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Research Paper

Assessing destination brand equity: An integrated approach



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ABSTRACT

Commonly, when referring to destination brand equity, four dimensions are taken into consideration: awareness, image, quality and loyalty. Building on product and corporate brand equity and the definition of destination branding, the present paper includes a marketing approach towards developing a structural model incorporating a fifth dimension; that of cultural brand assets. The proposed model, focused on cultural urban destinations, was tested from the perspective of international tourists visiting Rome. Findings indicate that the five dimensions are interrelated and important for the customers' evaluation of a cultural destination. Consistent with place and destination branding literature, the significance of specific cultural brand assets is emphasized. The study provides practitioners with a better understanding of the dimensions which may lead to favorable brand evaluations. Finally, it describes the structural relationships which are developed between assets, awareness, associations and quality, and links them with the intention to re-visit and recommend as outcomes leading to destination loyalty.

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1. Introduction

Research in the field of destination brand equity mainly builds upon works on corporate and product brand equity (e.g. Aaker, 1991; Cobb-Walgren, Ruble, & Donthu, 1995; Keller, 1993; Yoo & Donthu, 2001, 2002; Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000). According to Aaker's seminal work (1991), brand equity measures are classified into five dimensions: awareness, associations/image, perceived quality, loyalty and brand assets. In the destination brand equity context, the first four dimensions are included in the respective models. In this context, awareness refers to destination name and characteristics, and associations/image to perceived value and personality. Perceived quality is connected to organizational aspects, and loyalty to revisitation and recommendation (e.g. Boo, Busser, & Baloglu, 2009). On the other hand, Pike (2007) argues that the assets dimension, which is mentioned mostly in relation to the financial measure of destination brands, is of little practical value with only few exceptions of licensing opportunities (i.e. 'I ♥ NY'). Yet, competitive advantage and competitiveness, which are both also connected to other proprietary brand assets (Aaker, 1991), have attracted some research attention (Mechinda, Serirat, Popajjit, Lertwannawit, & Anuwichanont, 2010; Pike, Bianchi, Kerr, & Patti, 2010; Yüksel & Yüksel, 2001).

In corporate and product branding, a brand is defined as 'a product or service made distinctive by its positioning relative to the competition and by its personality, which comprises a

unique combination of functional attributes and symbolic values' (Hankinson & Cowking, 1993, p. 10). Destination branding, according to Blain, Levy, and Ritchie (2005, p. 337), is 'the set of marketing activities that (1) support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that readily identifies and differentiates a destination; (2) consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; (3) serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; and (4) reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk'. Taking into account these definitions as well as how brand assets are recognized and measured (Farquhar, Han, & Ijiri, 1991), this study argues that a marketing perspective could assist Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) to go one step closer to, and benefit from, the identification of their cultural brand assets. In fact, the main interest hereby focuses on cultural destination brands, which refer to the convergence of the dimensions of tourism, culture and heritage of the place brand hexagon (Anholt, 2004). Focusing on cultural destination brands, specific cultural assets have in the past been investigated, either in terms of their impact on brand equity or on a specific brand equity dimension. For instance, such has been the case of investigating the impact of events on brand equity in general (Dimanche, 2002) and on image in particular (Richards & Wilson, 2004). Yet, so far no study has built on tourists' evaluations of various cultural assets. Addressing this gap, the present study follows a customer-based approach to help DMOs recognize which assets are regarded as unique and, thus, constitute the cultural brand assets of a cultural destination. In detail, DMOs, in their effort to build cultural destination brands, keep on investing in various cultural assets.

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However, respective stakeholders usually do not have a clear view of which cultural assets are actually important cultural brand assets and, thus, contribute to their branding efforts. The present study attempts to address this need. The hereby exploratory approach to cultural brand assets does not go as far as defining their market values, but is limited to cultural assets that may contribute to the creation of a competitive advantage. This is achieved by recognizing the cultural brand assets that are perceived as unique; an aspect compatible with the definition of branding and brand assets. Letting tourists themselves evaluate those cultural brand assets which make the destination unique, as well as investigate all five brand equity dimensions, is believed to be an important development that provides evidence on those cultural brand assets which have a direct impact on brand equity.

The study provides a first approach more in line with all five brand equity dimensions (namely assets, awareness, association, quality and loyalty). On the other hand, literature on destination brand equity is not characterized only by limited research on the importance of the assets dimension. The literature review, in fact, reveals a respective limited effort in describing the structural relations developed between brand equity dimensions (e.g. [Boo et al., 2009](#); [Ferns & Walls, 2012](#); [Konecnik & Ruzzier, 2008](#)). Consequently, the present study, seeking to take previous research (e.g. [Boo et al., 2009](#); [Konecnik & Gartner, 2007](#)) to the next level, tests a more complete brand equity model in the case of a cultural destination. To be exact, the study wants to apply and extend the concept of brand equity to destination brand measurement using an integrated modeling approach. The first objective refers to developing a valid and reliable model for assessing the evaluation of cultural destination brands. The model, which is developed during this process, then seeks to empirically test the relationships among brand equity dimensions when the assets dimension is added. Finally, the study aims at validating the model structure. In order to reach the research objectives, a multi-dimensional approach to brand equity is followed.

