

Destination Branding Research: Mapping a Dynamic Field of Study

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Abstract: *Research on destination branding represents a propulsive area of study which is scattered across a wide range of journals. By focusing on research articles which are indexed in the Thomson Reuters Web of Science, this paper aims to provide a snapshot of the current stage of research in this area and to identify main research streams. In this regard, this brief note may serve as a useful resource for researchers new to this area, while it further points to emerging research topics related to destination branding*

Keywords: *destination branding; tourism marketing; conceptual map*

1. Introduction

Due to the ever-increasing competition among destinations, branding has become a major strategic destination management activity (e.g. Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2004). Resulting destination brands such can be viewed as important success determinants of a destination, because they can be used to communicate the unique identity of a destination, which facilitates its effective positioning.

Since the first two articles about the need for destination branding were published by Croatian authors Ozretić Došen, Vranešević, and Prebežac (1998), and by Morgan and Pritchard (1999), destination branding has evolved into one of the most popular research topics in the tourism literature. This is also reflected in the emergence of specialist field journals dealing with destination marketing, and branding in particular, such as the *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, or the *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*.

In order to provide a snapshot of the current state of research in this area, this letter seeks to present the results of a bibliometric content analysis which was conducted using the *Wordstat 6.1* textual data processing software. The results of this analysis may serve as a resource to tourism researchers in evaluating the evolution of this field and identifying key accents of contemporary research.

The essence of creating a brand is to facilitate consumers to perceive differences between competing suppliers within a product category. Once a distinctive brand has been established, and consumers got emotionally attached to it, the brand owner possesses a strong competitive advantage because his brand is unlikely to be replaced by other ones (Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011). Transferred to the tourism domain, the need for branding and promoting a differentiated image nowadays is more critical than ever, since many contemporary destinations provide tourists with high quality services and facilities, and almost each destination claims to have unique attractions, culture and heritage. Consequently, branding has become a necessity for today's destinations to become and remain competitive on the contemporary tourism marketplace.

Despite researchers (and practitioners) having early on recognized the importance of branding destinations, research in this area is still dominated by studies that focus on concepts like image and identity of a destination

(e.g. Konecnik & Go, 2008; Uysal, Chen, & Williams, 2000). Approaches to branding destinations, respective branding processes and brand strategies, have, in turn, received relatively little attention.

To assist future destination branding research, the present article seeks to provide an overview of the accents set in respective studies that have so far been published. In particular, the conducted bibliometric analysis may help researchers in identifying current research trends, as well as emerging research directions in this propulsive area of study.

2. Methodology

The data for this analysis were gathered by a search undertaken using the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) database of the ISI-Web of Knowledge, provided by Thomson-Reuters. In the search, the lexeme ‘brand*’ was used in combination with ‘destination’ and ‘tourism’ appearing in either the title, abstract or keywords provided authors. The wildcard ‘*’ served to cover all relevant manifestations of our focal lexeme ‘branding’ (e.g. ‘brands’, or e.g. ‘brand’ development). After extracting the initial list of references, the results were additionally checked to enhance validity of the analysis—i.e. to assure that all identified papers have, or are related to a tourism destination context. The selected document type was ‘article’ with an unspecified timespan. Finally, 208 results matched the search criteria and entered the subsequent content analysis.

The analysis was conducted using the *Wordstat 6.1* software package for textual data analysis. *Wordstat* has so far been employed in over 300 research papers covering diverse areas of study. E.g., in the international business domain, Dabić, González-Loureiro, and Furrer (2014) have used this software to analyze the evolution and current directions of research related to MNE strategies, while Pollach (2011) has used it in developing her critical review of *Wordstat's* suitability for quantitative analysis of textual data. To the knowledge of the author of this study, the software has not yet been used in any context related to destination branding.

The basic principle is to analyze key grammatical components mainly in nouns, verbs and adjectives. Results can then be transferred to a conceptual map that takes into consideration the frequency of individual concepts and their proximity to each other. Thereby, the globe dimension is proportional to the occurrence rate, while the proximity among words is a proportion weighted by that rate and the proximity in the text (i.e. co-occurrence by means of a Jaccard distance). Additional analysis outputs encompass e.g. the number of papers authored or co-authored by individual scholars, or the breakdown of respective papers according to year of publication.

3. Findings

As Figure 1 reveals, the number of research articles related to destination branding has increased steadily since the first article appeared in a journal covered by the *ISI Web of Knowledge*. Since the analysis has been run in April 2015, the record for the last year of examination should not be interpreted as a drop.

