Elisa Piva, Lluís Prats

Regional Destination and Brand Identity: The Case of Piedmont, Italy

doi: 10.14650/97103

Scienze Regionali (ISSN 1720-3929)
Early access
Abstract: In recent years, research relating to marketing promotion has focused on the concepts of place branding and destination branding. However, a number of gaps in the existing literature need to be addressed. For example, while there are many studies on tourists and destination brands, few studies have considered the internal perspective of relevant public stakeholders. Moreover, many studies on place branding have focused on either entire countries or individual cities, paying little attention to place branding at the regional and sub-regional level, apart from regions that are already well-known brands. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the Piedmont region of Italy, this paper addresses this lack of research, and focuses on the internal views of the destination management organisations (DMOs) on the brand development and brand identity of their territories. The results show that the process of developing a brand identity in the region is influenced by issues related to fragmentation, cooperation and coordination.

Keywords: regional branding, brand identity, place branding, brand development, Piedmont region.

JEL classification: L83, O2, R5.

1. Introduction

Within the literature on products, brands have always been considered the marketer’s key tool for creating product differentiation (Gilmore, 2002). However, it is only in recent years that studies on tourism destination brands have increasingly gained momentum among researchers and practitioners (Franch et al., 2008; Hernandez et al., 2016).

According to Konecnik and Go (2008), although the topic of destination branding has been partially covered under the alternative label of «destina-
tion image studies» for decades, less attention has been paid to the identity of tourist destinations from a supply-side perspective.

Furthermore, few empirical studies on regional destination branding have been undertaken. Indeed, Wheeler et al. (2009) note there are only a handful of studies on Australian rural destination regions (e.g. Prideaux, Cooper, 2002; Dredge, Jenkins, 2003). While these studies are useful in identifying the challenges of regional tourism marketing, few have questioned the applicability of the regional branding concept or fully explored the contextual factors and processes which influence its implementation (Wheeler et al., 2007).

Thus, the main aim of this study is to examine the elements that affect the process of brand construction at a regional level. Regional analysis is important since most of the European countries are divided into regions for management purposes. Furthermore, in Italy administrative regions have had exclusive legislative power as regards tourism since the national law no. 135/2001. In addition, short breaks are constantly on the increase (ITB, 2016), and this generates visits on a smaller geographical scale than before, which makes branding regional destinations increasingly important.

Hence, one of the main purposes of this study is to conduct in-depth exploration of brand development issues related to regions.

The study also addresses the theme of brand identity in regional and sub-regional destinations, and enhances our understanding of the role that Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) play in regional branding and their perceptions of the regional brand.

The relationship between regional and sub-regional brands can be explained through the concept of brand architecture, by which is meant an organizing structure of the brand portfolio that specifies the brand roles and the relationships among brands and different product-market brand contexts (Aaker, Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 102).

The research setting for this project is the Piedmont region in Northern Italy. Although tourism has not been historically important in Piedmont, it is attracting an increasing number of tourists, especially in some sub-regional areas. This paper focuses on understanding how the institutional tourism stakeholders evaluate the regional brand strategy and its destination branding construction process in Piedmont. We conclude that the Piedmont brand deals with several issues that have prevented successful brand development. The paper will also highlight the limitations of this project and make suggestions for future research.

2. Destination branding and brand identity

Even though the concept of branding has been applied extensively to products and services, the study of tourism destination branding is a relatively
recent phenomenon (Pollice, Spagnuolo, 2009; Hernandez et al., 2016), and it has only come to our attention since the late 1990s.

Clearly, branding a company is different from branding a destination, but corporate business tools and concepts can also be used in destinations to build strong, appealing brands (Anholt, 2007; Morariu, 2015).

Branding strategies are becoming increasingly important because destinations need to compete more effectively, establish a decision-making framework and increase accountability to their stakeholders (Morgan et al., 2011; Almeyda-Ibáñez, George, 2017).

Consequently, destination branding has emerged « as a technique to create and develop the positioning of places at different geographical scales» (Mosca et al., 2016, p. 34). Many authors have stated that a destination brand is recognizable and successful when it meets tourists’ expectations of a given destination (Blain et al., 2005; Anholt, 2010; Martins, 2015). According to Ritchie and Ritchie (1998, p. 103) « a destination brand also serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience». Various authors have defined destination branding over the years (see for example Gnoth, 1998; Cai Liping, 2002; Kerr, 2006). However, most of these definitions are focused on destination image and the tourist’s external perceptions.

