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Published in:
Advances in Hospitality and Tourism Research

Publication date:
2014

THE TOURISM POTENTIAL OF NORTHERN PORTUGAL AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR A REGIONAL BRANDING STRATEGY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to explore a potential regional branding strategy for the northern part of Portugal, emphasizing the regional tourism potential. Furthermore, it aims to clarify the answers of the following research questions: i) is tourism a strategic domain with the potential to integrate a branding strategy at the regional level? ii) is a regional branding strategy an engine by which to enable economic and social transformation in the region, thus responding to the contemporary challenges such as weak economic confidence and unemployment? To answer these questions, a content analysis on the policy documents: i) *Northern Portugal Strategic Guidelines 2014-2020* and ii) *National Strategic Plan for Tourism 2013-2015* has been performed. In addition, the article details the results of in-depth interviews conducted with two regional entities: i) *Tourism of Porto and the North of Portugal* (TPNP), in charge of national tourism planning and promotion and ii) *North Regional Coordination and Development Commission* (CCDRN), involved in regional planning and development. The findings reinforce the importance of tourism as a strategic domain to boost the economy and create momentum in Northern Portugal. Moreover, tourism is seen by the respondents as a key objective in a regional branding strategy.

INTRODUCTION

Places work hard to attract investors, entrepreneurs, talented and creative people (Kotler, Asplund, Rein, & Haider, 1999; Florida, 2002; Anholt, 2007)

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as well as tourists. Countries, cities and regions also aim to attract sporting, cultural events, recreational activities, and tourist attractions (Kolb, 2006) such as the Olympic Games (Andranovich, 2001), and strive for the attention and respect of the international media and other governments (Anholt, 2007). In addition, geographical entities also aim to develop their own communities and to gain and/or maintain a competitive advantage in the globalized market place, including the tourism market. Competition among places occurs since alternative territories can offer similar facilities and possibilities for investing, living and visiting (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2010). Therefore, in order to enhance their distinctive features, places have long been branding themselves (Hankinson, 2010) and tourism destinations are no exception (Pritchard & Morgan, 1998). This process, known as place branding, has successfully been used as a part of policies aimed to foster economic restructuring, community participation and cohesion, political engagement, and often to increase tourism revenues (Ashworth, 2011). As identified in the earliest literature on place branding (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; Kotler, Haider, & Rein, 1993), the three main target groups of a place branding strategy, if any, are residents, companies and visitors. Throughout this article, tourism will be the main focus of a branding strategy to boost the economy and create momentum in Northern Portugal.

Tourism has often been seen as a key element in the development of places, which have adopted branding strategies - meant to gain a competitive position and assert their identity - in their communication with potential tourists (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2011). However, tourism destinations are facing an ever-growing array of challenges and opportunities (Fyall, Wang, & Garrod, 2012), including Portugal. In addition, tourism destinations have been dealing with uncertainty at the environmental, financial, economic and social levels (Oliveira, 2013a).

These imbalances demand the exploration of strategic domains and unique/distinctive assets by emphasizing the need for long-term strategic thinking combined with the application of active instruments, which can shape a place into its desired identity. For instance, in spatial planning studies Oliveira (2014) debates place branding as a strategic spatial planning instrument.

Defining a place branding strategy involves strategic analysis. According to Albrechts (1999), a strategic analysis or determining a strategic position for a place is the task of spatial planners in support of policy-makers. Therefore, spatial planners play an important role in setting up a place branding strategy, which facilitates the development of

perceptions in the mind of potential investors, visitors, and tourists (Medway, Warnaby, & Dharni, 2011). Spatial planners, geographers, urban and regional researchers could facilitate the identification of the strategic domains or the potentialities of a place (Albrechts, 1999), including the tourism potential of a place. According to Rainisto (2003) planners are also prepared to establish strategic pathways, social and professional networks with stakeholders and communities, thus contributing to developing and reinforcing a place's competitiveness. However, places, including the region of Northern Portugal, are facing challenges in their economic, social, and political "puzzle" (Albrechts, 1999). As an attempt to address some of the regional challenges, a branding strategy is likely to be effective as an instrument to enhance the image and reputation of a region, and give it visibility as a whole. However, such a regional branding strategy is more likely to produce positive results for the territory when grounded in a consistent and integrated process, linked with spatial planning and tourism planning initiatives. According to van Assche and Lo (2011), the combination of spatial planning and place branding can preserve and create assets in a combination that promises a higher degree of stability.

The purpose of this article is to explore a possible branding strategy for Northern Portugal, emphasizing its regional tourism potential. This article aims to reinforce the strategic advantage of tourism in supporting economic, social and spatial transformation and as a response to the contemporary challenges the region, much like the country, is facing. For instance, financial and economic imbalances, and high levels of unemployment have consequent negative impacts on purchasing power.

