



Progress in Tourism Management

Destination Marketing Organizations and destination marketing: A narrative analysis of the literature

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H I G H L I G H T S

- The first comprehensive narrative analysis of the destination marketing literature.
- The literature is structured around the key themes DMOs are involved with, in the pursuit of destination competitiveness.
- Provides a succinct summary of research opportunities based on key relevant challenges faced by practitioners.

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This article presents the first narrative analysis of the areas of research that have developed within the destination marketing field since its commencement in 1973. Given the broad extent of the field, and the absence of any previous reviews in four decades, a key challenge is in providing a focus for such a disparate body of knowledge. The review is structured around one principal question: 'To what extent is the Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) responsible for the competitiveness of the destination?'. In pursuit of this underlying question, we address a number of themes including nomenclature and the DMO, the evolution of the destination marketing literature, competitiveness as the DMO *raison d'être*, and DMO effectiveness including issues of branding and positioning, and future research themes in the field.

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1. Introduction

Destination marketing is now acknowledged as a pillar of the future growth and sustainability of tourism destinations in an increasingly globalised and competitive market for tourists (UNWTO, 2011). Published research related to destination marketing represents an important growth area in tourism that has become a distinct paradigm (Bowen, Fidgeon, & Page, *in press*), and its significance is reinforced by four key propositions that are associated with global tourism: first, most aspects of tourism take place at destinations (Leiper, 1979); second, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) proposed that destinations were "the fundamental unit of analysis in tourism" (WTO, 2002); third, destinations have emerged as the biggest brands in the travel industry (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2002), and lastly, a large number of nations, states and cities are now funding a Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) as the main vehicle to compete and

attract visitors to their distinctive place or visitor space. Therefore, not only has the destination and destination marketing emerged as a central element of tourism research (Fyall, Garrod, & Wang, 2012; Wang & Pizam, 2011), it is associated with the operational activities undertaken in the highly competitive business of attracting visitors to localities (UNWTO 2007, 2011). While this in itself is not a new activity (see Ward, 1995 for a historical analysis), what is new is the scale and extent of this highly competitive activity as acknowledged by Ashworth and Page (2011) in relation to urban tourism, which equally applies to all types of destinations.

1.1. Aims of this analysis

A review of the first 40 years of destination marketing research is challenging for at least two reasons. First, this is a broad field with a diversity of research topics, spread across up to 150 English language tourism-related journals (see Goeldner, 2011) including the *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management* established in 2012, and an unknown number of non-tourism journals, which examine the DMO from a supply perspective, considering themes as varied as destination information systems, the politics of DMO

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governance, destination lifecycles, stakeholder collaboration, brand identity development, funding, and marketing communications; while the demand (consumer–traveller) perspective includes issues such as consumer perceptions, decision making, and loyalty. Second, while some *Progress in Tourism Management* articles have been underpinned by previous papers that commented on discrete elements of destination marketing (see for example [Ashworth & Page, 2011](#); [Buhalis & Law, 2008](#); [Weed, 2009](#)) and reviews of contemporary themes such as the growth of medical tourism destinations (see for example [Connell, 2013](#)), no prior review of the destination marketing field was identified in a search of the literature. Indeed, Noel Scott posted a list of 182 published tourism-related literature reviews on TRINET (5/9/12),¹ following input from listserve members, which did not contain any references to an analysis of the destination marketing literature.

Therefore, given the field is now well established after four decades of academic work with many Faculties now offering modules in Destination Marketing, a ‘situation analysis’ might be helpful to map out and provide a critical discussion of the field ([Fyall et al., 2012](#)). However, following [Weed \(2009\)](#), this analysis does not attempt an ‘epiphanic’ approach, which would lay claim to identifying a single truth of past, present and future research due to the arrival of the field’s ‘maturity’ or ‘turning point’ that just happens to occur at the time of writing the review. Instead, the aims of the review are two-fold: first, we seek to identify and provide an overview of the subject’s emergence and a coherent roadmap of the key research themes that have emerged since the first studies were published in the early 1970s, and secondly, to provide a summary of possible future research agendas structured around the principal theme of the review – the role of the DMO in leading destination marketing.

