An Analysis of brand-building elements in the Official Mediterranean Tourism Websites.


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Abstract

To which extent electronic branding has shed light on the concept of the destination marketing? This study seeks to fill the gap in the theoretical analysis of the 23 official tourism websites of the Mediterranean countries. Based on the content analysis of the pages through the slogans, graphic projections, verbal expressions and implied messages, this paper aims to highlight unique marketing strategies in order to create a strong brand. Results of the study point the wide diversity of the official websites. Some of them do not maximize their utility as marketing tools (Tunisia, Palestine), on the contrary Monaco and Slovenia have elements of innovation. Implications of the findings are discussed and directions for future research are provided.

Keywords: Destination Branding, E-Marketing, Mediterranean Tourism

Track: Tourism Marketing
1. Introduction

Tourism destination all over the world spend millions of dollars so as to create a favorable brand image. An important tool for creating destination brand image is e-marketing and especially the websites of the tourism destinations, as emphasized by numerous researchers. In line with previous research, we focus on Mediterranean official tourism destinations websites and explore the brand identity building elements that have been used.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Destination Branding

The extension of the brand concept from products to service industries such as tourism, offers implications for resort and travel destination management (Buhalis, 2000; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998; Williams, Gill & Chura, 2004; Woodside, Cruickshank, & Dehuang, 2007). The challenge of branding destinations lies within the complexity of the decision process on the part of tourists. As the purchase of a destination mix has an inherent uncertainty and is usually expensive, tourists are not able to try the destinations before making a choice (Eby et al.1999; Gartner 1989). As a result, destination image is a critical stimulus in motivating the tourist (Um & Crompton, 1990). Williams and Palmer (1999) find that the diversity and complexity of tourism products make information provision difficult for both national and regional tourism organizations. To advance destination image to the level of branding, a link needs to be established. Kaplanidou and Vogt (2003) indicated that a brand can further build upon other destination components after establishing an image that differentiates a destination from its competitors. They suggested that destination brands could be envisioned by identifying other dimensions in the construct.

2.2 Internet and Tourism Industry

Many studies argue that the Internet is a particularly effective communication (Gretzel & Fesenmaier 2007; Kim & Fesenmaier 2007; Murphy et al. 2003; Xiang & Fesenmaier 2006). According to Kim and Fesenmaier (2008) the process of information search for travel planning using the Internet can be understood as comprising three distinct stages: (a) search, (b) primacy, and (c) elaboration. Online travel planners often begin their trip planning by using search engines (i.e., Excite, Google, Yahoo!, etc.) to find and choose useful information sources (Marchionini 1995; Pan & Fesenmaier 2006; Wöber 2006). Thus, according to Levene (2006) when an online travel planner first evaluates the relevance and usefulness of a Web site, he or she evaluates the Web site within a short period of time in an attempt to form an overall impression of it. Likewise, Buda and Zhang (2000) and others (Haugetvedt & Wegener 1994) stressed the effect of primacy in the areas of attitude formation, information presentation, attractiveness, willingness to purchase, purchase behavior, as well as perceived performance of an advertised product. This overview showed that the higher a link’s position in a list of links, the greater the probability that information searchers online will click on that link.

2.3 Optimize the Branding Tourism Destination building through Internet

Zach et al. (2007) demonstrated that most destination marketing Web sites focus primarily on information provision and usability with the belief that this strategy will be sufficient to attract the prospective visitor to the destination. Several studies are examined in the literature, including (Hwang et al. 2006; Kim & Fesenmaier 2005, 2007; Tapscott & Williams 2006). Collectively, these studies support showing that the Internet is indeed one of the most persuasive media for destination marketing to influence tourists’ travel planning process.
Accordingly to Lee et al. (2006) the average consumer is increasingly interested in exploiting the Internet’s unique features, such as graphical interactivity with the audience, low-cost accessibility world-wide, hyperlinks with other travel suppliers and design flexibility, to attract more tourists and better position their state in the intense competition for visitors. Hence, brand image is a key component in the formation of a clear and recognizable brand identity in the market (Williams & Palmer, 1999). As mentioned above, we arrive to the conclusion that the brand identity of a country depends also on the structure of the official tourism website.