This article employs a qualitative methodology. An inductive approach was adopted to address the research aims that are subjective in nature and are located within an interpretative paradigm. Firstly, a content analysis on the policy documents: i) *Northern Portugal Strategic Guidelines 2014-2020* and ii) *National Strategic Plan for Tourism 2013-2015* was performed. Secondly, two in-depth interviews with representatives of i) *Tourism Porto and Northern Portugal* and ii) *North Regional Coordination and Development Commission* were conducted in March 2014. The article is structured as follows; after a brief literature review, the article starts by setting out the current economic and social scene, and highlighting the importance of tourism at the national (Portugal) and regional levels (northern part of the country). Further, it will proceed with the current branding attempts in Portugal and with the interviewed entities' perspectives on the relevance of the potential of regional tourism. Final

remarks and managerial recommendations are presented in the concluding part.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Principles and implementation of place branding

Place branding aims to make a country, a region, a city or a tourism destination stand out in the complex and changing marketplace. In addition, place branding has been seen as being able to enhance a place's reputation and image to the outside and inside worlds alike (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2010). Moreover, it contributes to social and economic development. Efforts to foster a position in the marketplace have been encouraged by an increase in competition between places. Places compete to position themselves in order to attract more exogenous capital, leisure activities, tourists, entrepreneurs, skilled workforce, and new residents, and attempt to implement a structural change in order to become a better place to live, to work, to play, and to visit (Rainisto, 2003; Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2010; Hankinson, 2010). Place branding can be a means both for achieving a competitive advantage in order to increase inward investment and tourism, but also the means for achieving community development, reinforcing local identities and the identification of the citizens with their city, and activating all social forces to avoid social exclusion and unrest (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2010). Place branding is 'centred on the creation of a favourable image or the change of a negative or indifferent image of the place' (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2010: 237).

Place branding is a field of study for spatial planners, geographers, ethnographers, and marketers, among others. They may want to assert the existence and individuality of the place to internal and external publics, in order to differentiate it from its more generic competitors and thus add value (Ashworth, 2005). Place branding is also identified as a marketing-led strategy of economic development (Greenberg, 2008 as cited in Pasquinelli, 2010) and as a means to fit operational and strategic goals of places (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2010). According to Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2010), place branding is a highly flexible instrument for managing places, not least as a form of communication. In addition, it offers collaborative links between previously quite disparate activities and departments within place authorities at different spatial scales, from the national to the regional levels, as well as bridging the different ethos, working practices and approaches of public service providers and business entities (Ashworth, 2011).

Place branding comprises a relationship between governments and those they govern, as well as a relationship between people and places by redefining the identification of people with places, communities, and social groups. Place branding can be applied, regardless of scale or circumstances, as part of the solution to a wide range of often obstinate and entrenched issues, such as regional economic disparity, multiple economic and social deprivations and exclusion, urban poverty, physical dereliction and negative effects of the globalization of culture (Ashworth, 2011). However, place branding does not guarantee fast results. It must be implemented through a wider strategy for the place (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2010).

The focus of this article is on the tourism potential of Northern Portugal, broadly defined in terms of its contribution to a regional branding strategy. It formulates a place branding definition in the vein of Ashworth's (2011), van Assche and Lo's (2011) ideas. The author underlines that only a few other instruments, usually used to manage places, have such a wide range of possible applications, such as flexibility in spatial contexts or responsiveness to change, as place branding has. However, only recently was place branding added to the instrument/tool box of strategic planners and place managers (Ashworth, 2011). Following the research of Ashworth and Voogd (1990), Kotler et al. (1993), Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2010), Hankinson (2010), and van Assche and Lo (2011), place branding has been shown to better prepare a response to macroeconomic unevenness, general economic and social imbalances, and unemployment (through investment attraction, job creation, boosting tourism). After some theoretical clarifications, regarding the application of branding techniques for tourism purposes, this article sets the current status of the Portuguese tourism economy and discusses some of the ongoing challenges at the national and regional levels.

Principles and implementation of destination branding

The application of place branding to tourism destinations (e.g. countries, cities and regions) is theoretically identified as destination branding (Pritchard & Morgan, 1998). Cities such as Amsterdam (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006), Manchester (Ward, 2000), Bradford (Trueman, Klemm, & Giroud, 2004) have already reinforced their image among visitors. Countries such as Thailand (Nuttavuthisit, 2007), Costa Rica, Moldova (Florek & Conejo, 2007), Ireland (O'Leary & Deegan, 2003), and Turkey

(Kemming & Sandikci, 2007) have undergone processes of branding by promoting a positive tourist oriented image as tourism destinations. Regions such as Wales (Pritchard & Morgan, 1998), Western Australia (Crockett & Wood, 2000) and Florida (Brayshaw, 1995) have been branded as well with an emphasis on their tourism potential. However, the line between branding a country, a city, a region or a destination is narrow (Herstein, 2012). In fact, according to Caldwell and Freire (2004), people perceive countries, regions, and cities in different ways. Moreover, all of the mentioned geographical units could be, or have already become tourism destinations and, therefore, apply branding techniques.

According to Buhalis (2000), a destination is a geographical unit which is understood by its visitors as a unique entity, with a political and legislative framework for tourism planning, marketing and branding initiatives. Tourism destinations are inherently complex and a range of social, economic, legal, and technological policies affect their appeal, attractiveness, competitiveness and sustainability (Brent-Ritchie & Crouch, 2011). To be successfully promoted in the targeted markets, a destination is likely to benefit from a favourably differentiated image from its competitors, or positively positioned, in the minds of the consumers and potential visitors. According to Echtner and Ritchie (2003), a key component of this positioning process is the creation, management and communication of a distinctive and appealing image, and one that can be developed by a consistent branding strategy.

