



**UNIVERSITY
OF TURKU**

Turku School of
Economics

Managing a destination brand

The strategic destination branding process

Department of International Business

Bachelor's thesis

Author:

Milla Puurunen

Supervisor:

D.Sc. Johanna Raitis

29.4.2026

Turku

Student's statement regarding the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for preparing and/or writing this thesis:

I have not used any AI-based tools.

I have used AI-based tools. Their use is documented in the Appendix. The AI tools were used in a way that complies with academic integrity guidelines.

The originality of this thesis has been checked in accordance with the University of Turku quality assurance system using the Turnitin Originality Check service.

Bachelor's thesis**Subject:** International Business**Author:** Milla Puurunen**Title:** Managing a destination brand: The strategic destination branding process**Supervisor:** D.Sc. Johanna Raitis**Number of pages:** 36 pages**Date:** 29.4.2026**Abstract**

The international tourism industry is more competitive and saturated than ever. To stand out, a destination must engage in strategic destination branding. The strategic destination branding process aids a destination to understand the market better and identify factors that make it unique, in order to be able to differentiate itself from the competition. This thesis aims to build understanding of strategic destination branding by investigating how the process should be formed and implemented.

The strategic destination branding process should start with co-creating the vision of the destination brand in collaboration with the stakeholders. After the vision creation, the customer base should be defined by segmenting the market and then targeting a few of the most ideal segments. Based on the needs and wants of the chosen target segments, the destination should differentiate itself from competitors by choosing a competitive market position and developing a unique brand identity. Once the destination brand has been differentiated, a communication strategy should be developed. The communication strategy should adapt to the needs of modern consumers and be based on digital communication, interaction and authenticity.

Once the former steps are implemented, success of the brand should be evaluated and measured. A destination brand's success should not only consider the customers but include stakeholder satisfaction as well as the long-term sustainability and prosperity of the destination. The destination branding process should also be continuously monitored and updated, viewing the process as a circle of continuous revision and not a linear process with a clear start and an end.

Keywords: destination brand, strategic destination branding, international tourism industry

Kandidaatintutkielma

Oppiaine: Kansainvälinen liiketoiminta

Tekijä: Milla Puurunen

Otsikko: Matkakohdebrändin johtaminen: Strateginen matkakohdebrändäysprosessi

Ohjaaja: KTT Johanna Raitis

Sivumäärä: 36 sivua

Päivämäärä: 29.4.2026

Tiivistelmä

Kansainvälisellä matkailualalla kilpailu on kovempaa ja tarjontaa enemmän kuin koskaan ennen. Voidakseen erottautua kilpailijoista, matkakohteen on panostettava strategiseen brändäykseen. Strateginen brändäysprosessi auttaa matkakohtetta ymmärtämään markkinaansa paremmin, ja tunnistamaan tekijöitä, jotka tekevät siitä uniikin. Näiden tekijöiden avulla matkakohte voi erottautua kilpailijoistaan. Tämä tutkielma pyrkii lisäämään ymmärrystä strategisesta matkakohdebrändämisestä tutkimalla, kuinka tämä prosessi tulisi muodostaa ja toteuttaa.

Strateginen matkakohdebrändäysprosessi alkaa vision yhteisluonnilla sidosryhmien kanssa. Vision luonnin jälkeen asiakaskunta tulee määritellä segmentoimalla markkinan ja valitsemalla muutamien parhaiten matkakohteelle sopivan segmentin targetoitavaksi. Valittujen kohdemarkkinoiden tarpeiden ja toiveiden perusteella matkakohteen tulee pyrkiä erottautumaan kilpailijoistaan valitsemalla kilpailukykyisen markkina-aseman ja kehittämällä uniikin brändi-identiteetin. Kun matkakohdebrändi on erilaistettu, tulee brändin kehittää kommunikaatiostrategia. Kommunikaatiostrategian tulee mukautua nykypäivän kuluttajien tarpeisiin ja perustua digitaaliseen kommunikaatioon, vuorovaikutukseen ja autenttisuuteen.

Kun aiemmat askeleet on toteutettu, tulisi brändin menestystä arvioida ja mitata. Matkakohdebrändin menestystä arvioidessa ei tule ottaa huomioon vain asiakkaita, vaan huomioida myös sidosryhmien tyytyväisyys ja matkakohteen pitkän tähtäimen kestävyys ja hyvinvointi. Matkakohdebrändäysprosessia tulee jatkuvasti seurata ja päivittää, suhtautuen prosessiin jatkuvana kehänä eikä lineaarisena prosessina, jossa on selkeä alku ja loppu.

