

COUNTRY IMAGE VS. COUNTRY BRAND: DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

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Abstract

This article was written in order to provide an overview regarding the differences and similarities regarding two congruent, yet different concepts: country brand and country image. The geopolitical context and, implicitly, the current global context require a redefinition – or a more complex circumscription – of the “country image” and “country branding” concepts. In this paper, the author aimed to highlight the characteristics and particularities of the approached concepts in order to shape a framework of the context within these two operate; a brief analysis of the literature is presented, trying to emphasize the slight difference between the approached concepts.

Key words: *country branding; country image; Romania.*

JEL Classification: *M31, M37, O15, J24*

I. INTRODUCTION

Places –generally speaking, including here villages, cities, counties, regions and countries- try to attract tourists, companies and investors and struggle to shape a policy for their inhabitants in order to build and provide them a viable community. Commonalties tried to face the continuous and emerging problems by increasing the number of economic development agencies in order to improve their condition. In the battle held in order to occupy a leading position among the developed economies, communities found out that other places are equal –or even superior- in terms of effort, knowledge and benchmarking process developed in order to meet economic growth.

In this context, positioning a place as a touristic brand needs to be done –locally- especially through information and nationwide - through persuasion and education.

II. METHODOLOGY

By reference to the research methodology used for writing the present article, it can be said that the paper is circumscribed predominantly to fundamental targeted research. Thus, the research methodology is mainly summarized to all appropriate methods and techniques used for collecting and processing empirical data and information, respectively to observing, sorting, correlating, categorizing, comparing and analyzing data so that it can be founded the addressed theoretical elements. In the center of the documentary research addressed in the present article lie general elements belonging to country branding and country image.

Information base of the present paper is represented by the research results, by the performed studies and by other editorial sources exhibited in periodicals and in foreign and local authors' works. Thereby, perceived as some of the most representative works in the field, Ashworth's and Kavaratzis' articles published over time represent some of the main guidelines of the present article; also, the papers written by Baloglu and McCleary (*A Model of Destination Image Formation*) and Beerli et al. (*Factors influencing destination image*) represent some of the main references of the present article; *National Image and Competitive Advantage – The Theory and Practice of Place Branding* written by Jaffe and Nebenzahl represents, also, one of the main references of the present article. Also, several authors and their papers were reviewed in order to identify different interpretations on: Bannister – Saunders, 1987; Martin – Eroglu, 1993; Kotler et. al., 1993; Szeles, 1998; Verlegh – Steenkamp, 1999; Brijs et.al., 2011.

Moreover, *Country Image in National Umbrella Branding Effects of Country Associations on Similarity Judgements*, written by Iversen and Hem in 2001, provides an unique perspective concerning the role and importance of country image within the branding process of a country, while Vaknin –within his paper, *Nation branding and place marketing*, emphasizes the differences existent between two different processes –nation branding and place branding, allowing –thus- to shape a comprehensive view regarding the complexity of a country brand.

Also worth mentioning is the work written by Jaffe and Nebenzahl, *National Image and Competitive Advantage – The Theory and Practice of Place Branding*, which offers a unique perspective on the concepts of place branding and country image. Taking into account the wide range of elements that are part of country's image and/or nation brand, for writing the present paper the author reviewed the literature in the field, among which books situated at the confluence between marketing, communication, public relations and history.

Taking into account the wide range of elements that contribute to the promotion of the identity and image of a nation, for writing the present paper the authors reviewed the literature in the field, among which books situated at the confluence between marketing, sociology, management, communication and public relations.

III. COUNTRY IMAGE

It has become relatively common in the last years that the subject of the image, in general, to be addressed in specialty literature. The scientific disciplines as sociology, psychology, philosophy tackle elements regarding the image, the general study of these appearing as an interest since antiquity. Nevertheless, the study of the image takes place in an fragmented way, within several independent fields, each dealing with a specific category of the image; according to the discipline within which the notion of "image" is addressed, it has been given different definitions. In scientific practice, it has been defined in line with the views of the author. It is to be noted that most studies avoid providing a generally accepted definition, clear and precise, this concept explicitly expressing in order to strictly facilitate understanding in accordance with the nature of the situation described (Echtner și Ritchie, 1991).

This theory is based on the ideas of William (1976) according to which the term "image" has different connotations, to suit the context in which it is used. According to MacInnis and Price (1987), the image is seen by psychologists as a unique way of information processing and recording in the memory, and its measurement is considered by Dichter (1985) as bringing real benefits to increase sales; he considers that in analyzing and evaluating the image needs to take into account several factors, such as individual traits, characteristics and/or emotional and functional benefits, etc., not just the overall image of an object/person.