Destination branding plays a core role in changing tourism products, integrating stakeholders and communities, avoiding irritations, and responding to issues posed to places. For instance, such issues could be those created by economic crises or the fluctuating process of exploring, researching, confirming and sharing travel experiences (Oliveira & Panyik, 2014). The spectacular growth of tourism has had a significant impact on the development of parallel industries such as accommodation, transportation, leisure, services and hospitality within a spatial context (Gu & Ryan, 2008; Wilkinson, 2007). Governments and public entities, in several countries, including Portugal (*North Regional Coordination and Development Commission* – henceforth CCDRN, 2013a), had started formulating strategic plans for tourism planning and development by the 1990s (Hall, 1994), particularly for its economic benefit (Oppermann, 1997). However, the territoriality of destinations also changes rapidly with unplanned, informal and uncontrolled tourism dynamics, which often lead to environmental degradation (Loumou, Giourga, Dimitrakopoulos, & Koukoulas, 2000) and socio-economic imbalances among citizens (Chai,

Huang, Yang, Sun, & Chen, 2009). Hence, it is vital to find the right synergies and to implement branding as a whole process with strategic thinking - and placing the strategic domains'/unique potential of each territory, such as tourist assets, tangible and intangible elements, landscape and built heritage at the heart of the process.

SETTING THE SCENE FOR A REGIONAL BRANDING STRATEGY

In Portugal, despite the fact that the tourism sector provides a large amount of the country's gross domestic product (henceforth GDP) and overall employment, while enhancing competitiveness, and generating social impacts, the recent lower indicators of economic growth and current account deficits have characterized the Portuguese economy as a whole. As a consequence, this has influenced the economy of the northern region of the country. Weaknesses in the labour market, reflected by unemployment indicators, have held back productivity and hampered wage adjustment, making it harder to gain cost competitiveness, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development - henceforth OECD (2012).

The economic and financial crisis made macroeconomic imbalances unsustainable and the Portuguese economy has embarked on a challenging process of economic adjustment and reform. Exploring the most up to date macroeconomic information (Table 1) from 2008-2014 the real GDP growth averaged at 0.6 percent and unemployment almost tripled (OECD, 2012). In addition, poor export performance led to high external deficits and indebtedness.

Table 1. *Macroeconomic indicators of Portugal*

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014*
GDP (per capita in Purchasing Power Standards)	79	78	80	80	-	-	-
Real GDP growth rate (volume forecast)	0.0	-2.9	1.9	-1.6	-3.2*	-1.9*	-
Inflation rate (annual average rate of change, %)	2.7	-0.9	1.4	3.6	2.8	-	-
Unemployment rate (%)	7.7	9.6	11.0	12.9	17.3	17.6	15.1
Long-term unemployment (%)	47.4	44.1	52.3	48.2	-	-	-
Government debt (% of GDP)	80.7	93.3	97.5	96.8	-	-	-
Government deficit (% of GDP)	-3.7	-1.02	-9.8	-4.2	-	-	-

Source. OECD, 2014, Retrieved August 19, 2014; * 1st quarter

Despite a growing tax burden, public debt has also increased markedly, reflecting chronic difficulties in managing and controlling public expenditure, of which government-directed investment projects are a good example with consequences for the job market. The national government is resolutely implementing the ambitious three-year European Union (henceforth EU) and International Monetary Fund financial assistance programme of fiscal adjustment and reform (to end in 2014). According to the OECD (2012), this is fundamental to taking control of the on-going macro-financial adjustment so the situation does not degenerate into a deeper recession. Furthermore, structural reform would be able to support the effort of minimizing the risk of unemployment becoming structural.

The unemployment rate in Northern Portugal declined in the 1st quarter of 2014 from 16.4 percent to 15.8 percent. The industrial sector was responsible for the job creation that took place in this period. The regional employment increased by 1.5 percent and recovered over the previous quarter. The youth employment rate in Northern Portugal (15 to 24 years) stood in the 1st quarter of 2014 at 36.5 percent, a result slightly above the previous quarter (35.7 percent), but lower than the same quarter of the previous year (39.7 percent). In the 1st quarter of 2014 Northern Portugal registered 291 thousand jobless individuals, representing 54 thousand less