Several studies have supported the idea that brand identity and brand image are key to obtaining a popular destination brand (Cai Liping, 2002; Nandan, 2005; Martins, 2015). However, authors frequently conflate or confuse these two concepts (Wagner, Peters, 2009; Qu et al., 2011). For instance, brand image focuses on tourists’ perceptions of destination-brand differentiation, whereas identity tends to be more concerned with how actors in the destinations network make a particular brand unique (Harris, de Chernatony, 2001). Furthermore, brand identity characterizes the self-image and desired image of the market, whereas the brand image signifies the actual image held by (potential) tourists (Pike, 2002). In other words, « identity is created by the sender whereas image is perceived by the receiver» (Kapferer, 1997, p. 32).

A destination brand should therefore be considered from the senders’ perspective as the projection of destination identity; and from the receivers’ perspective as the image of a place (Florek et al., 2006). Within the field of marketing, some authors (Morgan et al., 2002; Cai Liping, 2002; Hankinson, 2004) have claimed that destination brand identity is even more important than image, especially from a strategic point of view. According to Hankinson (2004) this arises from the view that positioning and communicating the destination brand needs to be rooted in reality, which then helps fulfil the experience promised to visitors (Saraniemi, 2009). Brand identity is created by private organisations or public administrations in relation to how they want their brand to be perceived (Kapferer, 1998, 2012). According to Konecnik and Go (2008, p. 179), «Brand identity clearly specifies what the brand aspires to stand for and has multiple roles». As stated by Aaker and
Joachimsthaler (2000), brand identity is a set of positive associations with a particular destination that destination management organisations strive to build and maintain.

Brand identity also embodies the idea of how tourists should perceive a destination brand. Alternatively, the brand could be seen instead as a cluster of values emanating from different actors in a network of actors (Lemmettyinen, Go, 2010). In this context, achieving a brand identity requires enlisting members who will commit to, and participate in, delivering a coherent set of values (de Chernatony, Dall’Olmo Riley, 1999). Effective leaders know how to connect each key player’s goals and actions within a network to everyone’s benefit by understanding and meeting their needs, and motivating and inspiring them (Macrae, 1999). An integrative and inclusive approach to destination branding is a prerequisite when exploiting a destination’s marketing potential and crafting a strong identity for it (Crockett, Wood, 1999). According to Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013), the success of place branding is affected by stakeholders in regard to the ways in which place brands stem from the place’s identity, which is understood as an interactive process of identity construction through a dialogue between stakeholders. Moilanen and Rainisto (2009) also support the idea that destination branding is a collective phenomenon where several actors should uphold the same brand and work together to deliver a coherent image. For Hankinson (2004), it is actually the direction taken by stakeholders that forms the basis for the whole process (Kavaratzis, 2012).

This discussion addresses a growing need to investigate the stakeholder’s internal perception and the institutional perspective of branding within regional tourism destinations. This case study explores this perspective and encapsulates the views of the main stakeholders responsible for managing and promoting tourism in the Piedmont region, Italy. In particular, this study provides further insights into the characteristics of the regional branding process and its relationships with sub-regional stakeholders.

3. Branding the Piedmont region

Strategically located between Central Europe and the Mediterranean, in the heart of one of Europe’s most developed areas, Piedmont is the second-largest region in Italy (Figure 1).

As shown by the trend of tourist flows and the resulting economic impact assessment (Regione Piemonte, 2012; Osservatorio Turistico Regionale, 2018), Piedmont is today considered an emerging tourist destination. It has four sub-regional tourist areas: 1) the City of Turin and its metropolitan area, which offers a high level of cultural and museum tourism; 2) the mountains, which have both summer and winter tourism (Olympic Mountains, Upper Valsesia and Cuneo Mountains), and constitute about one-third of Pied-
mont’s territory; 3) the Hills of Piedmont, an area characterized by a large and diverse tourism offer, including cultural, green, sport and increasingly food and wine tourism (area of Langhe, Monferrato and Roero); 4) Lakes Maggiore, Orta and Mergozzo. These are famous tourism landmarks, and contribute most to the tourist image of Piedmont in both the domestic and international market.