Avainsanat: matkakohdebrändi, strateginen matkakohdebrändäys, kansainvälinen matkailuala

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction	7
2	The strategic destination branding process	10
	2.1 Defining destination branding	10
	2.2 Co-creating the brand's vision	11
	2.3 Defining the customer base	13
	2.4 Differentiating the brand from competition	16
	2.5 Creating a communication strategy	20
	2.6 Evaluating success	23
3	Conclusions	28
	References	31

FIGURES

Figure 1. The relationship between brand positioning, identity and image.	18
Figure 2. The wheel of place brand management.	24
Figure 3. Antecedents and consequences of destination brand love.	27
Figure 4. The strategic destination branding framework.	28

1 Introduction

At the beginning of the millennia, Buhalis (2000) highlighted the increasing competitiveness of the growing global tourism industry. At the time of the article being published, the total number of international arrivals reached 699 million and international tourism receipts totaled USD 476 billion (UNWTO n.d.). When looking at present day, the numbers have multiplied. In the year 2025, around 1.52 billion international tourists were recorded around the world, and international tourism receipts estimated at USD 1.9 trillion (UN Tourism n.d.). Based on the substantial growth in numbers, it is safe to say that competitiveness of the industry has not lessened in the last quarter-century. Indeed, the market is now more competitive – and more saturated – than ever. (Castañeda-García et al. 2020, 1458; Chen et al. 2020, 1; Escobar-Farfán et al. 2024, 12.)

In the 21st century, consumers have unlimited options to choose from – whether its consumer products or travel destinations. With around 200 nations and 2 million destinations fighting for the travelers' attention, traditional sales pitches like quality accommodation, beautiful scenic views and friendly people are offered by every other destination. To be selected in the oversaturated market, a destination needs to be unique – offer something different from all the others. (Stephens Balakrishnan et al. 2008, 62; Kotler & Gertner 2011, 33–35; Qu et al. 2011, 465–466.) This uniqueness is communicated through the destination's brand. The brand aids consumers identify and differentiate a place from the countless alternatives offered to them. (Qu et al. 2011, 465–466.) If a brand has a positive reputation, this plays a significantly important role in determining the brand's success amongst competition (Morgan et al. 2011, 4). Indeed, branding is seen as a fundamental part of any destination-marketing plan and even the decisive key between success and failure (Baker & Cameron 2008, 84; Kotler & Gertner 2011, 35).

However, branding destinations is not a simple task (Giannopoulos et al. 2020, 148). Hanna et al. (2021, 108) describe place brands as dynamic, multifaceted and complex entities that cannot be as easily manipulated as commercial and corporate brands. A place cannot be replaced, re-launched or withdrawn from the market if something goes wrong (Fan 2006, 7–8). Instead destinations already come with rich histories, images and legacy developments that impact and shape the planning of tourism marketing strategies (Buhalis 2000, 104). At the same time macro-environmental factors such as politics, disease epidemics, terrorism and weather conditions cannot be controlled by the destination marketer, but affect tourism nonetheless (Stephens Balakrishnan 2009, 612). Indeed, recent years have been marked by growing environmental concerns, economic and geopolitical

uncertainty, change brought by the rise of technology and artificial intelligence as well as health and safety concerns, all of which pose challenges for destination branding (Aman et al. 2024, 7).

What makes managing and branding destinations especially challenging is the diversity of stakeholders that are involved in the development and production of the tourist's experience. The desires of the stakeholders – like locals and indigenous people, businesses, tour operators, tourists and other interest groups – are often conflicting and hard to navigate. Stakeholders tend to aim to maximize their own benefits – sometimes at the expense of other stakeholders. At the same time all stakeholders are not standing on equal ground but stark power imbalances exist between the parties. (Buhalis 2000, 98–99; Perkins et al. 2020, 251, 255–256.) Stakeholder inclusion in the branding process has been further complicated by the prevalence of the Internet. Tourist-generated content – as well as content generated by other stakeholders – can quickly and significantly influence how a destination brand is perceived. Managing all the conflicting interests and wishes of different stakeholders can pose immense challenges, but at the same time is considered to be crucial for destination branding to succeed. (Zouganeli et al. 2012, 740; Perkins et al. 2020, 251.)

At the end of the day the feeling people feel towards places other than their own is most of the time indifference. There is a limited number of destinations people have a capacity to care or even merely think about. If a destination brand manages to become relevant, it truly has hit the jackpot. (Anholt 2011, 29–30.) However, a destination's success should not only be measured by the increase in visitor numbers (Buhalis 2000, 99–100). Buhalis (2000, 114) argues that assuming the higher the volume of tourists, the more benefits a destination can achieve is wrong, since this easily leads to over-exploitation of local resources. Instead of merely increasing visitor numbers, a destination's strategic marketing objectives should include enhancing the long-term well-being of the locals, maximizing the profitability of local enterprises, exciting visitors by maximizing their satisfaction and optimizing the impacts of tourism by making sure there's a sustainable balance between economic benefits and social and environmental costs (Buhalis 2000, 100; Aman et al. 2024, 14). Indeed, a destination should not be treated as a means to an end, but a living entity, where long-term success cannot exist without long-term sustainability (Gartner 2014, 114–115).

