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RESEARCH ARTICLE

DOES BRANDING IMPROVE DESTINATION IMAGE AND INTENTION TO VISIT RISKY COUNTRY: AN APPLICATION TO TOURISM IN LEBANON

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is becoming one of the most profitable industries but despite its importance, it is a vulnerable and defenseless industry prone to disaster (Hall, 2003). The “intangibility” and “inseparability” factors in the tourism industry limit the information availability to consumers (Hsu and Lin 2006), which make it impossible to eliminate the risk (Wong and Ye, 2009) of political instability, terrorism, natural disasters and much more. Image is one of the most significant factors of the prosperity of any destination and a key element when choosing a destination (Gartner, 1993). The aim of this paper is to elaborate on the effect of branding to enhance the image of a destination leading to a more willingness of tourists to visit a country that is known to be politically unstable as the case of Lebanon. The Results have shown that the better the branded image of a destination, the better the image perceived

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INTRODUCTION

Destination Image

Destination Image is commonly accepted as an important aspect in successful tourism development and destination marketing due to its impact on both supply and demand (Tasci and Gartner, 2007). According to Crompton (1979, p.18), “*an image may be defined as the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination*”. Image could exist before actual visitation, during visitation and after visitation. It is prone to change according to the evaluation of the experience lived. Evaluation could be favorable or unfavorable, leading to the creation of loyalty after trust or withdrawal after trust. Tourism destination must be induced in the mind of the consumer for the consumer to be able to make a decision whether to visit or not. To differentiate an image from another, it needs to have distinct features that the consumer uses with the evoked set in mind. The final evoked set leads to a certain attitude that creates the decisive emotion in attitude towards the destination and decision making. One of the earliest studies emphasizing the importance of destination image more than tangible resources was made by Hunt (1975) and constituted the starting point of the emerging of the concept.

In fact, destination image is a major motive for the tourist during the decision-making process. Although the tourist might not have enough information about the destination he/she wishes to visit and despite the fact that the information as perceived by the tourist may differ, slightly or majorly, from reality (Pearce, 2009; Hunt, 1975), the concept of a positive image still plays a crucial role in the decision of potential tourists. Also important is the factor of distinguishing destinations with same attributes and even those located in the same geographical location. This is why the image of a destination is one of the current issues in tourism marketing.

Nowadays, marketers are profoundly emphasizing the importance of creating a positive image when promoting their destination as the role of the image concept is highlighted in present growing international tourism marketing and by the competition between destinations (Konecnik, 2005) forming a very important aspect in consumer choice. The importance of the image is not limited to known destinations only but is also expanding to undeveloped countries and destinations that are not much known to tourists. The role of smaller destinations is further emphasized because the vast majority of tourists visit just ten main countries (Morgan, Pritchard and Piggot, 2002) and marketers are putting tremendous effort in revolutionizing this reality by forming a distinguished image for prospective tourists in target markets which could strengthen the competitiveness of a destination (Goodal, 1993; Gartner,

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1993). Consequently, tourism destinations often contest via the images held in the perception of prospective tourists and pay out a great deal of money, time, and effort in creating a positive image aimed at putting their destination in a higher position than other competitors (Konecnik, 2005). As competition is increasing worldwide and globalization is playing a major role in the development of countries, the influence of a destination's image is increasing in importance within the new concept of tourism. Generating an encouraging touristic image to prospective tourists could reinforce the competitiveness of this destination (Goodal, 1993; Gartner, 1993). Consequently, the new approach in promoting image destinations is by structuring an image to be visualized in the minds of forthcoming tourists and investing a lot of time and hard work in creating a positive image aimed at putting their destination in a higher position than that of other competitors. The position of less significant destinations is more highlighted because the largest numbers of tourists (70 %) vacation in just ten main countries, mentioned earlier (Morgan, Pritchard and Piggot, 2002). To build up a successful and promising marketing strategy, destination promoters should be alerted of their competitors' perceived strengths and weaknesses (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999a).