To market Piedmont as a tourist destination, the Region designed a multiyear communication strategy, and began to promote its institutional identity. Another objective within the strategy was to create an institutional brand. The institutional communication campaign available during the interviews dates back to 2009. It aims to spread the mission and the positioning of the region with the logo Piemonte nuovo da sempre (Piedmont, always new) (Figure 2). It merges tradition and innovation, design know-how, creativity and the dynamic character of the region.

The aim of the 2015 regional plan of activities was to create an attractive brand image and then adopt an online communication strategy (web 2.0) to market it. In brief, the overall strategy of the Region is to raise brand awareness of Piedmont institutional brand. Currently, the Piedmont region is reorganising its structure, its strategies and activities for tourism development. In July 2016, the new Regional Tourism Law 11/07/2016, no. 14, entitled «New provisions concerning the organization of promotional activities, hospitality and tourist information in Piedmont» was approved. The most significant change and focus point is the constitution of the Regional Agency

Figure 1: Map of Piedmont region. Source: www.regione.piemonte.it.
for the development and promotion of tourism and quality food products in Piedmont, referred to as «DMO Turismo Piemonte». The DMO’s mission is to boost Piedmont’s tourist resources and products by competitively positioning them on domestic and international tourism markets through public and private partnerships. The DMO is responsible for developing the organisational and operational strategies to position the Piedmont brand on the international tourist scene.

4. Methodology

Due to the nature and aims of the research, the case study method was chosen as the most suitable.

Case study methods can be seen as a controversial approach to data collection. They are widely recognised in social science studies, especially when seeking in-depth explanations of social behaviour (Zainal, 2007). Using this method, a researcher can better understand the behavioural conditions from the actor’s perspective (Tellis, 1997). Furthermore, through case studies, researchers can analyse data meticulously in a specific context (Yin, 2014). According to Zainal (2007), in most cases, this method selects a small geographical area or a very limited number of individuals. For this project, the case study concerns the geographical and administrative area known as Piedmont, located in the North-West of Italy.

In the Piedmont region, multiple local authorities have been established to manage and promote tourism. In particular, local tourist agencies, called Agenzie Turistiche Locali (ATLs), are organizations undertaking activities related to hospitality and providing information and tourist assistance at the sub-regional level.

ATLs play a fundamental role in implementing the regional tourism strategies, overseeing activities, and coordinating local bodies and resources in the area.

At present, Piedmont is divided into nine ATLs: Turismo Torino e Provincia; Biella; Valsesia e Vercelli; Distretto turistico dei Laghi (Lake District); Novara; Langhe e Roero; Cuneo; Alexala; and Asti.
Taking the above into consideration, the purpose of the research reported in this paper was to collect the views of the nine directors of Piedmont ATLs as they are key players within Piedmont’s tourism organisation at a sub-regional level.

Data were gathered by means of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which were then analysed in order to gain better understanding of the multifaceted nature of tourism in Piedmont (Figure 3).

Semi-structured interviews are structured sufficiently to address specific topics, while also giving participants the opportunity to offer new meanings to the focus of the study (Galletta, 2013). According to Konecnik and Go (2008, p. 183), even though nine representatives may seem a relatively small number, «this represents a convenient sample regarding the criterion chosen for the sample selection».

The semi-structured interview questions were based on the main topics relating to destination branding in the literature review. Secondary data, and direct observation of current dynamics characterising the region, helped to identify further relevant topics. For this research, we used a triangulation process (Bekhet, Zauszniewski, 2012; Yin, 2014) in which data were gathered and analysed by combining different methods, such as case study, semi-structured interviews and secondary data.

All interviews were conducted in Italian between May and June 2016. They were audio-recorded and subsequently fully transcribed. The interviews varied in length from half an hour to one hour. Secondary data were obtained from official documents and statistics (Sviluppo Piemonte Turismo, 2012, 2013, 2016).

Figure 3: Research method: mind map.
Source: Author’s own elaboration.
Qualitative analysis was carried out using NVivo 11 software. The use of a qualitative data analysis software as NVivo is seen as beneficial to add rigour to qualitative research (Welsh, 2002).

For the data analysis (Table 1), every full transcription was first coded by the two authors in order to provide reliable data, and then classified into categories, classifications and cases/agents. Matrix coding query was used to compare categories, classifications and agents, and to find possible relationships. Matrix coding provided higher significant results between categories and classifications. Other possible cases/agents – i.e. units of observation that can represent people, places, organisations, events or other entities under investigation (Bazeley, Jackson, 2013) – did not show significant results and were therefore not included in the results. Subsequently, the plan of analysis was completed by running other types of queries (e.g., word frequency, text search).