According to Wunenburger (2004, p. 13), the image is defined as a "concrete representation, sensitive to a material or ideal object, present or absent from the perceptual point of view, which allows it to be recognized, known and understood." Generally, the image refers to a superficial build of an object, but is often seen as an indicator of the reputation of a place or object. In preparations for the existing literature research, it has been found that there isn't a self-contained area to investigate the image of a country/nation, but Mayo and Jarbis (1981) believe that the image is perpetuated when it comes to marketing and/or branding of a location.

Relating to the literature in the field of marketing, an image is "a set of beliefs/convictions, ideas and impressions that a person has on an object" (Kotler, 1991, quoted in Blunch, 1996). Papadopoulos (1993) considers that the image of an object arises from perceptions that people hold. As they differ from individual to individual, the image that each has in relation to a particular object will be also, in turn, different. According to Kunczik (1997, p. 41), "the image of a nation is formed by a highly complex communication process involving diverse information sources. [...] Those who create the most powerful images are international TV and radio, newspapers and magazines, cultural exchange programs, commercials, books, news services. Add to this education and travelling, i.e. the degree of personal experience related to certain foreign cultures that also has an important role in building an image".

Moreover, Hunt (1975) highlights the undeniable importance that needs to be given to the images of places/destinations/countries, as it transposes in the minds of potential tourists representing the area in question and thus provides the necessary impetus to visit it. On the other hand, Morgan (2003, p. 2) predicts that in the future, the places (destinations, countries) are the ones that will fight to win the hearts and minds of tourists. Although the country image doesn't have a standard definition, the authors agreed that each country has its own image (Ashworth and Voogd, 1997; Gilmore, 2002; Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002; Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2006). Interpreting existing definitions in literature on the image of a country/nation, it is easy to see that some of these terms give a small, custom meaning, while others cover a wider area, describing the image as an umbrella concept. The definitions found in the revised literature, which comprise the above mentioned elements, are found in chronological order in Table 1.

Tabel 1 – Country image definitions

Author(s)	Definition
Bannister – Saunders (1978, p. 562)	Country image is an overall image that is constituted by variables like peculiar products, economic and political development, historical events and relationships, traditions, level of industrialization and of technological development.
Martin – Eroglu (1993, p. 193)	Country image is the set of normative inferred and informational beliefs of individuals on a country.
Kotler et.al. (1993, p. 141)	Country image is the sum of people’s beliefs, ideas and impressions about a certain country.
Szeles (1998, p. 96)	Country image is an internal and external framework of the opinions and beliefs on a people, nation and country and the simultaneously objective and subjective psychological contents of eterogeneous and generalized value judgment thereof.
Verlegh – Steenkamp (1999, p. 525)	A mental interpretation of a country’s inhabitants, products, culture and national symbols.
Brijs et.al. (2011, p. 1260)	Country image represents all that a consumer attaches to a country and its inhabitants (and not to its products).

Source: own elaboration based on the references of the present paper

Given all this, Iversen and Hem (2001) have outlined a model (Fig. 8) when an image of a country is created in the mind of the consumer, taking into account cultural and psychographic characteristics of individuals and adding to these, the products from that country; they considered the definition given above Balabanis et al. (1996), under which the country of origin image of a product are the marketing concept which includes consumer attitudes towards different nations.

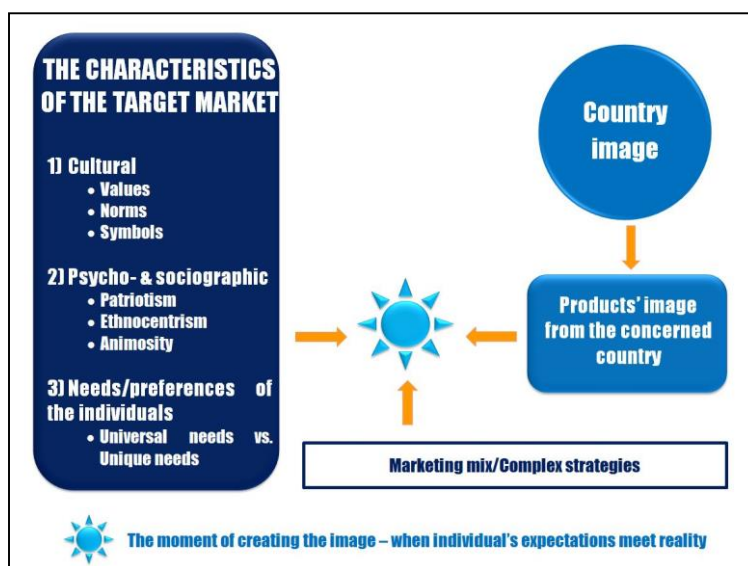


Figure 1. The moment of image' creation

Source: adapted after Iversen et al. (2001)