According to the above, destination image is first developed in the minds of tourists symbolizing cognition, and then passed through the evaluation of different alternatives of destinations or destination attributes available, symbolizing affection, and finally, arrives to the decision process whereby which destination to visit is chosen, which symbolizes conative. This definition applies to tourism research on destination image where favorable and unfavorable attitudes towards a destination constitutes a positive or negative image and then affects the behavioral intention to visit that destination or not to. On the other hand, Yilmaz *et al.* (2009) mention that most destination image studies investigated both the cognitive and the affective components of a destination image. The additions made by Echtner and Ritchie (1993) include the functional-psychological, the attribute-holistic and the common-unique. In the common-unique continuum, attributes of the destination range from common attributes that can nearly be observed and felt in all destinations, to unique characteristics that are special for that destination. Unique attributes, on the other hand, are those that are distinctive to that destination.

Destination Image in Risky Environment

According to Beirman (2003), safety and security is a foremost cause in tourists' decision to visit a destination. Tourists might cancel or hesitate visiting a destination based on risk perception (Irvine and Anderson, 2006) even if this perception is not real or precise (Roehl and Fesenmaier, 1992). After 9/11 the importance of risk has augmented and even small incidents can damage the image of a destination not because of the severity of the risk but because media is playing an important role in the customer decision making cycle. According to Tasci and Gartner (2007) media, as a result of its high standing, is able in short time to reach large number of customers and maneuver their decisions. The image of a destination is always changing according to the situation of the country but more precisely when a major incident takes place, the image becomes more vivacious (Avraham, 2004; Kim and Morrison,

2005). There are instances where a tourist formulates a destination image based on the country's political condition and security level; tourism is highly helpless towards these actions and can cause tourists to choose other destinations with more peaceful conditions. Tourism is one of the largest and fast-growing sectors, generating employment industries around the world. Peace is a state that not only indicates the absence of violence but also indicates the peaceful relationships among all social levels of society and between society and nature.

-Gap one: There is no answer for the following question: *Will enhancing destination image amplify tourist willingness to visit risky environment?*

Destination Branding

Tourism marketers build a positive destination image that identifies and differentiates the destination in question with a brand element mix (Cai, 2002). This destination image has a role in communicating the promise of an agreeable tourism experiences the tourist seeks before buying the final product. The products consist of tangible and intangible services which combined together paint the brand image of the tourism destination. Tangible attributes of the brand could be a historical site, transportation, beaches and others, while examples on intangible attributes could be history and culture. Both tangible and intangible attributes are seen with different perspectives by different customers. It is not easy to define the value of those attributes; consequently, setting a solid definition for a tourism brand itself is a complex process.

Customers perceive a brand for what it has to offer in different ways, so a brand image is created differently. The more solid and positive clear image a brand projects to customers, the better its conception is by customers, which is articulated in the brand image (Kapferer, 1997). Florek *et al.* (2006) explain that marketers project the identity of their brand through all the features and activities that differentiate the destination from other competing destinations, and the customer (the receiver) accepts that projection making it the perception of the image, stored in mind.

How a consumer perceives the brand affects the image and the intention to visit or purchase (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Keller, 1993, 1998; Low and Lamb, 2000; Woodside and Lysonski, 1989; Um and Crompton, 1990). Brand associations can be categorized into: attributes benefits and attitudes (Keller, 1993, 1998). Attributes are the descriptive features the consumer believes are associated with the brand and can offer some satisfaction to the consumer. Brand attitudes are the evaluation of the brand that creates the behavior towards the brands name. Brand image also contributes to consumers' behavior towards the brands name. Image is the expectations that the consumers believe they can receive from the brand. The expectations are derived from learned attributes communicated by marketers of the brand through different channels, directly to the consumers. Expectations are the supply of information to the consumers that affects buying decisions. Benefits are the personal value consumers believe the brand can give them. It is recognized that the image of a destination is formed with cognitive and affective evaluations by consumers (Baloglu, 1996; Baloglu and Mangalaglu, 2001; Baloglu and McCleary,

1999; Hosany *et al.*, 2007; Mackay and Fesenmaier, 2000; Stern and Krakover, 1993; Uysal *et al.*, 2000) where cognitive evaluation is formed by beliefs and knowledge while the affective evaluation is feelings toward the destination. Both are essential in building up the destination image on which buying it as a product is based.