The following section presents a descriptive analysis of the results, while the conclusions include a more detailed analytical discussion of the findings.

5. Results

This section presents the findings regarding the key elements contributing to the brand construction process in the Piedmont region. As said in the aims, the results are linked implicitly to the identified elements that affect brand development at regional level, which are brand identity, the DMOs’ role and brand development. Furthermore, after the qualitative analysis of the interviews the main findings were grouped into three topics which are presented and discussed below:

5.1. Fragmentation and brand identity

According to respondents, the higher the level of tourist development in an area, the more inadequate and less effective the regional strategies are. As shown in Table 1, the directors of ATLs with a medium or high level of development were those who complained that the regional strategies were unsuitable. Those of areas with a low level of tourism development remained neutral. None of them stated that the regional strategies were adequate or effective.

The ATLs deeming regional strategies inappropriate are those that claim strong, internationally recognised local brands which are perhaps even better known than the regional brand.

From a network perspective, a lack of adequate regional tourism strategies raised the issue of excessive fragmentation within local management of the many uncoordinated entities. Consequently, there is a significant dispersion of economic funds.
For example, respondent no. 6 stated that at the strategic level maybe we have not yet reached the top as a region, because tourism management is divided among many actors [...] Unfortunately, there are the mountain communities, the municipalities, the provinces, the chambers of commerce, etc. [...] since we are also in a period where resources are not what they were in the past, because they are spread over so many areas.

This fragmentation also leads to inefficient, non-integrated management of communicational and promotional activities. In particular, respondent no. 2 declared we have thought there could be more web activities better coordinated by the Region for a long time. Everyone has a regional web portal [...] but if Piedmont is ranked 8th among the top Italian regional destinations, we can’t understand why it is then ranked 20th when it comes to web activities.

Institutional and operational fragmentation in the Region is also evidenced by the data relating to the clarity of Piedmont’s brand identity (Table 2).

6 out of 9 directors of ATLs maintained that there is limited awareness of the regional brand. According to Keller (2003, p. 76), brand awareness is the customers’ ability to recall and recognize the brand as reflected by their ability to identify the brand under different conditions and to link the brand name, logo, symbol, and so forth to certain associations in memory.

A high and positive destination brand awareness reduces the need for a detailed information search and contributes to that destination ultimately becoming the destination of choice for the visitor (Seddighi, Theocharous, 2002).

---

**Table 1: Level of development and regional strategies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tourism development level (no. of tourists, in millions)</th>
<th>Adequate regional strategies</th>
<th>Inadequate regional strategies</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Not defined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High level &gt; 1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium level 0.5-1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low level &lt; 0.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Author’s own elaboration.

**Table 2: Level of development and clarity of brand identity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tourism development level (no. of tourists, in millions)</th>
<th>Clear regional brand identity</th>
<th>Unclear regional brand identity</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High level &gt; 1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium level 0.5-1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low level &lt; 0.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Author’s own elaboration.
Currently, the Piedmont brand lacks consistency. In particular, the directors of ATLs with a medium-high level of development were those who complained that the Region does not have a recognizable brand. Respondent no. 6 emphasized that «the Lake Maggiore brand is much better known abroad than the Piedmont brand». Respondent no. 9 reiterated that Piedmont has not managed to create a brand. Piedmont has seen an increase in tourist numbers in recent years; however, there isn’t yet a regional brand. There is something at the national level at least, but if we go abroad it is very difficult to talk about Piedmont.

Respondent no. 2 stressed that the Piedmont brand has certainly grown in recent years, but some local brands remain strong because they are very specialized in certain products, and it is normal for consumers to identify their travel purposes with that product more than with the regional destination as a whole.

The directors of ATLs who argued that the Region has a clear brand identity were only those with a low level of tourist development, and little known sub-regional brands. This is probably because these ATLs have not developed their own branding strategies and they believe that the Region is responsible for communicating the regional identity.

An analysis of the interviews highlights that Piedmont is not yet seen as an overall tourism destination, but rather as the sum of its nine sub-regional areas, as stated by the directors of ATLs with a medium-high level of development (Table 3).

