



POWER IN DESTINATION BRANDING

Giuseppe Marzano

San Francisco Business School, Ecuador

Noel Scott

The University of Queensland, Australia

Abstract: This paper examines those forms of social power in evidence in a destination branding process. Despite numerous conceptualizations of destination branding as a collaborative process, this paper finds that power is exerted in various forms and a destination branding process can have a positive outcome even if there is a lack of unity and collaboration amongst stakeholders. Furthermore this study provides a detailed inventory of how stakeholders advanced their interests in a branding process by using power in the forms of persuasion and authority. The Gold Coast, Australia, destination branding process was selected as a case study as it provides a context where branding is of singular importance to stakeholders. **Keywords:** destination branding, power, collaboration, persuasion, authority. © 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

The study of destination brands has focused on their external relevance, or in other words the understanding of how through the destination brand, destination marketing organizations are able to shape tourist behavior (Pike 2004) with the objective of generating revenues for the destination (Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott 2002). A distinctive feature of the destination brand is its conceptualization as the outcome of a multi-stakeholder collaborative decision making process (Prideaux and Cooper 2002). From this perspective branding in tourism does not adhere to the underlying assumption of traditional product and service brand management that the whole process of creation and management of the brand is controlled by and within an individual organization (Low and Fullerton 1994). Furthermore, the collective phenomenon of destination branding (Hankinson 2004) has been described as a “highly complex and politicized activity” (Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott 2003:286) that involves multiple stakeholders. Within tourism literature, it is recognized that stakeholders may carry different interests (Ramírez 2001), define their role in different ways

Giuseppe Marzano is the Dean of the San Francisco Business School in Quito, Ecuador. He is also Honorary Research Advisor at The University of Queensland, School of Tourism, and researches in the area of multi-stakeholder decision making processes in tourism with particular emphasis on image building and destination branding. **Noel Scott** is a Senior Research Fellow at The University of Queensland, School of Tourism. (4072, Australia. Email <noel.scott@uq.edu.au>). He has published extensively on sustainable tourism destination management.

within a certain community (von Friedrichs Grangsjø 2001), and that stakeholders' "interests cannot be summarily restricted to consideration of a single variable" (Sautter and Leisen 1999:316–317). However, tourism literature has a tendency to romanticize stakeholder interactions which are often merely described in terms of unity and collaboration (Hall 2003). Less attention has been devoted to the study of how, through the use of power, a stakeholder, or a coalition of stakeholders gain the ability to advance their will or to impose their interest (West 1994).

Several studies have addressed the issue of power within the context of tourism. A critical theoretical underpinning for studies of power in tourism is offered by Foucault's conceptualisation of power (Hollinshead 1999). The building of the image of a tourism destination can be understood as a process in which the reality of the world is transformed, through both inclusion and exclusion, into a metaphor suitable to provide the best representation and visual cliché (Dann 2002) instrumental in reinforcing the mental associations through which the destination brand equity is built (Konecnik and Gartner 2007). Foucault's (1980) conceptualization of power is therefore especially relevant in understanding how the image of a tourism destination and more specifically, a destination brand, is created.

The destination brand is described a powerful tool with the ability to create emotional appeal and brand image is considered crucial to the marketing success of a tourism destination (Leisen 2001).

While Foucault's works have influenced tourism studies, Church and Coles (2007) observe that they provide limited ability to understand the "locus" of power within a multi stakeholder decision making process. Moreover, while studies approaching tourism from a Foucauldian perspective, although sparse (Tribe 2006), tend to explicitly refer to Foucault as source of the theoretical inspiration, other approaches to the understanding of power in tourism are so far extremely limited. As a consequence, Church and Coles observe that "a more detailed treatment of power is vital to a fuller understanding of tourism" (2007:xii).

Hall (1994) and Hall and Jenkins (1995) describe the tourism policy and planning field as an area of conflict and contrasting interests amongst stakeholders and examine them from a community decision making perspective. Critical from this perspective is the contribution of Lukes to the theory of power. Lukes' (1974) contribution to the understanding of power can be summarised in three dimensions: 1) power is linked to the ability of controlling the political agenda, 2) conflicts, both observable as well as latent, must be included in the study of power, and 3) the study of power must take into account real as well as subjective interests. Church and Coles (2007) consider that one example of Lukesian power is found in the work of Reed (1997) who challenges the view of tourism as a pluralistic arena by providing evidence of how tactics were used in order to exclude, for instance, the Chamber of Commerce from a tourism planning decision-making process. As Reed (1997:585) reports "The Chamber was further excluded because despite its membership on the steering committee, it did not receive

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