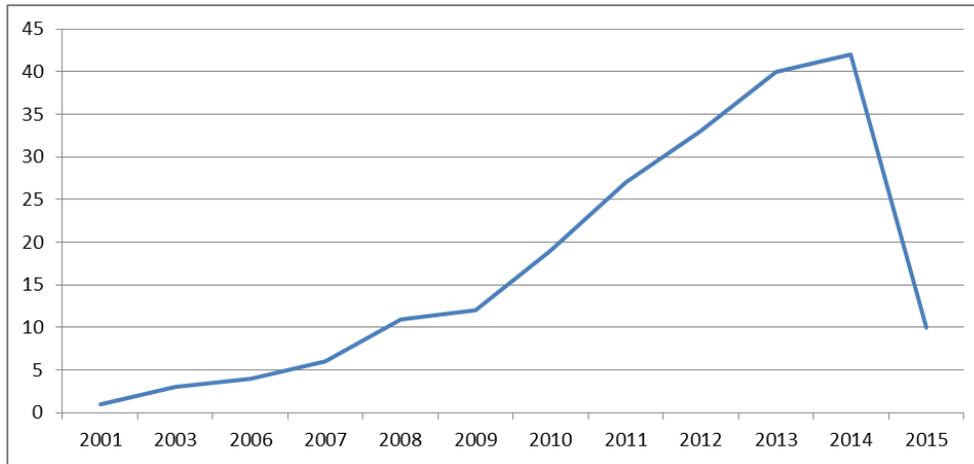


Fig. 1: Evolution of the Number of Publications on Destination Branding.

Source. Author draft from 208 articles retrieved from the Thomson Reuters Web of Science Core Collection (SCI-Expanded; SSCI, A&HI, ESCI).

According to Figure 2, most studies on destination branding have so far been published in *Tourism Management* which is considered one of the two premier tourism journals alongside the *Annals of Tourism Research* (or the *Top Tourism Trio* which further includes the *Journal of Travel Research* ranked second on this list). Interestingly to note, the *Annals* (ATR) do however not appear in this list, which reflects the mission of its editorial board to position ATR as a broad social science journal, with lesser emphasis on traditional management-related research. It is further noteworthy that a considerable share of destination branding research has been published in journals that do not have a primary business and management focus (e.g. *Tourism Geographies*), or in journals that have a broader marketing/management perspective, not focusing exclusively on tourism and/or hospitality (e.g. *Journal of Business Research*, *European Journal of Marketing*):.

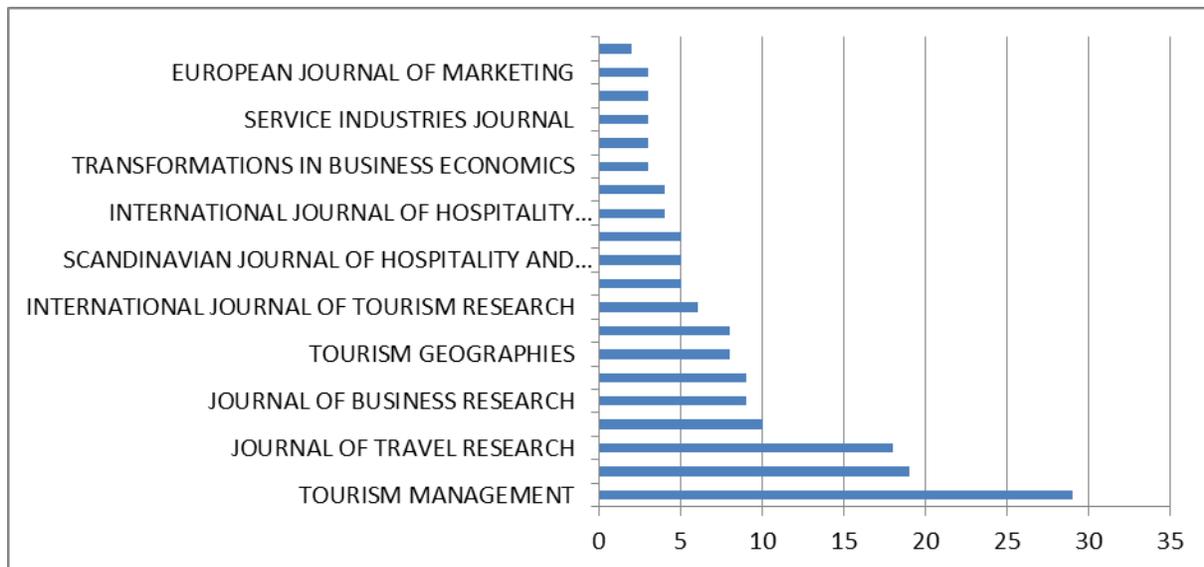


Fig. 2: Leading Outlets of Destination Branding Research

Source. Author draft from 208 articles retrieved from the Thomson Reuters Web of Science Core Collection (SCI-Expanded; SSCI, A&HI, ESCI)

Finally, a rough examination of a preliminary conceptual map, which was obtained following the previously described methodological steps, offers the following insight (Figure 3).