1.2. Structure of this analysis

To provide a focus for the review, the paper is structured in the following way: i) the analysis commences with a discussion of the key challenge of delimiting the field, including nomenclature and the DMO; ii) the evolution of the destination marketing literature is then summarised; iii) a destination marketing framework is proposed with sustained competitiveness presented as the DMO *raison d’être*; iv) DMO effectiveness in the pursuit of destination competitiveness is discussed under the themes of destination brand identity development, destination positioning and marketing performance measurement tracking; v) the paper concludes with a summary of possible future research themes in the field.

2. Understanding destination marketing research: delimiting the field

A destination represents an amalgam of a diverse and eclectic range of businesses and people, who might have a vested interest in the prosperity of their destination community; although research on small and micro businesses has indicated that not all stakeholders are necessarily interested in the viability of the destination, when their principal objective for operating a business is lifestyle ([Thomas, Shaw, & Page, 2011](#)). Nevertheless, the success of individual tourism ventures and cooperatives will depend to some extent on the competitiveness of their destination ([Cai, Qui, & Li, 2007](#); [Pike, 2004a](#)) and the leadership of the amalgam of stakeholders associated with the tourism industries ([Leiper, 2008](#)). Emerging research empirically testing this proposition includes

SMEs’ dependence on DMO resources in Finland ([Seppala-Esser, Airey, & Szivas, 2009](#)) and hotel performance in Spain ([Molina-Azorin, Periera-Moliner, & Claver-Cortes, 2010](#)). Therefore, if the main focus for marketing leadership of a destination is the DMO, then a critical understanding of the development of destination marketing by DMOs is vital to understanding the factors and circumstances that may constrain or facilitate the effective execution of their destination marketing function. In fact the marketing and promotion of destinations is now a ubiquitous activity, aided by the rise in new technological innovations such as social media which many destinations have harnessed in varying degrees (see for example [Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013](#) for a review of the rise of Web 2.0 and how DMOs have harnessed it).

2.1. Applied and fragmented nature of the destination marketing literature

Much of the initial stimulus for destination marketing emerged from the germane area of tourism marketing, its evolution the subject of excellent syntheses (see for example [Gilbert, 1989](#)) which provided the foundations for the development of this more specialised literature focused on the destination. In a subsequent review by [Ritchie \(1996\)](#), it was argued that tourism marketing research had been undertaken by those with a market orientation. Likewise, destination marketing research has by its very nature been undertaken by academics with an interest in applied studies that address relevant challenges faced by practitioners, rather than pure or basic research. There are a number of exceptions such as [Ashworth and Voogd \(1990\)](#) which made very clear distinctions about the contribution of geography to place marketing: such studies argued that places are unique and their marketing was not a simple process of translating conventional marketing theory and practice derived from goods and services marketing, a feature reiterated in recent synthesis of the role events can play in transforming cities ([Richards & Palmer, 2010](#)). Other recent research on evolutions in service dominant logic and its application to marketing in tourism have illustrated the shift in thinking towards co-creation and co-production in the way businesses and destinations can now engage with their customers ([Shaw, Williams, & Bailey, 2011](#)). Despite these distinct geographical contributions to research on cities as destinations, it is evident as [Malhotra \(1996\)](#) argued that destination marketing research is generally concerned with the application of theories and techniques to identify and contribute towards solving marketing management decision problems. Thus, the field has been characterised by a fragmented applied research approach rather than theory building. [Knight \(1999\)](#), who identified a similar approach in the services marketing literature, suggested this is characteristic in the early development of many academic fields.

Certainly there has been a lack of conceptual ideas, as well as replication studies to re-test findings in destination marketing research. Ryan raised this issue on the TRINET discussion list (30/7/08), by citing comments made by Pearce in 1991 that there had been a general lack of comparative research in the tourism field. One possible reason for this is that there is little editorial journal space available for replication studies, though there is more recent evidence of a changing position at least in the case of destination image research in the key tourism journals in terms of replicating previous studies beyond individual case studies. Another plausible reason has been the nature of continuous change occurring in the tourism macro environment, stimulating new research directions. Few other industries have evolved as quickly as tourism has during the past few decades ([Jafari, 1993](#)). Many transformations have occurred within the tourism sector since the destination marketing literature commenced in the early 1970s, which have had wide

¹ TRINET is an online discussion group comprising over 2000 tourism academics with postings made by individual and replies and discussion freely occurring.

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