In the academic literature, destination branding has been a popular topic (Ruiz-Real et al. 2020, 11; Escobar-Farfán et al. 2024, 1). However, despite its popularity, it is argued that there is still a need for more understanding of destination brands. Indeed, as the world changes, so do living destinations. Trends such as globalization, digitalization and new technologies, co-creation of brands and focus on sustainability keep shifting the field, calling for updated research. (Kavaratzis

& Hatch 2021, 4–5; Escobar-Farfán et al. 2024, 11–13.) When it comes to strategic destination branding, Giannopoulos et al. (2020, 149, 152) notes a lack of research on defining a successful destination branding strategy process, very limited amount of frameworks for destination branding as well as little attention on management issues. However, the vitality of a strategic approach to branding as well as a better understanding of the process has already been highlighted over a decade ago by Stephens Balakrishnan (2009, 622). Therefore, further understanding of the strategic destination branding process as well as combining this strategy with the recent shifts in the destination branding field can be argued to be warranted.

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the process of strategic destination branding by addressing the following sub-questions:

- What is destination branding?
- What are the steps of strategic destination branding?
- How should the success of the branding process be evaluated?

To create a coherent structure for branding strategy, the sub-questions are explored under one main chapter. Firstly, the thesis defines the meaning of destination branding and provides other important definitions relevant to the topic. Then the thesis follows the steps of strategic destination branding, starting with vision co-creation and moving on to defining the customer base by utilizing market segmenting and segment targeting. Then the thesis explores differentiating the brand from competition by positioning the brand and creating a destination brand identity. Afterwards, communication strategies are explored. Finally, the last sub-section explores how success of the branding process can be evaluated.

2 The strategic destination branding process

2.1 Defining destination branding

The term destination has been defined in many ways in academic literature. Buhalis (2000, 98) describes a destination as a defined geographic region that is understood by its visitors as a unique entity, which has a political and legislative framework for tourism planning and marketing. Such destinations can be continents, countries, states, cities, villages or resort areas, that attract visitors for temporary stays (Pike 2011, 11). At destinations, tourists' enjoy various types of tourism experiences and thus the destination is an amalgam of all tourism services and experiences offered to them (Buhalis 2000, 97–98). Morgan et al. (2011, 4) add that destinations are not born in a vacuum. A 'place' becomes a 'destination' through the narratives and images communicated in tourism promotional material.

Like the term destination, destination branding has multiple different definitions and a single agreed upon definition lacks from the literature (Park & Petrick 2006, 262–264). Blain et al. (2005, 337) provide a comprehensive definition of the concept that will be used as the basis for this thesis: "Destination branding 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; that (2) consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; that (3) serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; and that (4) reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk." Collectively, these activities aid in creating a destination image that will positively influence the consumer's destination choice (Blain et al. 2005, 337).

When discussing destination branding, it is important to differentiate between destination branding and place branding. The term 'destination' is strictly related to tourism activities, whereas 'place' refers to a more holistic concept describing all economic activities and feelings that are related to the place. Place branding is not only concerned with attracting tourists, but appealing to all people who are considering where to live, work, study or visit. (Briciu 2013, 9.) In this thesis, the focus is on tourism and thus will mainly be using the term 'destination branding'. However, the terms cover similar topics and are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature and thus both are important to mention and define (Kavaratzis & Hatch 2021, 3, 5–6). Additionally, destination brand topics have been researched under the relational terms of city, nation, country, regional and location branding (Hanna & Rowley 2008).

Destination brands are primarily created and managed by Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) (Morgan et al. 2011, 8–9), or alternatively called Destination Marketing Organizations (e.g. Stephens Balakrishnan et al. 2011, 6). A destination management organization is a formal organization responsible for an array of different management processes of a tourist destination, enabling destination stakeholders to create tourist experiences (Reinhold & Beritelli 2022). One of the main responsibilities of a DMO is the marketing of their destination to potential visitors (Blain et al. 2005, 328). Since the DMO is principally the entity responsible for destination branding, a significant portion of the literature views the topic from the DMOs perspective, using the term DMO interchangeably with destination brander (Saraniemi & Komppula 2019, 1118; Hanna et al. 2021, 109–110). Therefore, this thesis also uses the DMO as the assumed branding entity. However, the same suggestions apply to any organization branding a destination.