An overall image of a destination affects how tourists perceive the destination, in addition to adding to that image their own perspective linked to their needs and desires. No one destination is envisaged in the same way by all. Destinations have unique attributes that highlight their perception and defines their differentiation from competitors. Thus destination branding relies on this differentiation uniqueness to project an agreeable image. It is a communicated attribute that draws expectations of a satisfactory, or more, tourist experience (Blain, Levy, and Ritchie, 2005; Pike, 2009).

Managing the desired brand image and enhancing it takes several steps to be accomplished. Brand image managers probe into the attributes they are promoting, developing them. They define next what benefits the tourist gets from those attributes and measure whether they are appropriate and satisfactory. Psychological rewards tourists get by visiting this destination is the next step leaves focus on the value experience left after visiting, creating a loyal customer of repeat visits, and promoting the experience to others under a title, the brand title. The more appropriate and desired this brand title to visitors, the more competitive the brand image, hence the location, leaving behind the affect of risk and uncertainty. Improving a brand image under uncertainty is a challenge.

Destination branding as a tool to improve the image of risky destination

The world has seen terrorism, economic recession and political instability, attributes that are dominating the discussion of current international affairs. (Baral, Baral and Morgan 2004). Hopper (2002) stated that this impact can negatively affect a destination's image. Branding touristic destinations under such conditions is a great challenge. As a signal of product positioning, the most important characteristic of a brand is its credibility (Erdem and Swait, 2004). When several criteria are affected by uncertainty, brands can serve as a product positioning for the country. Any country is looked at through its tourism, investment and immigration to establish its position of brand. Spain and India were ranked in the top 24 whilst using these criteria (The Anholt-GfK Roper, 2008).

It is well known that tourism sector is targeted by terrorism in many a country. Ankomah and Crompton (1990, p19) state that, "*Any evidence of domestic turmoil is likely to result in a decision not to visit that country*". To counter that decision, tourism marketers are to find out how to build a stronger image than the effect of domestic turmoil, and promote an attribute that can surpass the effect of turmoil in the tourists' minds. Putting the new more positive attribute into a strongly defined framework, pushing it in time in the industry is apt to have desired effects. The acts of terrorism in Lebanon have dealt a grave impact to tourism sector. Many Gulf countries warned their citizens from visiting Lebanon as of 2012. Lebanon is foreseen as a non stable and dangerous destination by most tourists around the world. Warnings to tourists to keep a low

profile from their own countries make the image of touristic Lebanon hazardous to Westerns including women, especially after the recent physical harassment news. According to Lebanese economist Ghazi Wazni The number of tourists dropped 23.7 percent in 2011 and 17.5 percent in 2012 only to decline by a further 12.5 percent in the first quarter of 2013.

Not countering such an image reflects on tourism and feeling of uncertainty hinders making the buying decision. Thus countries establish their own brand image promoting it strongly to cover an extended period of time. Each country promotes touristic sceneries, its people, and heritage. Countries are in competition for the best attributes. Thus, branding and differentiation is essential for credibility.

There is a considerable industry focused literature covering destination marketing issues from stake holder investments (Morgan *et al.*, 2003) to marketing management (Kotler, Haider and Rein, 1993, 2002 ; Ritchie and Crouch, 2000; Kotler and Gertner 2002) and destination branding (Morgan. *et al.*, 2002). Marketers choose a most prominent attribute to promote as a branding title of the destination. Countries are not considered the product itself, Simon Anholt (1998) states that a more important tool can be 'country as corporate brand', rather than 'country as a product brand'. Specific attributes for each creates the branding strategy for any country as a touristic destination, eliminating competitions, and differentiating it from other destinations.