This study provides a five-dimensional model useful for evaluating destination brands and describes the path structure among brand equity dimensions. Some of these paths have been verified in the cases of different destination categories (e.g. [Boo et al., 2009](#)). Yet, findings suggest that these paths need to be further enriched. The detailed description of the model provides significant input both for academics and practitioners. Finally, implications spur additional research which will make destination brand equity more easily comprehended and applied by destination stakeholders.

2. Destination brands: assessing the role of culture

The importance of culture has been repeatedly stressed in destination branding literature (e.g. [ATLAS, 2007](#); [Buhalis, 2000](#)), whereas branding a destination is defined as 'the process used to develop a unique identity and personality that is different from all competitive destinations' ([Morrison & Anderson, 2002](#), p. 17). [Arzeni \(2009, p. 3\)](#) further argues that 'creating a strong relationship between tourism and culture can help destinations become more attractive and competitive'. Cultural destination brands have been particularly popular among tourism practitioners and academicians (e.g. [Buhalis, 2000](#); [ONTIT, 2012](#)). Besides, emphasis on heritage and cultural assets is believed to 'have the potential to be developed into a special niche in the industry' ([Apostolakis, 2003](#), p. 796).

2.1. Rome as a cultural destination

According to [Baloglu and Mangalolu \(2001\)](#), the Italian image is first and foremost connected to culinary associations referring to food, cuisine, pasta and wine. Italy is also recognizable for its

historic images and ancient ruins, while it is described as memorable, magnificent, beautiful, majestic and magical, as well as fascinating, exciting, stimulating, exotic, colorful and attractive ([Baloglu & Mangalolu, 2001](#)). In general, it seems that Italy in the beginning of the 21st century was perceived to provide more 'quality' experience than three of its competitors; namely Egypt, Greece and Turkey. Considering the contribution of 'cities of art' (*le città d'arte*), as also summarized by the National Observatory for Tourism ([ONTIT, 2012](#)), tourism authorities' efforts should target cultural tourism ([Ministry of Tourism and Sport, 2012](#)).

The Italian capital, Rome, is selected as the destination brand to be studied, following [Leuthesser, Kohli, and Harich's \(1995\)](#) recommendation, according to which it is preferable to choose and analyze brands that are sufficiently well-known to the consumer. Rome, together with London and Paris, is considered to be among the most attractive cities ([van der Ark & Richards, 2006](#)), as part of the art of the Roman culture is represented by its architecture and remains from the antiquity (e.g. the Coliseum). Other representations of the Roman culture are also connected to its significance in European History. Saint Peter's Basilica is an example of Rome's importance for one of the main religions worldwide, while other parts are also linked to Italy's national past (e.g. the National Monument to Victor Emmanuel II). All these monuments and heritage sites reflect Rome's influence on the known world's developments over the past 2500 years. This heritage continues to attract people from all over the world, reinforcing its long-standing reputation as the Eternal City ([Visdeloup, 2010](#)), and justifies the historic center of Rome having been listed as a World Heritage Site ([UNESCO, 1990](#)).

Historical edifices are essential ingredients of Rome's identity, image, and attractiveness; for instance, the Coliseum and the Vatican Museums attract millions of tourists annually and are some of the main competitive characteristics of Rome. It is, however, considered necessary to point out that visitability rates are not available for other open sites, such as the *Fontana di Trevi* (i.e. Trevi Fountain). Such open sites, together with a variety of events and festivals as well as the city's overall atmosphere, may contribute to *Vacanze Romane* (i.e. Roman Holiday). Looking at the financial side of this picture, it is considered that for 'every euro spent on a festival there's a return of 7–8 euro and an economic impact equal to 7 times the investment made' ([Maussier, 2010](#), p. 19). Moreover, Rome, having realized quite early the significance and possible contribution of events such as the Olympic Games, hosted them in 1960. In fact, and in order to once again promote its heritage, some of the events were held in venues rich with ancient history ([Olympic Games, 2012](#)).

2.2. Brand equity

[Aaker \(1991, p. 15\)](#) defines brand equity as 'a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbol, which add to or subtract from the value provided by a producer, by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers'. The concept of consumer-based brand equity proposed by [Aaker \(1991, 1996\)](#) and [Keller \(1993, 2003\)](#) offers destination marketers a potential performance measure of the extent to which brand identity has successfully been positioned in the market ([Pike et al., 2010](#)). Yet, in destination branding, only in a few cases is a comprehensive model being tested ([Boo et al., 2009](#); [Konecnik & Gartner, 2007](#)). The literature review helped identify the dimensions of destination brand equity and select the most appropriate way to measure each variable in relation to the dimensions proposed by [Aaker \(1991\)](#). Then, in order to investigate the structural relationships between the brand equity dimensions in a tourism content, [Boo's et al. \(2009\)](#) model has played a fundamental role.

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