3. Methodology of research

The present research concerns the official websites of 23 Mediterranean countries. The overall approach for the analysis is content analysis, an “observational research method that is used to systematically evaluate the symbolic content of all forms of recorded communications” (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991, p. 243). The data were grouped (Table 1) and variables were categorized. In analyzing branding elements and evaluating each site in terms of efficiency and market targeting, the key points of the content analysis are the slogans and the visual, verbal, and graphic images projected on the official countries’ websites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of country &amp; URL</th>
<th>Slogan</th>
<th>Appearance of the site</th>
<th>Target group</th>
<th>Promoted products and services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greece <a href="http://www.visitgreece.gr/">http://www.visitgreece.gr/</a></td>
<td>“the true experience”</td>
<td>Mostly blue colours, pictures of Acropolis</td>
<td>Tourists who are interested in ecology and culture</td>
<td>Nature, archeological and cultural monuments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey <a href="http://www.tourismturkey.org/">http://www.tourismturkey.org/</a></td>
<td>“Turkey welcomes you”</td>
<td>Orange background, many pictures, availability to explore many monuments and sights via 3-D video</td>
<td>Youth, tourists for sport recreation, ecology, monument and culture interested tourists</td>
<td>Religiosity, diversity of activities (ornithology, adventure tourism, conferences ) arts, cuisine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus <a href="http://www.visitcyprus.com/wps/portal">http://www.visitcyprus.com/wps/portal</a></td>
<td>“Love Cyprus”</td>
<td>While entering the site the presentation is in Greek, changing manually the language it changes the welcome text</td>
<td>Everyone</td>
<td>Culture, food and beverages, events, sun and sea, sports and conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel <a href="http://www.goisrael.com/tourism_eng">http://www.goisrael.com/tourism_eng</a></td>
<td>“Wonders, you’ll love Israel from the first SHALOM”</td>
<td>Presentation of upcoming events, typical photos associated with words and phrases</td>
<td>Culture and religiosity interested, fun seeking, relaxation needed tourists</td>
<td>Natural differentiations (from snowed picks to sandy desserts+ the saltiest sea in the world), ancient Bible cities, open air markets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain <a href="http://www.spain.info/us/tourspain">http://www.spain.info/us/tourspain</a></td>
<td>“Welcome to Spain”</td>
<td>Many choices on viewing the site .in my opinion it is complicated in use, not so well organized</td>
<td>Families homosexuals, eco seeking, fans of art and history travelers</td>
<td>Cultural events, arts, cuisine, nature, sports, «Wine trips», ecology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal <a href="http://www.visitportugal.com/Cultures/en-US/default.html">http://www.visitportugal.com/Cultures/en-US/default.html</a></td>
<td>“Portugal – light at its most seductive”</td>
<td>Sounds of sea, photos of famous Portugal people presenting each their country</td>
<td>Families, couples, tourists seeking for sport activities, lovers of art, culture and nature</td>
<td>Nature, local events (organizations of rally, celebrations in Lisbon etc) , activities like snorkeling and diving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt <a href="http://www.egypt.travel/?flashinstalled=2">http://www.egypt.travel/?flashinstalled=2</a></td>
<td>“The gift of the sun”</td>
<td>Traditional melody of the country playing in the background, photos of desert and traditional buildings</td>
<td>Family vacations, for fans of cultural diversities and sport events</td>
<td>Nature, archeological sights, Sports (golf), safari</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Website</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Target Audience</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td><a href="http://www.tourismtunisia.com">http://www.tourismtunisia.com</a></td>
<td>«Welcome to the travel and tourism guide to Tunisia»</td>
<td>Shades of blue, Sports and festivals lovers, Giant coastline, special cuisine, cultural heritage, modern surroundings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td><a href="http://www.visitmorocco.com/index.php/eng">http://www.visitmorocco.com/index.php/eng</a></td>
<td>«Travel for real»</td>
<td>Earthy colours, photos of different sides of the Morocco, Explorers of Morocco (citizens of the country), tourists looking for beautiful nature, civilization, sport activities and businessmen, Authentic experiences, Relaxing vacations, unusual scenery, lots of activities, sun, beaches, conferences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td><a href="http://www.visitmaltacom/main">http://www.visitmaltacom/main</a></td>
<td>«Welcome to the heart of the Mediterranean»</td>
<td>Simple structure of the website, photos of the destination on white background, Businessmen, nature, culture, fan seeking tourists (bars, clubs, casino), Relaxing vacations, nature, visit the islands of Gozo and Comino, wedding ceremonies and honey moon trips, traditional food and beverage, sport events, health centers, night life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td><a href="http://www.italiantourism.com">http://www.italiantourism.com</a></td>
<td>«Much more»</td>
<td>Successful promotional video when entering the website, many pictures, upcoming events and festivals, Sanative tourists, art lovers, businessmen, Cultural attractions, spa springs, gastronomy, beaches, conferences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albania</td>
<td><a href="http://www.albaniantourism.com">http://www.albaniantourism.com</a></td>
<td>«A new Mediterranean love»</td>
<td>Colorful, playfully designed logo, easy to navigate in the site, For those who are interested in archeological attractions and relaxation, Short distance from other Mediterranean countries, beaches, cultural activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montenegro</td>
<td><a href="http://www.visitmontenegro.com">http://www.visitmontenegro.com</a></td>
<td>«Breathtaking beauty»</td>
<td>Lessons of Serbian language with sound, many categories and references to other pages, Tourists who explore nature and culture, Eco-tourism, sports, recreations related to sea, mountains, rivers and lakes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td><a href="http://www.syriatourism.org/index.php?newlang=eng">http://www.syriatourism.org/index.php?newlang=eng</a></td>
<td>«Welcome to the site»</td>
<td>The page seems to be referring to businessmen and investors than tourists, Businessmen also for those who love nature and culture, Conferences, festivals, museums, nature</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td><a href="http://www.htz.hr/English/Home/Naslovna.aspx">http://www.htz.hr/English/Home/Naslovna.aspx</a></td>
<td>«The Mediterranean as it once was»</td>
<td>A tasteful site, functional, many pictures, Families, youth, businessmen, Many sport activities (detailed descriptions with photos), nature, cultural heritage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td><a href="http://www.slovenia.info/">http://www.slovenia.info/</a></td>
<td>«I feel Slovenia»</td>
<td>On-line game to about exploring the country, green and blue colours, Families, elderly, businessmen and nature lovers, Spas and different treatments with water, sports, conferences, entertainment, trips by bicycle or car, means of transport</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td><a href="http://www.libyantourism.org/">http://www.libyantourism.org/</a></td>
<td>«Land of the eternal treasures»</td>
<td>Earthy colours, not much developed site, It isn’t clear what is the target group, Unique nature (Sahara, beaches, mountains), tradition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td><a href="http://www.destinationlebanon.gov.lb/">http://www.destinationlebanon.gov.lb/</a></td>
<td>«Spend the best fall/spring/summer/winter in Lebanon»</td>
<td>Traditional melody playing when entering the site, Nature and civilization lovers, Sea and mountain activities, endless sunny days, cultural heritage, camping</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Results
Table 1 shows five categories of the content analysis of the official Mediterranean websites: name of country and web address, logo, appearance of the site, target group and promoted products and services. In our study we found that some slogans focus on unique products attributes. The three more attractive slogans were «I feel Slovenia» of Slovenia, «A new Mediterranean love» of Albania, «Wonders. You’ll love Israel from the first SHALOM» of Israel. The three less attractive slogans were: «Welcome to Spain» of Spain, «Love Cyprus» of Cyprus and «Turkey welcomes you» of Turkey. Furthermore, Palestine, Jordan and Syria didn’t have a slogan. Regarding the appearance of the websites Monaco and Slovenia had elements of innovation in contrast to Palestine and Tunisia which did not maximize their utility as marketing tools. Israel and Albania slogans were the most relevant to the promoted products and services. In contrary to Croatia and Tunisia’s slogans which did not respond to the promoted products and services.