2.2 Co-creating the brand's vision

Vision is the starting point of strategic destination branding (Stephens Balakrishnan 2009, 621; Saraniemi & Komppula 2019, 1120). Brand vision communicates the brand's purpose as well as its philosophy and view of the world, from which the brand evolves its mission. Mission then puts into words what the brand needs to do to achieve this vision. (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley 1998, 1083.) Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998, 1083) note, that the vision should excite employees and therefore would make them appreciate the role they play in building the brand. Their commitment and pride in being associated with the brand would lead them to take ownership of the vision (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley 1998, 1083). However, destination brands are not just created by the employees of a company. Instead, the brand represents and is represented by a variety of stakeholders, all with a vested interest in the brand and its future. (Anholt 2011, 23–25.) Even though Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998, 1083) describe the importance of a shared vision in terms of company employees, the same importance of a common vision could be argued to apply more broadly to destination brand stakeholders. Indeed Kavaratzis and Hatch (2021, 10–12) highlight that the vision of a tourist destination should be created in collaboration with the destination's stakeholders, bringing together their views and wants. The common vision should be guided by shared values of the stakeholders, which are then suggested to be included in the values of the brand (Kotsi & Pike 2020, 575; Kavaratzis & Hatch 2021, 10).

The process of engaging with the stakeholders in the branding process is called brand co-creation (Hatch & Schultz 2010, 591). This stakeholder involvement should include all the individuals, organizations and groups that are affected by tourism development (Simpson 2001, 19–20). In

practice, these include the tourists, local residents, indigenous people, tourist enterprises, tour operators, the DMO and different levels of government, whom are all considered to be the destination brand's primary stakeholders (Buhalis, 2000, 99; Mandagi & Centeno 2025, 14, 19). The range of stakeholders that should be included in the branding process is extensive, making creating a common vision often a very challenging task. Especially when the interests of a diverse group of stakeholders are heterogeneous and potentially even conflicting. Issues with who has the right to decide aspects of the brand can easily rise and it's the job of the DMO to manage these differing views and wants. (Buhalis 2000, 99; Pike 2011, 259.)

When it comes to destination branding, the process of co-creation should start with engaging the residents and local businesses. They should be made aware of the destination's brand and its potential positive impacts, since they hold a key role in ensuring consistency between brand image and reality. (Baker & Cameron 2008, 90.) Indeed, Choo et al. 2011 (211) find that the more positively resident identify with the destination brand the more they contribute to visitor satisfaction, talk positively about the destination to others and engage more in tourism and leisure activities themselves. Therefore, not only should destinations be branded to tourists, but engaging in internal branding activities for residents and local companies is vital (Choo et al. 2011, 211).

The need for stakeholder involvement does not stop at residents and companies. In the 21st century consumers are active partners in the marketing process, regardless of the DMO's wishes to engage in this partnership or not. (King 2002.) Including consumers in brand development has only become increasingly important during the era of social media, since consumer opinions and experiences shared online have power to cause stark shifts in the way new potential customers view the destination (Lim et al. 2012, 204–205). If visitors feel like the brand message and reality do not align, they will communicate this online, with the message potentially reaching wide audiences (Lim et al. 2012, 205; Chen et al. 2026, 5). Tourists hold a great deal of power and should be paid attention to when visioning the future of the brand (Lim et al. 2012, 204-205; Xu et al. 2025, 790, 809).

It should be noted, that even though stakeholder engagement is vital for the success of a destination brand, not all stakeholders need to be equally engaged in the co-creation process (Fyall 2011, 92–99). The DMO should weigh what kinds of relationships they want to have with each stakeholder group (Stephens Balakrishnan 2009, 622). This consideration should include the interest stakeholders themselves show in the brand and the desired future of the destination (Saraniemi &

Komppula 2019). Indeed, some stakeholders – like big chain hotels – might choose to opt out of shared vision creation and the co-creation process altogether (Fyall 2011, 98).

When it comes to a tourist destination, creating a vision for the brand does not only pertain to marketing activities. Destination marketing and branding should be viewed as a holistic concept, where the vision guides the overall development of the destination. (Fyall 2011, 99.) With stakeholders engaged to a common mission, the destination eventually starts to change and form around this view (Morgan et al. 2011, 17; Saraniemi & Komppula 2019, 1127–1130). For example, if the common vision is to market a sustainable destination, the stakeholders start adopting more sustainable practices in their own operations (Maccioni et al. 2024). Therefore the vision development of a destination typically defines the nature of long-term major developments, and should be treated with utmost care and importance (Ritchie 1993, 381).

When creating the vision for the destination, it should be remembered that the future of a destination brand cannot be treated the same as a product brand's (Gartner 2014, 115). Gartner (2014, 115) highlights, that destinations are living, complex and dynamic entities, and focusing on the long-term health of the destination is vital. They remind that the goal cannot purely be gaining financial benefits, but indeed the environmental and socio-cultural elements must be taken into account. Indeed, concern about the sustainability of destinations has only increased in recent years (Aman et al. 2024). Aman et al. (2024, 114) note, that a destination is sustainable when it has protected and preserved cultural and natural heritage, is building stable and profitable economies for the long-term and facilitates equitable and thriving societies. In other words, the destination must fulfill the three dimensions of sustainability: environmental, economic and social sustainability, and these goals should be included in the vision of the destination brand (Kavaratzis & Hatch 2021; Aman et al. 2024, 10–11).