than in the same quarter of the previous year (-15.7 percent) although higher than the values registered across the country (Figure 1).
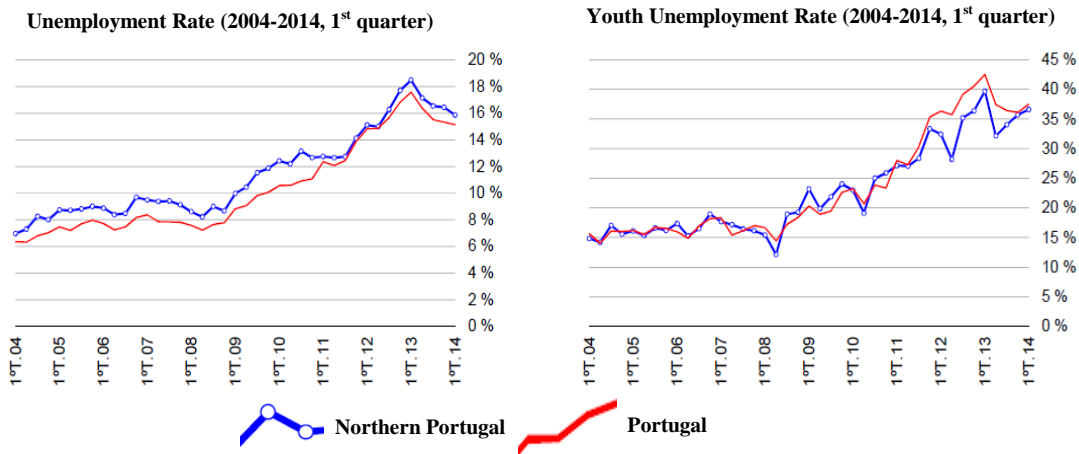

Figure 1. *Unemployment rate in Portugal and its northern part for the period between 2004 and 2014 (1st quarter of each year)*. Adapted from CCDRN (2014).

According to CCDRN (2014) in the 1st quarter of 2014 the average monthly net salary in Northern Portugal (€774) registered a real decrease of 1.1 percent compared to the same quarter of 2013. The average monthly net salary in Portugal is €58 higher (€802) than in the northern part. This result translates into an identical change in the nominal wage in conjunction with a zero average rate of inflation in the 1st quarter of 2014. In the previous quarter, the average wage of Northern Portugal had retreated 1.4 percent in real terms.

Key recommendations stated in the Economic Surveys Portugal (OECD, 2012) held that for the country and its regions, such as the northern region of Portugal, to restore growth, they should reallocate both labour and capital, essentially towards the tradable sector as well as to find instruments to enhance the key strategic domains. The OECD (2012) document states that tourism, technical textiles, shoe-making and the production of various national wines are key strategic domains to boost the Portuguese economy and contribute to regional development.

By looking to the current economic and social scene, integrating goals, and engaging with regional stakeholders can play a role in fostering job creation, attracting investment, and supporting the export sector as well as increasing purchasing power. At this level, and without exaggerated claims from our theoretical way of dealing with spatial issues,

place branding by emphasizing strategic domains, as tourism, is likely to be effective in creating regional momentum. Thus, the output growth will eventually be enhanced while avoiding high unemployment becoming entrenched and threatening. The regions of the country play an important role as well, not only as passive watchers of social and economic dynamics, but rather as mechanisms of national growth and development. According to Paasi and Zimmerbauer (2011), regions are constructs that work as background contexts for social and economic action. Regional strengths, which include tourism, built heritage, landscapes, traditional music, such as folklore, as well as regional gastronomy are part of the northern regional advantage. However, the question remains: can tourism and related sectors become that engine of growth in Northern Portugal? The importance of tourism to Portugal and to the country's northern region will be further discussed below.

THE TOURISM POTENTIAL OF PORTUGAL

In Portugal, tourism is a key growth driver for the national economy and for the social, economic and environmental development of the Portuguese regions (to know, North, Centre, Lisbon and Tejo valley, Alentejo, Algarve, Autonomous Region of Madeira and Autonomous Region of Azores), states the *National Strategic Plan for Tourism 2013-2015* (Turismo de Portugal, 2012). According to data from Statistics Portugal (INE, 2013), tourism revenue increased by 7.2 percent in 2012.

As described in Table 2, the total contribution of tourism to GDP was, 15.2 percent in 2011 €26.2 billion in total. It is forecast to fall by 2.1 percent in 2012 and is expected to have risen by 1.8 percent by 2022. In 2011, tourism generated 322,000 jobs directly, 6.6 percent of total employment, and this is forecast to fall by 0.3 percent in 2012 to 321,000 (6.7 percent of total employment). Despite the importance of tourism to GDP and employment, The World Travel and Tourism Council's (WTTC, 2012) forecast (covering 2012-2022) shows a negative growth for the year 2012 and a lower growth of tourism by 2022.

Table 2. *The economic impact of tourism in Portugal. (WTTC, 2012)*

	2011 % of total	2012 Growth (1)**	2022 % of total**	2020 Growth (2)**
Direct contribution to GDP	5.3	-2.2	5.4	1.7
Total contribution to GDP	15.2	-2.1	15.7	1.8
Direct contribution to employment	6.6	-0.3	7.0	1.2
Total contribution to employment	17.8	-0.3	18.9	1.2
Visitor exports*	17.3	0.6	15.1	1.6
Domestic exports	3.8	-6.5	3.8	1.9
Leisure exports	8.7	-1.8	8.9	1.7
Business exports	1.3	-5.2	1.2	1.8
Capital Investment	11.5	2.7	12.4	3.4

*Visitor exports - spending within the country by international tourists for both business and leisure trips, including spending on transport - (% of total exports);
**Forecast
(1) 2012 real growth adjusted for inflation (%);
(2) 2012-2022 annualized real growth adjusted for inflation (%). Accessed in: 17th December, 2013.