Balogu and McCleary (1999) found that in the forming of an image of a country act two distinct categories of factors: stimuli-factors and personal factors. Stimuli-factors are linked to external stimuli that the individual receives in relation to the country concerned and the related physical elements but also previous trips made by the individual in the country concerned; personal factors are related to social and psychological characteristics of the individual.

In 2003, Echtner and Ritchie have conceptualized the image of a country as a complex process through which individuals develop a creative mental construction based on a few selected impressions from a sea of information and impressions available in the environment. Reynolds (1965, p. 69) describes the creative process as the moment in which impressions are selected, developed, improved and put into order by the individual. In this context, promotion plays an essential role in the induced image formation - dictated, according to the authors Ahmed et al. (2006), by marketing and country branding efforts, but the organic image is situated beyond the area of control of the destination.

Beerli and Martin (2004), on the other hand, approached image forming through the country's tourists that are visiting for the first time, respectively through the tourists that perform multiple visits - Fig. 9.

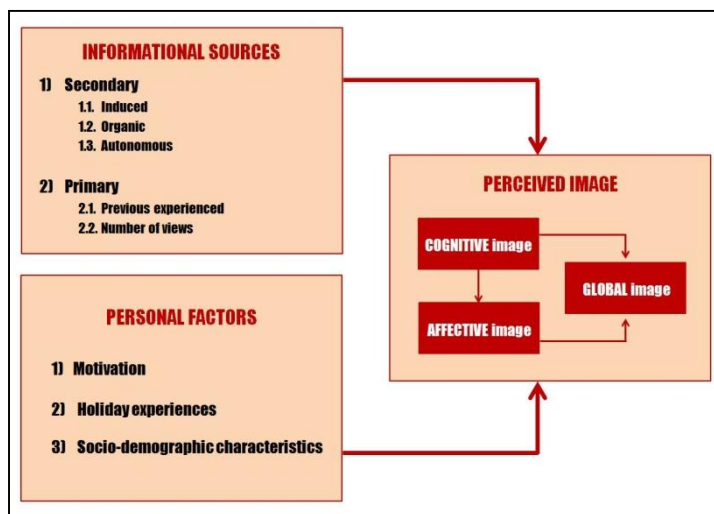


Figure 2. The model of image's formation

Source: adapted after Beerli and Martin, 2004, *Factos influencing destination image*, in "Annals of Tourism Research", vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 657–681

Considering the fact that the image of a country is rooted in its own identity, the creation and the change of that particular country's image can be conceived only through a revision of the past, through a return to its own origins, in order to try to express who its people really are and which are in essence, the representative elements of that specific country's culture and civilization.

IV. COUNTRY BRAND

The term "branding" has only recently been used in order to describe a process – more commonly were used the terms of "place selling" or "place promotion" (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2010); on one hand, describing place branding as an unclear concept and suggesting that "almost nobody agrees on what, exactly, branding means" Simon Anholt sustains (in his book, "Place branding and Public Policy) the idea that there is a lack of consistency in defining which the constituents of the place branding are. He defines the process of branding as being "[...] the process of designing, planning and communicating the name and identity, in order to manage the reputation".

More than that, Hankinson (2007) sustains that "[...] place branding enhances the development of a region or a place not only in terms of leisure and tourism, but also in terms of attracting inward investments, enhancing the existing culture and heritage, developing facilities for local residents, and welcoming new residents, employees and skilled migrants".

Wally Ollins talks about nation branding by attaching an emotional dimension concretized in the deliberate actions of a nation for building prestige and reputation by designing national identity in a consistent manner, respecting a certain ideology.

Considering Pike and Scott's (2009) opinion, the concept of branding in tourism was initially slow to be transferred but has been adopted rapidly over the past decades. Even if branding subject was approached in the international literature since 1940s, articles concerning destination and place branding have been written only 50 years later. The most developed trend in theory –and the one which is the most often used- is branding in the marketing of tourism destinations, as Kavaratzis states. In 2003, Keller (2003) mentioned that the branding function was so important that the focus of all marketing communications should be to reinforce the brand identity.