A sound approach to creating such branding and maintaining it is consistency. All stakeholders in the destination use the same attribute to create a strong desired image with the customers, not forgetting that customers believe what they have encountered, experienced, shared with others or witnessed on that location. Sincerity is another factor of creating a reliable brand name. Different factors contribute to its success and failure, such as pace, people, infrastructure, natural disasters, terrorism and human factors. The brand image cannot be pre-designed. It comes naturally based on the destination history of tourism and services of the location.

Marketers, government and tourism decision makers are responsible to making the brand promise to tourist a sincere one, communicating relevant and contemporary brand tourists relates to, through market investigation, analysis and strategic recommendations. Lebanon was pictured as 'Incredible Lebanon' in 2001. Since then, tourism in India has grown more in value than volume. Tourists' perceptions of a destination and expectations influence the final destination decision. When the experience meets expectations, tourists would be positive consumers spreading a positive word of mouth about the destination, and get to be partners in creating the positive image of the destination. Positive WOM is a strong source to reduce perceived risk, for customers tend to believe their friends and relatives more than believing advertisements. Cognitive image is personal, and it reflects on the intention to visit, recommend and revisit a certain destination. It is argued that a person with a perceived positive image is more likely to recommend the destination (Bigné *et al.*, 2001). Destination knowledge is also crucial to the perceived image. It consists of destination awareness combined with the image projected by the destination. Familiarity with and awareness of the attributes of the

destination is a component of knowledge. Combining perceived risk and expectations of tourists toward the destination defines trust in the destination. The less perceived risk and higher expectations the more positive image of the destination that leads to more trust. Yet trust involves a calculated risk of disappointment. In turn, this creates a set of consumer behaviors. Customers seek out locations and brands that give them the feeling that they are doing something that relates to their sense of self. Many successful brands create positive customer feelings in their experiences or promised experiences which inspire them onto action beyond rationality. Trust leading to loyalty is created herein. There is a fine line of distinction between trust and confidence in the destination. Both trust and confidence relief the customer but lay a burden on the touristic destination to be truthful to the perceived picture.

-Gap Two: There is no answer for the following question: *Will improving branding of a destination enhances the image of a destination?*

Hypotheses formulation

The literature review investigated the effect of branding on the willingness to visit a risky destination. In reviewing previous literature, research gaps became apparent and lead to the research assumptions. These assumptions or hypotheses will be tested quantitatively in order to validate their accuracy and satisfaction level. Brand associations influence consumer evaluations toward the brand and brand choice (i.e., intentions to visit or purchase) (Aaker, 1996; Low and Lamb, 2000; Um and Crompton, 1990). Branding a destination creates two important added values: identification and differentiation (Qu *et al.*, 2011). As tourism promoting tourism heavily depends on the intangibility of the industry, branding will act as a tangible characteristic for the destination. Many studies reached a conclusion that the overall image of the destination is significant not only on the destination selection process but also on tourist behaviors in general (Bigné, Sánchez, and Sánchez, 2001; Cooper *et al.*, 1993). The two hypotheses were based on the two gaps found in the Literature Review.

H1: Branding will positively shape the tourist's overall image of a destination.

H2: Enhanced overall image of a destination will outcome in more willingness of tourists to visit a risky destination

From a methodological point of view, the model aims to establish the level of relationship between a predictor variable, branding of risky destination, and a criterion variable, willingness to visit risky destination.



Such a model relies on the definition of mediating variables and moderating variables (Baron and Kenny, 1986) which better explain the relationship between the independent variable represented in the predictor and the dependent variable represented in the criterion variable.