In Piedmont there is still the need to develop an effective branding strategy; there is not yet a clear brand architecture. The regional brand is not seen as the umbrella brand of its sub-regional areas.

Respondent no. 9 specified these sub-regional areas and their related tourism products: there is the Northern area that has the lake, a very strong tourism product; there is the area of the Langhe which has the attraction of wine; there is the metropolitan City of Turin, which has taken huge steps forward in obtaining and giving itself a tourist brand image. There is skiing in winter and other outdoor activities in summer thanks to the mountains. But Piedmont, as a product, does not exist.

Respondent no. 1 confirmed this opinion, arguing that in Piedmont there are areas that have independently and consciously branded themselves. Then there are other areas, such as the Lake District and Turin, that are very strong destinations; so, it’s hard to think that Piedmont brand could come first when compared to these other areas that have been working on their products for a very long time.

The research shows that these well-known, sub-regional brands are the outcome of a brand creation process involving a small group of decision makers aided by professionals (Bottazzi, Mondini, 2006). The result is often top-down planning and promotion action that leaves destination communities with little input or control over their own destinations (Murphy, 1985).
Table 3: Level of development and Piedmont as a tourist destination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tourism development level (no. of tourists, in millions)</th>
<th>Piedmont as an overall destination</th>
<th>Piedmont as the sum of the 9 provinces</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High level &gt; 1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium level 0.5-1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low level &lt; 0.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

Table 4: Level of development and brand creation process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tourism development level (no. of tourists, in millions)</th>
<th>Top-down model</th>
<th>Bottom-up model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High level &gt; 1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium level 0.5-1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low level &lt; 0.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

As shown in Table 4, ATLs with a high level of development have used the top-down model. However, this approach does not always guarantee high-level development, because other sub-regional destinations using this model have shown a low level of development.

The data show that Piedmont ATLs adopting the traditional Italian planning methods favour a top-down model (7 out of 9), and only two cases used the bottom-up model.

In the tourism context, «the bottom-up approach indicates both challenges and opportunities for destination communities» (Theerapappisit, 2012, p. 270). The concept of participatory tourism planning initially develops at a grassroots level, and extends to a global level by incorporating local wisdom, knowledge, culture and needs through alternative future scenarios of global tourism transformation (Theerapappisit, 2012). There is, of course, no single correct solution to the dilemma of how to balance top-down and bottom-up forces, by reference to either the criteria of democratic participation or efficiency in planning and management processes (Carley, Christie, 2000) within the practices of destination management and brand creation.

These models used by the ATLs to develop their sub-regional brands have a clear impact on the regional brand itself. The primary use of top-down models – i.e. without consulting local stakeholders, residents, and especially the Region – means that there is a lack of coordination between regional and sub-regional/local strategies.

In Piedmont, bottom-up processes were activated and promoted by Biella ATL and Alexala ATL. However, their approach still does not include the local communities and the residents, which should be leading that process.
5.2. Cooperation and brand identity

In recent years, Piedmont has gradually distanced itself from traditional approaches, in which tourism was managed as a social activity and which often led to a fragmented distribution of both funding and initiatives in the area, and a lack of attention to economic return. In the last regional multiannual programme for tourism, investments with a higher impact on the various tourist products and on the creation of a regional tourism brand were prioritised.

By taking an entrepreneurial approach, as in any other economic activity, the Region relies on transparency and tools which measure the return on a single investment, in order to understand the value and the benefits of profits of every individual action (latest available data: Sviluppo Piemonte Turismo, 2013).

From this perspective, the regional government has identified and subsequently invested in the key markets and product segments that can produce the greatest return in terms of marketing and number of tourist flows. These investments are aimed specifically at developing and promoting mountain tourism and city tourism, which are considered fundamental for the region’s brand identity.

This trend is also highlighted by the analysis of data on individual ATLs (Table 6), which shows that these areas are the destinations with the highest level of investments. Table 5 shows medium investment in the lakes area and the hills.

Also in terms of tourism projects, the higher number occurs in these areas, with particular regard to the mountain areas of Cuneo ATL and the urban area of Turin ATL (Table 6).

The resources allocated to Piedmont Mountains support investments for the improvement of tourist and recreational infrastructures on a small scale, as well as the enhancement of the related tourist information for the outdoor product, coordinated between the local and regional levels.