2.3 Defining the customer base

Market segmentation is the basis for defining a destination's customer base and a key step in creating an effective branding strategy (Tkaczynski & Rundle-Thiele, 2011, 265). Kotler et al. (2017, 48) define market segmentation as: “dividing a market into distinct groups of buyers who have different needs, characteristics or behaviours, and who might require separate products or marketing programmes.” Additionally, a segment is a group of consumers that is assumed to respond in a similar way to a specific set of marketing efforts (Kotler et al. 2017, 48). In effect, market segmentation allows the destination to understand who its potential customers are, in order

for it to eventually target the desired tourists with an appropriate brand message that resonates with them (Tkaczynski & Rundle-Thiele, 2011, 265).

Tourism markets are typically segmented by geographic, demographic, psychographic and behavioral factors. Geographic factors imply a place of origin, whereas demographic factors can include attributes such as age, income and travel party composition. Behavioral variants range from expenditure, purchasing behavior and number of nights stayed at the destination. Psychographic factors are divided into two: push and pull factors. In other words, these describe the trip's purpose, motivations behind it and activities the tourists seek. Push motivations describe a tourist's reason for traveling such as wanting to rest and relax, to go sightseeing or be together with one's family. On the other hand, pull motivations represent a tourist's reason for choosing a destination to fulfil their need to travel, such as the weather, competitive price or someone's recommendation. (Tkaczynski et al. 2010, 146–147; Tkaczynski & Rundle-Thiele 2011, 257–158.)

Not all these factors need to be considered when identifying and creating customer segments and emphasis should be placed on the most relevant factors for the destination (Tkaczynski et al. 2018, 24). The assessment should be based on market research (Buhalis 2000, 103). Additionally, Tkaczynski et al. (2010, 148) emphasize the need for stakeholder involvement in the segmentation process. They suggest a two-step approach where first tourism stakeholders' view is considered and then visitor perspective included. By interviewing local stakeholders, segmentation variables relevant to them can be identified, leading to a more accurate and at the same time richer description of who truly is visiting the destination. The market research should therefore cover both the customers and the local stakeholders. (Tkaczynski et al. 2010, 148.)

By considering the different factors and listening to stakeholders, segments can be identified. These segments will be different for each destination and dependent on which factors will be considered and highlighted. (Cha et al. 1995, 38–39; Tkaczynski & Rundle-Thiele 2011, 266–267.) To provide an example of customer segments, Tkaczynski & Rundle-Thiele (2011, 261) identify three relevant international tourist segments for Australia: wealthy travelers, young Europeans and long-stay travelers. In the case of Japanese travelers, Cha et al. (1995, 38) list novelty seekers, sport seekers and family/relaxation seekers. The variety of possible segments to be identified is great and will highly depend on the specific destination and the metrics used to base the segments on (Cha et al. 1995, 38–39; Tkaczynski & Rundle-Thiele 2011, 266–267).

Segment targeting is the next step of the branding process after identifying the destination's customer segments. In effect, segment targeting describes assessing each market segment's

attractiveness and then selecting one or more of those segments to enter. (Kotler et al. 2017, 48.) Deciding which target segments the destination wants its brand to appeal to enables it to suitably plan its marketing activities around the needs and wants of the segment. This is especially important, since some aspects of a place may appeal to one segment, whilst for another these are insignificant or even negative. If the wrong things are included in the brand communication, this may lead to isolating a big part of the potential visitors. (Fan 2006, 11.) Therefore, a destination brand should have a clear image on who to tailor their brand for (Tkaczynski et al. 2018, 25).

Tkaczynski et al. (2018) suggests destinations assess segments based on measurability, substantiality, accessibility and actionability. Measurability indicates the degree to which the size and purchasing power of all the segments is possible to be measured, in effect indicating if a certain segment could be a viable target (Tkaczynski et al. 2018, 18). Substantiality weighs which visitor segments are large and/or profitable enough, depending therefore on the number of consumers within the segment and the volume of their purchases (Spotts & Mahoney 1991, 27). Accessible segments can be reached by brand messaging and therefore served effectively through targeted marketing campaigns. Lastly, actionability asks, if segments are unique enough to validate different marketing campaigns, and whether the DMO has the resources to effectively target the segment. (Tkaczynski et al. 2018, 19–22.)