Measures and Results

In tourism research, there are three types of methods that can be employed to better understand the research problematic and the objectives behind examining it. These approaches include quantitative methodology, qualitative methodology and the experimental design (Jennings, 2001; Creswell, 2009). Qualitative methodology focuses mainly on interpreting, discovering, understanding, and exploring the research observable fact and the meaning associated with that requirements rather than hypothesis testing (Ryan, 2000). Accordingly, qualitative research tends to use unstructured or less structured techniques of data collection and data analysis such as in-depth interviews, observations, or focus groups (Jennings, 2001). The gap with qualitative research of destination image is the bias that might be created especially if the researcher is from the same origin as the destination under study, which is excluded in the case of quantitative methodology. On the other hand, quantitative methods are easy to manage and direct. Quantitative is used to test a theory rather than build one up. Moreover, they are easy to code and results are uncomplicated to investigate using sophisticated statistical techniques. Furthermore, the results assist the researcher to balance between different destinations. Finally, the experimental design methodology is a methodology that generates results to analyze the cause and effect relationships which is very much applicable to our needs. In this study we will be employing quantitative approach.

In this study the population is defined in one main group according to the objectives of the study, which is focused on Western citizens visiting Lebanon with different cultures and civilizations. This variety in cultures has granted the study a diversification in data and judgments. Sample size is one of the four inter-related features of a study design that can influence the detection of significant differences, relationships or interactions (Peers, 1996). Determining the size of the sample is important. Inappropriate, insufficient, or big sample size influences the quality and accuracy of research. "One of the real advantages of quantitative methods is their ability to use smaller groups of people to make inferences. However, a sample size that is too small will not allow you to properly address your research questions with your proposed statistical analysis and might lead to inaccurate results. On the other hand, samples that are too large may waste time, resources and money. Such large sample sizes will decrease the chance of a random sampling error, but since the sampling error is inversely proportional to the square root of the sample size, there is generally slight advantage gained from studying very large samples.

The tourism industry encompasses a number of different and overlapping component parts involved in the provision of hospitality, transport, recreation, activities, and attractions (Leiper, 2004; Brotherton, 1999). Thus, the optimum sample size depends on the parameters of the phenomenon under study, for example the rarity of the event or the expected size of differences in outcome between the intervention and the control groups. The questionnaire was distributed over a sample of 250 respondents where 116 were valid for analysis. The sample was divided according to Table 1.

Table 1. Respondents' characteristics

Respondent Characteristics	Details	Percentage
Gender	Male	34.48 %
	Female	65.52 %
Age	18 – 34	11.2 %
	35 – 49	51.72 %
	50 - 94	25.88 %
	65 -	11.2 %
Marital Status	Single	31.9 %
	Married	68.1 %
	Once	12.93 %
	Twice	25.86 %
Traveled Before	Three times	38.8 %
	More than Three	17.24 %
	Never	5.17 %

The validation of the Hypothesis was performed through SPSS 18 which automatically resulted in a bilateral coefficient. Since a unilateral coefficient is sufficient, the resultant p -value was divided by two ($p/2$). According to Norusis (2008) this adjustment to a one-tailed test is acceptable, if the direction of the effect is known.

Validation of Hypotheses

Hypothesis	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	B	β	P/2
H ₁	0.362	0.131	0.085	0.252	0.126	0.037
H ₂	0.352	0.124	0.078	0.408	0.202	0.002

As it can be seen that both P/2 values are less than 0.05 which has lead that both hypotheses are validated.

H₁ is validated.

H₂ is validated.

Conclusion

This study aims to test whether branding positively shapes the tourist overall image of a destination. It is accepted that Destination image is a collective impression of evaluations of a destination aligning what is mentioned by (Baloglu, 1996; Baloglu and Mangalolu, 2001; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999) and that cognitive and affective image components also enhance the destination image. The study showed that destination image creates an image in the tourists' minds. It is a unique brand image that influences the image of the destination accepted by tourists. A destination that needs to survive in a very competitive global market needs to work on an image that highlights a positively positioning attribute differentiating it from competitors.