The Region’s goal is to diversify and desезonalize the tourist offer, to preserve the landscape, promote local products through direct contact with tourists, and foster job creation in rural areas. On the other hand, today’s Turin is a city which is changing, and gradually prioritizing tourism and culture. The city’s economy has relied primarily on industry, but since the 2006 Winter Olympic Games, it has invested substantial financial resources to re-invent itself as a tourist destination and a European cultural capital.

Consistently with the data on investments, the hills area registers a medium number of projects. The majority are initiatives selling outdoor and enogastronomic products aimed at developing this hills area as an emerging tourist destination.

Worth noting are the results for the lakes area. Despite a relatively high investment in tourism, there are a rather low number of projects. This is due
Table 5: Investments in tourism and territorial attributes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Investments in tourism (millions of € per year)</th>
<th>Lowlands</th>
<th>Mountains</th>
<th>Lakes</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Hills</th>
<th>Mountains and lowlands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High &gt; 10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium 5-10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low &lt; 5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own elaboration on latest available data 2013.

Table 6: Tourist projects and territorial attributes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tourist projects (no. of tourist projects per year)</th>
<th>Lowlands</th>
<th>Mountains</th>
<th>Lakes</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Hills</th>
<th>Mountains and lowlands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High &gt; 200</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium 100-200</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low &lt; 100</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own elaboration on latest available data 2013.

to the stage at which the Tourist Lake District project finds itself at present, and only a limited number of tourist projects are being developed in this area. However, there is a large investment commitment with a particular focus on the main nodes of the destination.

In general, the Piedmont region has co-financed ATL projects addressed to different areas of expertise such as tourist offers, planning and tourism organization, or promoting tourism and sport.

The ATLs that have benefited the most from the regional contributions are Turin, the Lake District, Novara and Cuneo (Table 7).

The Region has therefore shown a commitment to supporting both high-level development destinations (Lakes, Mountains and Urban), and lesser developed areas (Lowlands). In the hills area, the low regional contributions appear to be off-set by the presence of other sources of funding, which are in part private (e.g. enterprises, banking foundations, etc.).

According to respondents, the ATLs with the largest number of regional contributions are those that claim to have strategies in line with the regional ones. Those with low contributions are mostly neutral or not consistent (Table 8).

The synergy between ATLs and the regional government is embodied in a partnership for activity development which enhances and strengthens the regional and sub-regional tourist brands (e.g. educational tours, press tours, exhibitions, workshops).

Respondent no. 1 stated that
Table 7: Regional contribution and territorial attributes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regional contribution (regional contribution/total expenditure)</th>
<th>Lowlands</th>
<th>Mountains</th>
<th>Lakes</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Hills</th>
<th>Mountains and lowlands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High &gt; 60%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium 30-60%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low &lt; 30%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

Table 8: Regional contribution and actions for brand development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regional contribution (regional contribution/total expenditure)</th>
<th>Strategies in line with the Piedmont region</th>
<th>Strategies NOT in line with the Piedmont region</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High &gt; 60%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium 30-60%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low &lt; 30%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

Although we have implemented and managed the activities, this is shared with our partners: the city of Turin, the Olympic municipalities, the metropolitan area and, of course, the Piedmont region.

Respondent no. 5 emphasised «actions are first decided by us, then shared with the Piedmont region».

Respondent no. 6 claimed that they always participated in both Italian and international trade fairs in collaboration with the regional government, but highlighted their lack of management and a strategic tourism plan at regional level.

This view was also shared by directors of ATLs who stated that their actions were not in line with the regional strategies. Respondent no. 2 explained that policies put in place had resulted from their own decision because if the Region does not produce anything (strategic plan) for a few years in a row, then they cannot expect to decide the regional policy. Clearly, everyone tries to act as they can and wish.

Respondent no. 1 suggested that

it would be appropriate if the regional government outlined its regional strategy better, and above all, instead of overlapping with work already done by local actors, take it into account […] The Region also leaves out the sub-regional areas, which could be integrated as a system.

Hence, in the regional scenario, there are different positions arising from the diverse processes of creating and positioning sub-regional brands, which are consistent to a greater or lesser extent with the regional strategies.
5.3. Coordination, peripherality and brand identity

By correlating the data on regional strategies (see Table 2), already discussed, with the data on distance from the main city in the Piedmont region (Turin), it emerges that the ATLs that manifest a lack of efficient regional strategies are those with a medium-low proximity (Table 9).