An analysis of Table 2 underlines the direct contribution of tourism to GDP in 2011, which was €9.2 billion (5.3 percent of the total GDP). This is forecast to fall by 2.2 percent in 2012 and to register a 1.7 percent growth by 2022. This primarily reflects the economic activity generated by hotels, travel agents, airlines and passenger transportation services. Nevertheless, it also includes, for example, the activities of restaurants and leisure industries directly supported by tourist activity. The total contribution to employment (including wider effects from investment, the supply chain and induced income impacts) was 866,500 jobs in 2011 (17.8 percent of total employment). This is forecast to fall by 0.3 percent in 2012 and increase by 1.2 percent by 2022 (18.9 percent of total employment) according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (2012).

The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2013 reveals the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index-TTCI (World Economic Forum, 2013) and states that Portugal is the 20th most competitive country/economy in the world in terms of tourism, among 140 economies assessed. Countries such as Switzerland, Germany and Austria occupied

the first three positions. According to the same report, Portugal received close to 8 million international tourist arrivals in 2012 nearly US $11 million (United States dollars) as international tourism receipts. Since 1997 international tourist arrivals and international tourism receipts have progressively increased (UNWTO, 2014), showing the tourism potential in the country and its regions.

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2014), despite economic and financial imbalances in most of the world's economies, international tourist arrivals grew by 5 percent in 2013, reaching a record 1087 million arrivals worldwide, up from 1035 million in 2012. France continues to top the ranking for international tourist arrivals, with 83 million visitors in 2012, and is third in international tourism receipts US $56 billion in 2013). The United States ranks first in receipts with US $139.6 billion and second in arrivals with 69.8 million (see year 2013 - Table 3). Europe led the growth in absolute terms, welcoming 29 million more international tourists in 2013, and raising the total to 563 million (UNWTO, 2014).

Table 3. *World´s top tourism destinations in arrivals and receipts (2012-2013)*

International Tourists Arrivals						International Tourism Receipts						
								US$			Local Currencies	
		Million		Change (%)				Billion		Change (%)	Change (%)	
	Country	2012	2013	12/11	13/12		Country	2012	2013	12/11	13/12	12/11	13/12
1	France	83.0	…	1.8	…	1	France	126.2	**139.6**	9.2	10.6	9.2	10.6
2	US	66.7	**69.8**	6.3	4.7	2	US	56.3	60.4	-6.3	7.4	1.5	3.9
3	Spain	57.5	60.7	2.3	5.6	3	Spain	53.6	56.1	-2.2	4.8	6.0	**1.3**
4	China	57.7	55.7	0.3	**-3.5**	4	China	50.0	51.7	3.2	**3.3**	0.8	1.4
5	Italy	46.4	47.7	0.5	2.9	5	Italy	43.7	51.6	13.7	18.1	13.2	18.1
6	Turkey	35.7	37.8	3.0	5.9	6	Turkey	41.2	43.9	-4.2	6.6	3.8	3.1
7	Germany	30.4	31.5	7.3	3.7	7	Germany	33.8	42.1	24.4	**24.4**	26.7	**23.1**
8	UK	29.3	31.2	-0.1	6.4	8	UK	38.1	41.2	-1.9	8.1	6.3	4.5
9	Russia	25.7	28.4	13.5	10.2	9	Russia	36.2	40.6	3.3	12.1	4.8	13.2
10	Thailand	22.4	**26.5**	16.2	**18.8**	10	Thailand	33.1	38.9	16.2	17.7	15.8	17.7

Source. Adapted from UNWTO Tourism Highlights, 2014 Edition.

Growth in absolute terms was led by Southern and Mediterranean Europe, which reported 11 million more international arrivals (6 percent more) in 2013. The sub-region's largest destination Spain recorded a sound 6 percent increase in arrivals to 61 million. Other major destinations such as Greece (16 percent more), Portugal (8 percent more), Turkey (6 percent more) and Croatia (6 percent more) also saw a robust growth in 2013 (UNWTO, 2014).

The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2013 (World Economic Forum, 2013) emphasizes the ranking indicators of environmental sustainability where Portugal holds position number 15 in terms of environmental sustainability and position number 19 in terms of safety and security, out of 140 countries. Those assets are fundamental to sustaining tourism as a valuable economic activity in the country and its regions. According to CCDRN (2013b), Northern Portugal is one of the tourism destinations with the greatest domestic and international growth potential and that aspect will now be further explored.

NORTHERN PORTUGAL AS A TOURIST DESTINATION

The northern region of Portugal (NUTS 2) includes eight sub-regions (NUTS 3): *Minho-Lima, Cávado, Ave, Grande Porto, Tâmega, Entre Douro e Vouga, Douro* and *Alto Trás-os-Montes*. It has 144 kilometres of Atlantic coast and is the Portuguese region with the largest border area (it borders the Spanish Autonomous Communities of Galicia and Castile-Leon). It has a resident population of 3.7 million people, 35 percent of the national resident population, and 36 percent of the national youth population between zero and 34 years (Instituto Nacional de Estatística - henceforth INE, 2013).

