1989; Wood & Gray, 1991). Collaboration theory and stakeholder theory are therefore similar in accepting that being a stakeholder is a potential quality and therefore being a stakeholder does not imply participation in the collaborative process (Evan & Freeman, 1993; Grimble & Wellard, 1997; Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997). As a consequence, in this study, it is not expected to find that all the stakeholders of a destination are involved in the collaborative process of destination branding.

The concepts of collaboration and power are interrelated (Gray 1989). A process, for instance, can be identified as collaborative if it takes place among ‘the most powerful or influential stakeholders [...] whatever their power’ (Wood & Gray 1991, p. 155). Following this conceptualization, power appears intrinsically connected to the concept of collaboration. The existence of power within collaborative processes has been extensively examined. In the context of urban planning, it is recognized that power is embedded in collaborative processes (Healey, 1997; Healey, 2003). In particular, while advocating, for collaborative planning Healey (2003) nonetheless recognizes that ‘all social relations have a power dimension. Just as social relations operate on several levels at once, so power relations are expressed in the dynamics of interaction between specific actors, in the deliberative processes through which some actors seek to dominate the way others work (as in the deliberate structuring of governance processes, economic markets, cultural practices, etc.), and finally in the deeper level of cultural assumptions and practice’ (p. 113). Power is here defined as ‘the bringing about of consequences’ (Lukes 1978, p. 634) and it is manifested in social relationships in four forms such as force, manipulation, persuasion and authority (Wrong, 1979). This research is focused in particular on understanding how power as a characteristic of a stakeholder (Mitchell et al., 1997) is exerted in the process of destination branding.

The following theoretical framework (Figure 1) brings together and synthesizes the literature review and shows the linkages between destination branding and the two parent theories, collaboration and power. Moreover it provides conceptual clarity to the research question through the identification within the literature of the following three research issues:

- RI 1: What are the characteristics of collaboration in evidence in the process of branding a tourism destination?
- RI 2a: How are different types of stakeholder power exerted in the process of destination branding?
- RI 2b: How can stakeholder power be explained in terms of the resources that every stakeholder commands in the process of destination branding?
- RI 3: How does stakeholder power impact in the different collaborative phases of the process of branding a tourism destination?

Figure 1
Theoretical Framework



Source: Developed for this research

SUMMARY

Multi/stakeholders processes are characterized by the coexistence of collaboration and power. Within the context of tourism, this research aims to understand how stakeholder power influences the collaborative process of branding a tourism destination. Drawing on sociological theory and specifically on collaboration and power theories, this paper has presented the initial theoretical framework for this research. Due to the complexity of the issues analysed, qualitative methodology and case study research within it appears to be appropriate method to further investigate this topic.

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