This is because collaboration was better between the Region and ATLs in regard to specific projects or events affecting areas close to Turin and its metropolitan area. In fact, such proximity favours the establishment of coordination networks, the search for agreed solutions, and the exchanging of relevant information in a much more direct way.

The Director of ATL in the Lake District, which is further away from Turin, criticized the Region’s weak coordination:

we feel rather abandoned by the centre (Turin) […], because we are considered a peripheral territory compared to Turin, and therefore they do not take us into consideration much.

The research also reveals that the limited growth in tourist numbers affects the adequacy of the regional tourism strategies. As shown in Table 10, the ATLs with lower growth in terms of tourism numbers in 2015 are those whose directors complained that the regional strategies are inadequate.

This dynamic has helped reinforce the negative view of the regional government’s role in developing effective tourism policies, adversely affecting even the best-known sub-regional brands. Respondent no. 2 stated

---

Table 9: Regional strategies and proximity to Turin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proximity to Turin (distance, in km)</th>
<th>Adequate regional strategies</th>
<th>Inadequate regional strategies</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Not defined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High &lt; 60</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium 60-100</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low &gt; 100</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

Table 10: Regional strategies and tourism growth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tourist growth (% growth in tourist numbers compared to 2014)</th>
<th>Adequate regional strategies</th>
<th>Inadequate regional strategies</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Not defined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High &gt; 10%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium 5-10%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low &lt; 5%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own elaboration.
to say that the Region has developed major regional tourism strategies in recent years would be a bit too generous […] for there to be more fruitful relations with the Region, which we would all welcome, the latter should work to create more coordinated activities.

In brief, the absence of a strategic regional tourism plan, and a clear definition of tourism policies, is making it difficult for ATLs and local stakeholders to find a clearly referenced, unique and strong regional brand identity.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Since the Winter Olympic Games in 2006, Piedmont has renewed its image, shifting from a predominantly industrial region to a tourism destination of international interest. This trend has grown by 29% over the past decade, enabling Piedmont to consolidate its position on the national and international markets, with more than 15 million visitors in 2018, compared to 11.5 million visitors in 2008 (Osservatorio Turistico Regionale, 2018).

Even though Piedmont presents this positive scenario, the findings of the study suggest that three main issues need to be tackled in order to enhance its brand identity and further develop the regional brand.

The first critical issue is fragmentation, where sub-regional brands prevail over the regional brand. This is in line with the findings of previous studies on fragmentation which state that fragmentation leads to different tourism destination images being emitted by a large number of agents. It also means that the regional government’s capacity to manage and control this situation through a complete image of the destination is limited (Camprubí, 2015). According to Shaw and Williams (2002), fragmentation of the tourism system implies that different players with different values and interests are involved in the branding process, and this is one of the reasons why attempts to develop a regional brand identity have not been successful (Marzano, Scott, 2005).

Morrison et al. (1997) stressed the necessity of a central DMO which serves as an «industry coordinator», providing a clear focus and encouraging less industry fragmentation. Zach and Fesenmaier (2009) argue that DMOs should create a supportive environment to foster innovation, guide stakeholders in the development of innovative products, and enhance local partnerships to avoid fragmentation and achieve cohesion.

This idea of cohesion is closely linked to the second issue: cooperation. Bornhorst et al. (2010) affirmed that cooperation among stakeholders increases the success of tourist destinations, while fragmentation decreases it. Furthermore, Buhalis (2000) argued that destination branding is a difficult goal because of the destination’s tangible and intangible elements, and the different ideals that stakeholders have. In this regard, he suggested that they should collaborate, instead of competing, for the destination’s success (García et al., 2012).
Consistently with these studies, our results also show that the lack of cooperation between the Piedmont region and its sub-regional brands is another reason why the regional brand is poorly positioned in the international tourist market.

In his study on rural communities, Cai Liping (2002) posited that cooperative branding builds a stronger destination identity than an individual community can. Liping also found that both the region and its member communities benefited from cooperative branding by projecting a consistent cognitive image based on shared destination attributes.

The third major issue in this context is that of coordination and geographical peripherality. Results reveal that the Piedmont region, particularly its peripheral areas, lacks coordination by central institutions, which tend to gravitate towards Turin. Since no previous research has been conducted on peripherality and brand management, this finding represents a clear contribution of this paper.