Northern Portugal is often associated with the 'green' of its natural scenery, characterized by the biogeography of the Peneda-Gerês National Park, mountainous terrain, that provides tourism opportunities (e.g. for rural tourism). The traditional rural way of life, the ethnography (e.g. handicraft, folklore, and religious celebrations) and its gastronomy contribute to the region's uniqueness and attractiveness (Kastenholz, 2002). Four United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage Sites (henceforth UNESCO) are also part of the region's cultural assets and its tourism potential: i) Alto Douro Wine Region (Douro river); ii) Historic Centre of Guimarães (Guimarães city); iii) Historic Centre of Oporto (Porto city), and iv) Pre-historic Rock Art Sites in the Côa valley (Douro river). The top five tourist markets in 2011 were Spain, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, and the Netherlands. Tourists, from the aforementioned countries, chose to visit the city of Porto and the north for different reasons (in order of preference): i) nature, ii) heritage, iii) price, iv) culture, v) climate, vi) port wine (*vinho do Porto*).

The promotion of tourism in the North as a whole is based on the following strategic products: i) business tourism; ii) city breaks; iii) gastronomy and wine; iv) nature tourism; v) religious tourism; vi) touring and cultural landscape; vii) heritage, and viii) health tourism. Tourism also encompasses the opportunity to discover the growing number of certified products with a designation of origin (e.g. wines, cheese, and olive oil). In addition to wine, olive oil, smoked meats, honey and other agro-food products, as well as bobbin lace and filigree work, many other handicraft goods of extensive quality and authenticity have also achieved such recognition of origin. The built environment, the heritage and the cultural value associated to these products have additionally led to the creation of specific promotional instruments, such as the *Olive Oil Route* (*Trás-os-Montes*), the wines routes *Vinhos Verdes* and the *Port Wine Route* (CCDRN, 2013a).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article applies a qualitative methodology, through content analysis and in-depth interviewing. Following the application of qualitative methods involving content analysis in tourist destination studies (Govers & Go, 2005; Tasci & Kozak, 2006; Govers, Go, & Kumar 2007) and bearing in mind the complexity of branding places, a critical content analysis of the two main policy documents for tourism in Portugal and in the northern part of the country, namely the *National Strategic Plan for Tourism 2013-2015* (Turismo de Portugal, 2012) and the *Northern Portugal Strategic Guidelines 2014-2020* (CCDRN, 2013b), both written in Portuguese, has been carried out.

Content analysis

Content analysis is an empirical technique, which involves the counting and identification of issues and the interpretation of the content of a text, such as a document, website, email message and report which is assumed to be significant. Content analysis calls for the categorization of the various elements or components which are able to support researchers in explaining current trends (Krippendorff, 2003). In addition, it has been used to count the number of times a word has been mentioned while describing a travel experience (Oliveira, 2013b/c). A content analysis attempts to identify image arrays and identify the key words used to

characterize a tourist destination. Furthermore, it is a useful tool for designing branding strategies as the content could support the decision-making process of a place brand, for instance, by clarifying strategic domains and the nature of the brand. This article has employed a content analysis on two policy documents in terms of their approach towards the tourism potential of Northern Portugal: *National Strategic Plan for Tourism 2013-2015* and *Northern Portugal Strategic Guidelines 2014-2020.*

National Strategic Plan for Tourism 2013-2015

The *National Strategic Plan for Tourism 2013-2015* (*Plano Estratégico Nacional do Turismo Horizonte 2013-2015*, in Portuguese), published by Turismo de Portugal (2012), underlines the need to develop tourist activity based on the authenticity of the national assets and offering unique experiences. The document highlights tourism as an engine of social, economic and environmental development at a national and regional level, with a special potential relying in the regions of the country such as the northern part (page 7). In addition, the document states that Portugal has the potential to be one of the European destinations with tourism growth more in line with the principles of sustainable development, supported by distinctive and innovative features of the country (page 7). The weak economic confidence is acknowledged in the document and measures for improvement are presented. Mechanisms are identified to finance entrepreneurial projects related to tourist activity as a means to overcome economic imbalances. The tourism potential of Northern Portugal is also mentioned (page 28) and tourist products are identified:

i)   Touring, including city breaks;
ii) Douro Valley (along the Douro River);
iii) Culture and religious tourism;
iv) Health and wellness tourism;
v)   Natural parks and sports activities in nature;
vi) Business congresses, incentives and events;
vii) Gastronomy and wines.

The results show that the references to regional tourism potential are excessively low with respect to its true value and potential for development. Although the document states that tourism is a strategic domain to rebalance the Portuguese economy and contribute to regional development and cohesion, there is no attempt to strategically integrate

the tourism potential of the country or of the region in a wider long-term strategy.

It can be said that the national strategic plan for tourism has some incongruities. For instance, it superficially emphasizes the regional tourism potential. The tourism potential of the main northern cities such as Porto, Braga, Guimarães, Viana do Castelo, including their natural landscapes, built environment, traditions, gastronomy and heritage are not integrated. There are references to the need to value public spaces and rationally use natural resources, as well as preserve heritage (page 38). However, there is an evident disconnection between territorial (spatial) planning and place management, and tourism planning and management.