As Hospers states (2004), the success of the place branding campaign depends on three essential factors in the field of place marketing: the importance of emphasizing the region's unique attraction elements and its distinctive and competitive advantages, the investment in the public domain (in order to visualize the region's brand) and an intensive process of internal marketing before the external one.

The process of branding helps a country to define its identity, to promote itself, to draw attention and to differentiate from others. For a country to reach to have a strong brand, there are needed inhabitants who desire this thing; generally speaking, behind building country brand stays ambitious and visionary management bodies that perceive branding process as a strategic economic necessity. A country can be promoted in several ways: as

a tourist destination, as a trade or business center, as a quiet and safe place etc. It is thus necessary to identify the key attributes and strengths; other elements that can be taken into account target quality of life, unaltered nature, the open and tolerant spirit of the people etc.

In order to create and develop a destination branding process, the local authority needs to:

- delimitate the interest of tourists for that particular geographic region;
- analyse the characteristics and functions of the destination that is going to be branded;
- compare the potential destination brand to other existing similar destination brands and emphasize the differences existing between them;
- understand and anticipate which and what represents the main attraction for the potential tourists, why and how can it be capitalized;
- which are the factors that can influence competitiveness in tourism field and how can their influence be measured.

Country brand construction is based on clear, simple and differentiated proposals, often built around several emotional qualities that can be easily symbolized verbally and visually. In this context, is needed to delimitate the sense of several notions that surround nation branding process.

Considering that culture strengthens a country's identity, essential for place/destination branding are two elements that connect the country itself to culture: first that should be mentioned is “the importance of the image of the country for country branding and its power to influence even the shaping of the nation itself” and, secondly, “the heavy dependence of the country's brand on the country's identity” (Kavaratzis, 2005).

V. DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

Ideally, place marketing closes the gap between what an area really is (“identity”), what outsiders think about it (“image”) and how the location wants to be known in the outside world (its “brand” or desired reputation) (Hospers, 2004). In Kavaratzis’ opinion (Kavaratzis, 2005), through the branding process is aimed to identify the connections existent between these two different issues of the place, fact that leads to the union of the two images “in one marketing message”. Even with these things in mind, different managerial systems still make an important and critical mistake: the self-centered lack of emphasis on customer satisfaction. Meeting and exceeding the "client's" expectations is merely an afterthought - rather than the axis around which the planning, evaluation, control, and revision of the marketing mix revolve. It must be mentioned that in the current context the management has to concentrate on the development and cultivation of long-term relationships with their visitors.

In the context in which a country seeks to promote itself as a tourist destination, it is necessary for the country brand to serve as an “umbrella-brand”. As Papadopoulos said, “[...] once a clear, unitary and well defined umbrella brand is established, each of its individual components can follow its own path, with no risk of transmitting and promoting inconsistent messages” (Frost). These being said, we believe that -through a serious approach, performed with systematic efforts and in the conditions of the existence of an effective strategy-, each country can become an efficient "product", a well-sold brand with a directed image created among customers and tourists through proper branding strategies.

VI. CONCLUSION

The process of branding helps a particular place to define its identity, to promote itself, to draw attention and to differentiate from other places. For a city to reach to have a strong brand, there are needed inhabitants who desire this thing; generally speaking, behind building place branding stay ambitious and visionary management bodies that perceive branding process as a strategic economic necessity.

A place can be promoted in several ways: as a tourist destination, as a trade or business center, as a quiet and safe place etc. It is thus necessary to identify the key attributes and strengths; other elements that can be taken into account target quality of life, unaltered nature, the open and tolerant spirit of the people etc.

What is important to remember is that places have to offer visitors a memorable experience that would impress in tourists’ minds a positive image regarding that particular place; from here will result, because of the high degree of satisfaction, the people’s trust in that particular brand –perceived as place or destination-.

The actors that play an important role in the construction of a country’s brand must identify what the nation has “to sell” to those outside the borders and most importantly to make it credible to its citizens. James Grunig, one of the most important public relations specialists in the U.S.A., thinks that “the countries in which a large number of a particular country’s citizens live can find out information about that country straight from them”. Thus, the construction of a country’s brand must start “at home” so that, afterwards, it would have the desired impact with foreigners. The emphasis put exclusively on the image and identity of a specific country’s image promotion campaigns outside the boundaries, the nonexistence of nation branding processes to the internal

public and the lack of well-developed strategies constitutes several weak points of the processes carried out so far by the responsible actors with the purpose to build a country brand.

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