Opposed to product marketing, destination brands have diverse audiences that are often hard to identify and find. The consumers come from numerous geographic regions as well as cultural and linguistic backgrounds, causing segmenting and targeting to often prove to be challenging tasks. (Buhalis 2000, 112; Fan, 2006, 10–11; Stephens Balakrishnan 2009, 612–613.) A destination should not choose a single segment to target, but instead focus on a few of the most advantageous target markets (Tkaczynski et al. 2010, 148–149; Weaver, 2015). Woodside and Dubelaar (2002, 131) recommend choosing three to six advantageous market segments. Akin to the segmentation process, the target market selection should be made based on market research and be conducted in collaboration with the stakeholders to ensure best results (Buhalis 2000, 103; Tkaczynski et al. 2010, 148). By including stakeholders in the process, the DMO makes sure to attract the same tourist segments that the stakeholders aim to attract once the tourists have arrived at the destination. This way harmony between the brand and experience at the destination as well as best return on investment can be maintained. (Tkaczynski et al. 2010, 148.)

Target markets may change over time but nonetheless provide the brand with a focus. To create a clearer image of the target segments, visitor profiles or in some cases wider archetypes can be

created. These profiles summarize the main attributes of a consumer segment, concretizing the potential customer, for both the DMO and stakeholders. In effect, individuals who match these profiles become targets for action. Akin to the general segmenting and targeting actions, this profiling should also be a flexible process open to change. The profiles of target customers will likely change over time, when changing patterns and trends are identified. (Weaver 2015, 164–165, 172.)

2.4 Differentiating the brand from competition

Qu et al. (2011, 466) state that the key to destination branding is the ability of consumers to perceive a difference among brands in the same category. The reason for this is that a brand perceived distinctive and unique is hard to be replaced by competition. The way to achieve distinctiveness is through positioning and differentiation. (Qu et al. 2011, 466.) Saqib (2020, 150) defines positioning as the strategy of discovering the desired consumer perception of a brand and filling an empty slot in the target customers' minds. This is done by creating and communicating an image that differentiates the brand's unique position from competitors, in order to obtain a competitive advantage in the market. Differentiation therefore describes creating such a position that can be differentiated from the competitors. (Saqib 2020, 149–150.)

In order to be able to position the brand correctly, the destination needs to have defined its target segments (Stephens Balakrishnan 2009). The destination brand needs to consider which aspects of the destination the target segments would favor over competitors and these points of difference should then be emphasized. However, the destination should only choose a few differentiating factors. Emphasizing too many qualities may lead to less efficient implementation of the core identity of the brand and confusion in visitors. (Qu et al. 2011, 466, 474.) Indeed, Natalija et al. (2016, 141) highlight the importance of a clear positioning system, both when it comes to communicating with the target market and when it comes to emphasizing competitive advantage. However, finding effective differentiating qualities can pose a challenge. With countless similar offerings presented across various regions and countries, standing out in the crowd is not easy. (Daye 2010, 1–2.) In the case of destinations, many parts of the brand are also out of the control of the marketer. Characteristics such as the history and culture or geographical composition exist with or without branding, and guide and restrict the positioning and differentiation of the destination. (Buhalis 2000, 104; Gunn & Var 2002, 10.) Additionally, the destination does not exist in a vacuum, but the country the place is located at influences how people perceive the destination. People's views about the country and its people as a whole affect how visitors evaluate the

destination and the brand and is called the country of origin effect (COO). (Nadeau et al. 2008, 101–102.)

Part of destination brand positioning is the development of symbolic elements such as a name, logo and a slogan (Stephens Balakrishnan 2008, 84). These symbolic elements are used to aid in identifying and differentiating the destination brand and at the same time to symbolize a promise of a memorable experience that is uniquely associated with the destination (Ruiz-Real et al. 2020, 2). In the case of destination brands, the brand name is usually the name of the destination and thus not developed by the destination marketer (Rainisto 2003, 44). Logos and slogans should be memorable and reflect the image and attributes of the destination, ideally tested with visitors to ensure there's a match between the expectations set and reality. Slogans should be short, and based on a few attributes of the destination the marketers regard as strengths, such as 100% Pure New Zealand, What Happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas or Paris is for Lovers. (Blain et al. 2005, 337; Baker & Cameron 2008, 88; Kotsi & Pike 2020, 574.) Historically much of the destination branding effort has been focused on developing these elements. However, the potential impact of these elements on the visitors' behavior has been found to be limited and visitors often do not include them at all in their own narratives about the destination. (Kladou et al. 2017.) Indeed, Kladou et al. (2017) support the shift towards the more holistic, brand identity-based approach where instead of the main focus being on the symbolic elements, the wider identity of the destination brand is in focus.

Indeed, literature increasingly considers the identity and image of the destination brand to be at the core of brand positioning (e.g. Qu et al. 2011, 466; Kotsi & Pike 2020, 574–575). A destination's identity describes how the destination wants to be perceived and image how the destination is actually perceived. Destination identity can be described as the unique set of brand characteristics the destination wants to create and maintain that differentiate it from other destinations. (Rainisto 2003, 73–74.) Brand positioning then is a concise communication of this to consumers based on which the consumers form an image of the destination (Kotsi & Pike 2020, 574–575). In other words, consumers build the destination image in their minds based on the brand identity the destination marketers project, and afterwards the destination marketers enhance the identity based on the brand image consumers have. (Qu et al. 2011, 467.) The relationship between destination brand positioning, identity and image is further emphasized in Figure 1.