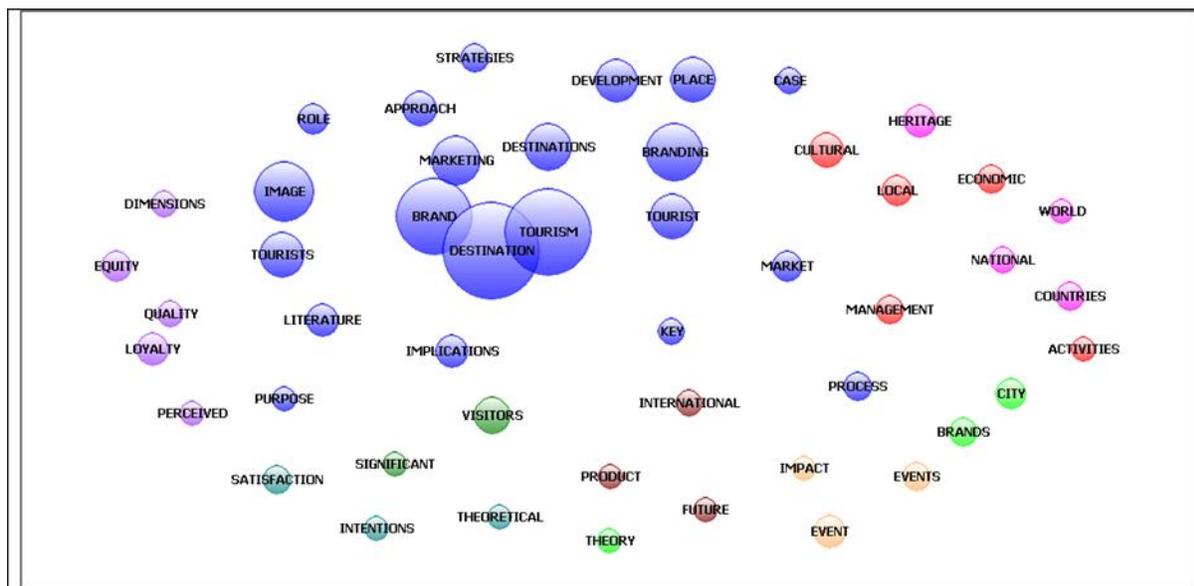


Fig. 3: Conceptual Map of Destination Branding Research

Source. Author draft from 208 articles retrieved from the Thomson Reuters Web of Science Core Collection (SCI-Expanded; SSCI, A&HI, ESCI).

First, the reviewed literature is dominantly centered on ‘branding’ of ‘destinations’, and their ‘brands’, thereby naturally having a strong ‘marketing’ focus. Since these concepts were taken as key terms during the literature search, this result is absolutely expected. Furthermore, research focusing on ‘strategies’ and ‘approaches’ is closely related to aforementioned research, but significantly less represented. Accordingly, this part of destination branding research can be regarded as still developing. Conversely, there is a significant share of studies conducting ‘image’-research, which represents a predecessor of branding research. It is, however, clear that a favorable and distinctive ‘image’ represents a key outcome of branding, why it should be regarded as an important success measure of the branding process.

Second, the results further well portray that ‘place’-branding research has spun off from the destination branding area, today representing an important area of study that is not exclusively focused on tourism. The premier outlet for research on this topic is *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* quarterly published by Springer. Since this journal is not indexed in the *Web of Science*, its articles dealing with the wider branding of places, as compared to tourist destinations, are not represented in the present analysis.

Third, a look at the outer circle of the map reveals at least three less-researched, potentially emerging research areas, which differ significantly. One group of studies such focuses on classical marketing-related outcomes, like e.g. ‘satisfaction’, ‘loyalty’, or ‘equity’ (left side), which represent key constructs encompassed in studies focusing on the concept of *customer-based brand equity* (CBBEQ). A second group is centered on ‘events’ which have particular value for ‘city’-branding purposes (lower-right side). Finally, a third, distinct group of studies centers on ‘cultural’ aspects and ‘heritage’, which are valuable in branding destinations at the both the ‘national’ and ‘local’ level. With regard to the ‘local’ level, ‘case’-based research, in particular, may provide valuable implications to destinations that have not (well) valorized such resources in their branding activities. Moreover, since this type of research typically focuses on very specific, smaller geographical areas, they can well portray the potential significant ‘economic’ benefits as an outcome of branding activities.

4. Conclusion

The results of the content analysis provide indicative insight into key accents and evolutionary steps of destination branding research. As expected, most represented research in this area is associated with the

marketing of destinations, and the concept of destination image, which has a long history in tourism research. Within this pool of dominantly marketing-oriented studies, relatively less focus is set to branding strategies and approaches, which, in turn, are issues with high inherent value for the practice of destination branding. Accordingly, future research might intensify its focus on more practical aspects underlying destination branding, in particular with a view to the management of tourist destinations.

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