In terms of branding there is a misunderstanding between what place branding is and what a slogan or tagline is (page 70). A slogan is interpreted as a brand which is an incorrect conceptualization (see for instance Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2010). For example, regarding the tourist product gastronomy, a slogan - *Taste Portugal* - is mentioned as a "brand" to be promoted (page 69). The existence of the "brand"- *Destination Portugal* - does not prevent the existence of other potential regional brands. However, Portugal and its regions will benefit more from an effective and strategic integration of a wider branding strategy and territorial planning. Although the author acknowledges the value of the national plan for the development of the national and regional tourism sector, the time frame (2013-2015) is a limitation to implementing a long-term strategy.

Northern Portugal Strategic Guidelines 2014-2020

The *Northern Portugal Strategic Guidelines 2014-2020* (*Diagnóstico Prospetivo da Região do Norte 2014-2020*, in Portuguese), published by CCDRN (2013b), is an invited investigation report that is requested from the Portuguese government from CCDRN. The aim of the document is to prepare a concise and prospective economic and social diagnosis of Northern Portugal for the period of 2014-2020, following the agreement between Portugal and the European Commission, and the respective EU Operational Programmes (page 5). The *Northern Portugal Strategic Guidelines 2014-2020* intend to establish the public policies, and priorities for public and private investment co-financed by the EU.

The document follows the EU *Strategy 2020* (European Union, 2010). The EU *Strategy 2020* is about delivering: *smart growth*, through more effective investments in education, research and innovation; *sustainable growth*, thanks to a decisive move towards a low-carbon economy; and *inclusive growth,* with a strong emphasis on job creation and poverty alleviation. The *Northern Portugal Strategic Guidelines 2014-2020* acknowledged the current structural macroeconomic issues. The document also underlines the potential for *smart*, *sustainable* and *inclusive* growth.

Tourism is identified as an activity with high potential for growth, economic restructuring and job creation (page 16). Tourism is also associated with other activities such as *sea economy* and *health tourism*, both strategic domains. A sustainable approach to territorial assets is fundamental to the whole tourism value chain (page 37). References to place branding are missing, both for the city or regional level. There are references to the advantage of promoting competitiveness using technological expertise developed within regional borders. The failure in the attempt to retain visitors and a need to build a regional promotional strategy is identified (page 58). The document underlines "promotion" instead of "branding". Thus, it currently lacks long-term actions to re-position, re-imagine and to instigate the reputation of the northern part of Portugal. There are references to the need to develop cooperative ties but the document lacks ideas on how to operationalize this. For instance Yuksel, Bramwell, and Yuksel (1999), in their work on the tourism potential of Pamukkale in Turkey, underlined that stakeholders must be involved in the decision-making processes concerning tourism development. Without their participation, disputes can arise. Therefore, following the discussion towards a place (regional) branding strategy for Northern Portugal two interviews were conducted with two regional stakeholders, respectively: i) *Tourism of Porto and the North of Portugal* (TPNP) and ii) *North Regional Coordination and Development Commission* (CCDRN).

In-depth interviews

Two in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with two key regional stakeholders to retrieve core information and their perspectives regarding the tourism potential of Northern Portugal (TPNP and CCDRN). Both interviews were conducted by the author of this article at

the headquarters of each institution in March 2014. The locations were; Viana do Castelo, for TPNP and Porto, for CCDRN. In both cases the respondents were professionals from each entity and responsible for planning and operations. The respondents were indicated by the presidency of each institution as being able to represent their interests and perspectives for Northern Portugal. Acknowledging the limitation of the sample, the author takes their participation as an institutional response to the posed questions.

The interview at CCDRN was conducted with the manager of the department of regional development. By using digital recording hardware, following a semi-structured interview guide, each conversation lasted one hour. These two regional stakeholders were selected from a list composed of 10 potential interviewees (e.g. academics, regional institutions and consultancy companies). The interview at TPNP was conducted with the manager of the department of tourism planning and promotion. Both were indicated by their respective directorates.

Tourism of Porto and the North of Portugal was created to ensure the sustainable development of regional tourism potential. This entity is in charge of enhancing tourism as a strategic sector of the economy of Porto city and the northern region as a whole. The aims of this entity are to define, monitor and assess policies and strategic business plans, as well as to provide relevant information to support public and private decisions, in order to promote the full range of activities in the tourism sector at the regional level.

The *North Regional Coordination and Development Commission* is a decentralized body of the central government. Its mission is to promote the conditions permitting the integrated and sustainable development of Northern Portugal, thereby contributing to territorial cohesion at the national level. CCDRN, a body which has administrative and financial autonomy, is tasked with coordinating and promoting, in the Portuguese North Region, governmental policies with regard to regional planning and development, environment, land-use management, and inter-regional and cross-border cooperation. The body's fields of intervention also encompass the management of regional operational programmes financed by EU funds supplied to provide support to Portugal, as well as other regional development finance instruments to accomplish strategic harmonization at the regional level in a very specific manner.

Instead of individualizing the different opinions/perspectives on the tourism potential of Northern Portugal, this study presents a summary of the key points that were raised. In parallel with structural reforms to return to fiscal sustainability, measures to tackle excessive spending growth and better financial management tools, a place branding strategy able to enhance, in an integrative way, the tourism potential of the country and the northern region, could be effective and generate regional dynamics, and tackle regional unemployment, the respondents have emphasized. The respondents have underlined that tourism is a *strategic domain for Portugal and the northern region* and a *branding strategy at the regional level could make sense but only if preceded by a wider territorial intervention* and the *definition of a consistent strategy*. The need to give clarity to the long-term vision for Portugal has also been asserted. So far this has stayed close to the European Union agenda for 2020. Portugal strictly follows the EU's recommendations and strategic line.