Lebanon as a touristic destination economically relies on tourism. Politic instability has affected the work done on developing tourism, thus negatively affecting its economy. It has long been seen as one of the most desirable destinations in the Middle East, known for its beaches and mountain, providing positive experiences in tourism. Decades later, and since Lebanon lacks a strong, positive and unique destination image in the minds of potential tourists, economic effect of tourism is no longer reliable as it used to be. Once Lebanese tourism marketers and government adopt the notion of branding Lebanon for a specific attribute, this will create opportunities for Lebanon to again stand competitively in the marketplace. Lebanon has a task of recreating the old image tourists have had before, in addition to branding its image with a specific attribute that tourists focus on for their touristic

experiences. When tourists are able to identify a brand attribute, the destination is able to differentiate itself based on that specific branding attribute. And are able to evaluate the brand and attach to it (Keller, 2008, p. 107). Once tourists associate the name of Lebanon as a touristic destination with a branding attribute they want to buy, it is not easy to replace it with any other destination. Both, destination and brand are associated to each other creating the positive image which is quickly recognizable in the marketplace. Marketers enhance that image by sending positive messages, clarifying the image strengthening the bond between the brand and the name of Lebanon as a destination.

Information, in all its kinds, is an important source of forming an image. Once the information is positive, such as branding, a positive image is accepted and created in the minds providing favorable promises in promotion of an attribute in the destination that affects the destination image. Marketers have an essential role to assume in order to create the branding. They also have to follow up on the destination image frequently to examine if the image created is well perceived by the tourists and remaining so. Any discrepancy between the created image and the perception of tourists posts problems that should be researched and resolved. The study also validated the hypothesis that states an enhanced overall image of a destination will outcome in more willingness of tourists to visit a risky destination. An enhanced overall image of a destination results in a favorable cognitive feeling in the tourists which they talk about and use in their recommendations and word of mouth. Tourists' behavior is affected by what they have heard or learned.

The brand of the image positively affects the choice of the destination by the tourist that is the intention to visit the location. The tourists focus on the attribute highlighted by the brand promotion believing it and expecting the outcome experience promised even if the image was formed in unstable or risky conditions. The tourist considers his own personal gain from what the brand has to offer, or what he/she thinks that the brand has to offer, and according to his/her own needs. This belief affects the buying decision and the tourist's behavior toward the destination as a touristic location. When the tourist learns about the aspects of a location, tourist evaluates that piece of information, and produces a feeling towards it. When the feeling is a positive one, the buying decision is a positive cognitive one. To produce such a positive outcome, the original image has to be positive and strong. This in parallel creates differentiation for such location, consequently, positioning it in a unique place. The word of mouth and intention to visit/revisit are the most influential tourist behaviors researched. They are symbols of customer loyalty where the impact of the brand and image positively affects any decision taken later. A loyal customer would positively talk about the location he has visited and recommend it to others, especially if a revisit is scheduled.

Theoretical

From a theoretical point of view the results aligns with studies (Florek, Insch, and Gnoth, 2006; Nandan, 2005) that tourism branding directly affects the image of a destination and will create a competitive advantage over competitors (Morrison and Anderson, 2002).

Managerial

From a managerial point of view, this study presented essential information for destination managers especially managers of risky destinations. The results were clear indications for marketers to emphasize on the brand of a destination. Lebanon never promoted a brand for tourism even though this industry is the most profitable industry in Lebanon. Being a service country requires adding advantage over other competitors and branding is extremely important for promoting destinations.

Limitations and recommendations for future study

There are three limitations for this study

The first limitation is that the data collection was conducted in a period where the political situation in Lebanon was not stable, thus all the tourists interviewed already are visiting this country in risky occasion. It would have been more reflective interviewing tourists visiting this country under stable conditions where their risk tolerance may be lower than our respondents. The second limitation is that the questionnaire was distributed in English and some of the respondent's primary language in not English. It is suggested to have the questionnaire translated to more than one language. The third limitation is that we were not able to distribute questionnaires in competing destination and thus understanding why the tourists have chosen their destination over Lebanon.

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