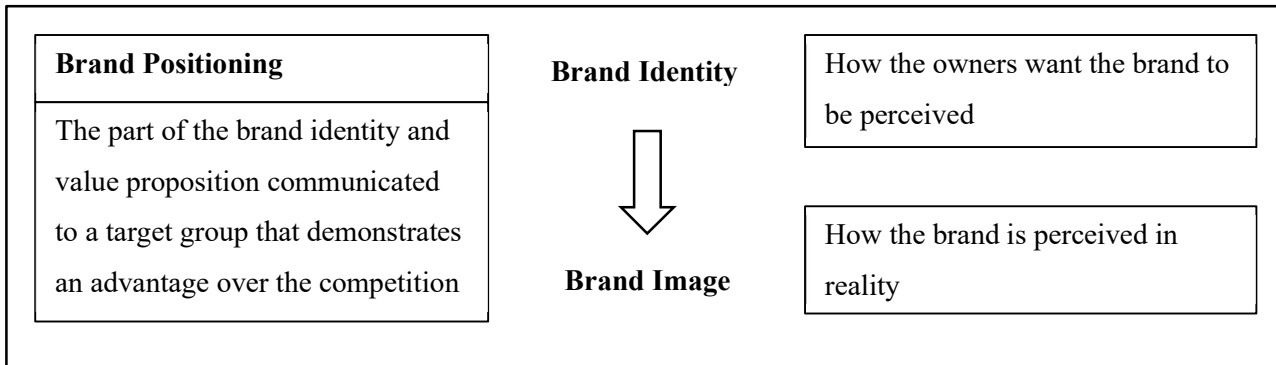


Figure 1. The relationship between brand positioning, identity and image. Adapted from Rainisto (2003, 48)

Destination brand identities are formed around the tangible and intangible attributes of the destination and its brand. Tangible attributes of the brand include the logo, design, places, pictures, souvenirs & handicrafts. The physical and environmental attributes of a destination also fall into this category, including the climate, landscape and ecology as well as built sites such as historical buildings and monuments. (Stephens Balakrishnan 2009, 619; Qu et al. 2011, 466; Benur & Bramwell 2015, 213, 219.) Intangible attributes on the other hand include emotions, smells, colors, taste and interactions (Stephens Balakrishnan 2009, 619). Additionally, Qu et al. (2011, 466) highlight the role of culture, customs and history as part of the intangible offering of the destination. The destination needs to decide, which of these attributes to highlight, and a level of generalization is warranted (Woodside & Dubelaar 2002, 131; Qu et al. 2011, 466). For example, destinations are usually generalized under geographic types such as coastal, island, mountainous, rural and urban destinations (Sarantakou 2023, 690–691).

The destination's tangible and intangible attributes are packaged into tourist offerings by the destination's service providers, in effect creating the destination brand's product and service portfolio (Stephens Balakrishnan 2009, 617; Benur & Bramwell 2015, 217). These products and services – such as sights or experiences – are the key drivers for tourists when deciding between destinations. To position the destination correctly, it is important to understand what kind of a portfolio is available to visitors. (Benur and Bramwell 2015, 213–214.) Additionally, Benur and Bramwell (2015, 213, 217) highlight the need to diversify the product and service offering to aid competitiveness and sustainability. As an example of diversifying, he suggests including both outdoor and indoor water sports as part of a beach destination's product portfolio. Combining new and existing products can help in attracting new markets as well as keeping existing target markets interested (Benur & Bramwell 2015, 217). Understanding the product portfolio also aids in deciding identity and positioning themes, such as historical heritage, wellness and health, romantic,

gastronomy or responsible sustainable destinations (Yavuz et al. 2016, 70; Aman et al. 2024, 12–13).

In addition to guiding product portfolio formation, the destination's attributes act as an important resource for the destination brand (Benur & Bramwell 2015, 213; Tsaour et al. 2016, 1320).

Attributes such as the location and unique culture of the destination generate identity characteristics that cannot be copied by any other destination. These non-replicable characteristics aid in creating a unique destination brand. (Tsaour et al. 2016, 1320.) This unique, differentiated destination image has been argued to be the basis for survival within the globally competitive marketplace (Qu et al. 2011, 466). To guide in finding unique identity factors, Zouganeli et al. (2012) recommend listening to stakeholders. They suggest that stakeholders can give exact words, images, colors and smells that describe the identity and image of the destination, which can then further be utilized in brand identity communications. Zouganeli et al. (2012, 753) contrast the examples of Chania and Heraklion in Greece. Chania is described by the residents with words such as joy, calmness, pride, romance, jasmine, green, and sea, whereas Heraklion is connected to descriptions such as two faces, noisy, workaholic, love for life, excitement and sun. The differing descriptions shed light on the need to understand the destination image thoroughly in order to position it correctly. (Zouganeli et al. 2012, 753.)