Both the TPNP respondent and the representative of the CCDRN agree that the *European competitive agenda and the* EU *guidelines are fundamental to financing any step towards a regional branding strategy* but should give freedom to explore uniqueness and inner strategic domains. Following their statement, the discussion went to the level of a potential regional branding strategy. The opinions have underlined that the development of the regional tourism potential, better communication and an effective strategy could attract more investment. The need to facilitate the licensing of infra-structures, tourist activities and tourist accommodations, for example, has been underlined. Both respondents have agreed that *participatory planning and communication tools are essential to spreading a positive message of Northern Portugal to the outside world*. Furthermore, it is also important to *engage with the community and stakeholders, not only from the tourism sector but other sectors of activity*. Ensuring the well-being and pride of local communities is of core value when conducting a place branding initiative the respondents have emphasized. However, both respondents have stated that there will be difficulties designing a branding strategy as *the region is so heterogeneous*. Bearing in mind both perspectives designing a regional branding strategy might be a tough task although possible.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMENDATIONS

Bringing together the content of the two policy documents that were analysed for content and the perspectives of the two entities interviewed (TPNP and CCDRN) the results can be concluded that there are misalignments between entities, misconceptions, such as the definition of a place brand, and a nonexistence of a long-term vision for the tourism sector in the country. The economic and social context of Portugal reflects the lack of territorial organization and the definition of unique trajectories for place development and potential branding strategies. Although Portugal has started down a long road of economic adjustment to boost growth and correct an excessive reliance on debt, as stated in the document - *Northern Portugal Strategic Guidelines 2014-2020* - a wide range of structural reforms is required to raise productivity and rebalance the economy. This is expected to positively impact the tourism activity in the coming years, as stated by the TPNP. As a policy recommendation it seems more likely to effectively impact the economy of the country as well as support job creation, if a tourism strategy further then 2020 could be designed.

In addition, the *National Strategic Plan for Tourism 2013-2015*, in line with the 2012 OECD report, underlines that international trade and tourism are key sectors for rebalancing the Portuguese economy as a whole. *An economic and social rebalance is paramount to designing a regional branding strategy*, a statement that has been shared by the TPNP and CCDRN respondents. Furthermore, deeper knowledge is necessary about what is going on in Portugal, in terms of both strategies, and tactical interventions in the tourism sector. The respondents from *Tourism of Porto and the North of Portugal* and *North Regional Coordination and Development Commission* have emphasized that this is in order to support a resilient approach able to enhance national and regional competitiveness, and boost the economy. It has been clearly stated by the respondents that tourism plays a crucial role as a generator of jobs and revenues; therefore, it has been identified as a strategic domain able to integrate a wider regional branding strategy. However, how to operationalize it remains uncertain which open doors for future research.

Let us return to the research question stated in the introductory part "*is tourism a strategic domain with the potential to integrate a branding strategy at the regional level?*". Place branding could attempt to develop regional synergies by structuring place identities and by highlighting place assets and tourism potential. However, the need to re-organize the Portuguese

territory, special at the regional level, remains a priority. This was emphasized by the respondents. This final remarks works here as a policy recommendation for Portuguese authorities and it can be generalized and enhance the literature on regional branding.

An appealing regional brand, supported by consistent image building and a strategic vision which are integrated in a wider territorial strategy, will allow the development of unique and distinct identities, and to establish a clear and competitive position in the tourism marketplace. The respondents have underlined that there is political will to enhance place competitiveness at the regional level; however, the strategic documents are not effective in that regard. The second research question was "*is a regional branding strategy an engine by which to enable economic and social transformation in the region, thus responding to the contemporary challenges such as weak economic confidence and unemployment?*" From the qualitative research conducted, the analysis of the two main documents and the two interviews, it seems there is a need for ways of thinking and for tools, concepts and instruments that help the central government and regional entities to cope better with challenges. The key findings from the content analysis and the opinions shared suggest that Northern Portugal has the potential to explore tourism as a strategic activity to rebalance the regional economy and contribute to regional dynamics and territorial cohesion. A branding strategy able to highlight the tourism potential of Northern Portugal could strengthen the position of the region and the country as a whole. As a policy recommendation, the development of a unique strategy for tourism at the national level able to integrate the regional uniqueness will benefit not only the tourism activity but also related sectors.

This article has assembled a contribution for the theoretical discussion on regional branding. Furthermore, it reinforces the embedding of tourism within a wider branding strategy capable of enhancing the regional development of Northern Portugal. However, this article has some limitations. Acknowledging that the main criticism could emerge from the lack of empirical data, there is a need to do more interviews and extend the analysis. In spite of requests to interview other key regional actors, it only has been possible to do institutional interviews with TPNP and CCDRN. These are the two regional institutions with more autonomy in terms of projects, policies and strategic interventions in Northern Portugal.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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