As regards coordination, previous studies have argued that coordinators should create a mind-set among the different stakeholders in which tourism managers must begin to think laterally, forging partnerships to achieve organizational and collective goals (Selin, Chavez, 1995). Moreover, empirical research has shown that connecting a diverse array of stakeholder groups helped them to finally recognize their common interests and to realize the advantages to be gained from working together, as opposed to competing with each other (Go et al., 2004). The stakeholders gained a greater strategic knowledge of their geographic area and the factors which might affect the long-term sustainability of the regional industries (Williams et al., 1998). However, this is a collaborative process, which to date does not appear to have been taken into consideration in the Piedmont region.

Among the destination marketing activities, the need to create and manage a regional brand has only recently been recognized. According to Franch et al. (2007), the regional brand should be designed to convey an image and identity of the destination that are shared by its members (internal operators) and perceived as unique from outside the destination (the market). Thus, a regional brand should be a tool to foster collaboration within the destination, especially between the Region that manages the brand and the local operators. Moreover, a regional brand overcomes the individualism of the sub-regional areas by having a shared identity.

The findings make an important contribution to our understanding of the interrelationship among fragmentation, cooperation, coordination and peripherality, and inadequate regional branding strategies. They also have significant practical implications for the destination marketing managers of the Piedmont region.

The results highlight the need to adopt a regional destination brand for Piedmont based on the concept of an overarching umbrella brand for a geographic region, as Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) pointed out. To
this we can add the intended benefits for regional tourism planning of a management and marketing strategy which includes a sense of cohesion, and a basis for collaboration between regional destinations and local operators (Wheeler et al., 2011).

The findings also suggest that an umbrella brand would be beneficial to reduce fragmentation and avoid dissimilar destination images being emitted. Although Piedmont has adopted a brand with a logo and a payoff, the research shows that a clear branding process and the sharing of branding strategies at different geographical scales are still lacking.

It is well known in the literature that place branding is a process that goes beyond the mere creation of logos and slogans. Anholt (as cited in Govers, 2011, p. 227) suggests that place branding, at a higher level, should be about creating an overarching brand strategy or competitive identity that reflects a nation’s, city’s or region’s history, accomplishments and aspirations regardless of the markets to be served, that is, not to confuse place branding with place marketing (Anholt, 2010).

Thus, the variety of stakeholders shaping the tourism scenario of Piedmont should be coordinated by a stronger regional DMO whose role is to foster a collaborative and cohesive environment. Furthermore, the Region should engage in defining clear tourism policies and the continual creation of annual regional strategic tourism plans.

This would also favour the more peripheral territories, and being in line with regional strategies would reduce their sense of being abandoned by the regional institutions.

As the research results suggest, the Piedmont region is starting to implement a new process that, in addition to the already mentioned change in the tourism organizational structure, can give more recognition to the brand «Piemonte». According to the most recent provisions contained in the «annual program of promotional activities, hospitality and tourist information for the year 2018», the primary objective remains the maintenance of market shares in tourism, as well as the implementation of tourist flows in Piedmont, through the continuous interaction with other important regional sectors (e.g. culture, sport, environment, agriculture, industry, etc.) that can effectively contribute to consolidating the «Piemonte» Brand. In this regard, in January 2018, the Region launched the new brand «Piemonte, the place to visit» with the aim of giving the Piedmont destination a new identity for the international promotion of tourism.

This study also has several limitations that need to be addressed. Firstly, it was conducted using only qualitative methodology. Other studies have shown that integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods make it possible to use data in a more complete and synergistic way (Creswell et al., 2003; Kelle, Erzberger, 2004).
Another limitation concerns the nature of the respondents: the interviews were conducted only among the best informants, omitting all the other subjects with an active role in the promotion of tourism in Piedmont at a local level.

Furthermore, the results relate to the dynamics in this particular context, and therefore are not yet generalisable.

Thus, future research should address this issue using mixed methods, also taking the demand-side perspective into consideration. In order to generalise these results, further study should also include all the other local institutions, as well as other regions. It would also be very useful for academics to conduct comparison studies between other Italian regions and/or other foreign regions.

Finally, given the process of change that was initiated after the analysis reported in this paper, it would be of interest to conduct further investigation in Piedmont on the new regional and sub-regional strategies in the future.

References