5. Discussion and Conclusion
To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to examine the gap in electronic brand of the Mediterranean tourism official websites. The study has made a contribution to the Web-based destination marketing in conjunction with destination branding strategy. It has analyzed the 23 Mediterranean’ official tourism websites in terms of slogan, visuals, graphics, and verbal expressions, and also the sites’ web-based brand-building systems. The present research and the one of Lee et al. (2006) have many similarities. As we have already seen (Lee et al. 2006) the support of the slogan through visual and verbal images, is sometimes used too sparingly, or the graphic and verbal images are not consistent with the slogan. This statement is also verified in this paper i.e. in the official websites of Croatia and Tunisia. One explanation is that the marketing tourism plan is not well structured. Another plausible explanation is that the slogan is not up to date. In addition, many of the websites do not currently maximize their utility as marketing tools due to lack of consistency among their elements. This would explain also the findings of Lee et al. (2006). As Lee et al. (2006) indicated that the more clearly the tourism slogan of each official page reflects a brand, the more efficient a message it tends to deliver, our findings verifying that. Monaco and Slovenia presented the best examples of fully combined websites. Moreover, the slogans that create a concrete image rather than an abstract or general statement about products and are supported
by matching graphical/verbal imagery are highly likely to project a relatively clearer brand image.

Our main finding is that the upgrade of the websites is necessary in order to become more competitive and more attractive in the market. The most general managerial implication arising from this study is that the slogan has to promote the country’s products and services. Except from the previous much attention has to be given to the verbal expressions and in general to the content used for the design of the websites. Marketers need to know precisely the target group each time, in order to accomplish successfully the brand image.

6. Limitations and Scope of Future Research
The most significant limitation faced in this study relates to the method of analysis. Content analysis conducted in the current study primarily serves as a starting point for more comprehensive empirical research. It should be considered an initial attempt for more comprehensive multi-method studies, which may include focus groups, consumer surveys and interviews with potential travellers who visit the tourism websites. In this way, the important findings of this study can be confirmed and extended. In terms of future research, well-designed replication studies that aim to overcome some of the limitations evident in prior research are clearly required.

References