Stakeholder involvement brings another possibility: ensuring authenticity. The identity of the brand and the reality at the destination must be aligned in order to avoid creating an artificial destination identity. (Vanolo 2015, 6.) The brand's chosen identity and values should accurately reflect the destination, rising from the historic, cultural, spiritual, environmental and economic background of the destination and its community to ensure authenticity (Wheeler et al. 2011). Stephens Balakrishnan et al. (2011, 21) highlight that destination should be careful not to build up expectations that cannot be met, since this can lead to negative word-of-mouth. Word-of-mouth (WOM) is the term used to describe the informal communication between people about a brand (Harrison-Walker 2001, 63). Indeed, research has shown many positive benefits of destination brand authenticity and therefore authenticity strategy should be integrated into the wider brand strategy (Chen et al. 2020, 8).

Chen et al. (2020) pair destination brand authenticity with brand self-congruence and claim these jointly lead to tourist loyalty. Self-congruence describes the perceived match between the tourist's self-concept and the image of the destination brand. When brand self-congruence is high, tourists see the brand as similar to themselves leading to a better relationship between the tourist and the

destination brand. Self-congruence can be improved by understanding the tourist's preferences as well as constructing a destination identity that is consistent with the tourist's self-concept. (Chen et al. 2020, 2, 7–8.) Kotsi & Pike (2020, 580–584) also highlight the importance of considering the tourist's own identity and suggest destination brand positioning to take into account consumers' personal values. They propose that understanding the tourist's personal values serves as an indicator of destination preferences and thus aligning destination brand values with the target segments' values would be beneficial. Indeed, the destination brand identity and positioning theme should be developed with the tourists' own identities and values in mind (Chen et al. 2020, 7–8; Kotsi & Pike 2020).

2.5 Creating a communication strategy

Once the target segments have been chosen and brand identity and positioning theme developed, it is time to create a communication strategy for the destination brand (Stephens Balakrishnan 2009; Boisen et al. 2018, 7). The communication strategy is a holistic concept, describing the inclusion of all forms of brand communication as part of the brand's strategy. These range from communication controlled by the destination to communication about the destination conducted by consumers and other stakeholders. (Boisen et al. 2018, 6–8.) An important – and traditionally most researched – part of destination brand communication is promotion. Promotion is the term describing the destination led development and choice of communication channels aiming to increase awareness of what the place has to offer among the selected target segments, specifically with the goal to increase demand. (Buhalis 2000, 112; Boisen et al. 2018, 6–8.)

Destination led promotion activities can generically be divided into four main types. Advertising on television, radio, press, print and an array of digital advertising channels is called above the line promotion. (Buhalis 2000, 112; Natalija et al. 2016, 140.) In addition, DMOs attend major annual tourism and travel fairs to promote the destination. This is called below the line promotion. Thirdly, DMOs typically operate information centers, where they provide information about the destination and local tourism service providers. Finally, many destinations also partake in public relations on the national level. They establish tourism offices in their main markets in order to share promotional material and information. In some cases, this can also be done through the embassies. Public relations are also used to generate news stories and publicity to increase awareness about the destination. (Buhalis 2000, 112–113.)

Not all destination brand communication is initiated by the destination itself. Destination brands can appear in owned, earned and bought media. Owned media usually includes the destination's own

websites and existing communications with the customers. Bought media includes any media where the destination buys a presence at and requires strategic media planning, efficient buying and optimization of the media presence. (Munro & Richards 2011, 147–148.) Earned media describes publicity that the destination does not pay for but earns from organic sources. Such organic sources include for example films, novels, documentaries, news stories, the internet and popular culture. (Munro & Richards 2011, 147; Kavaratzis & Hatch 2021, 6.) This organic content cannot be controlled by the destination and does not always present the destination solely positively (Lim et al. 2012, 205; Castañeda-García et al. 2020, 1458). The amount of media presence can also be deliberately aided by engaging with and listening to target communities and careful seeding of conversations into the communities (Munro & Richards 2011, 147).

Indeed, tourists do not find destinations only through destination led promotion but instead from a wide array of sources from recommendations from family and friends to magazine articles or from travel agents to school books (Stephens Balakrishnan 2009, 621). A large portion of customers find out about destinations through the Internet, and it has indeed been argued to nowadays be the main source of information on destinations (Castañeda-García et al. 2020, 1458). The internet hosts countless websites, blogs, virtual communities, tourism review pages and social networking sites that all provide information on the destination. Some of these the destination owns and controls, but a big portion of the information is out of the hands of the marketers and instead give a platform for online opinion. (Oliveira & Panyik 2015, 54, 59; Castañeda-García et al. 2020, 1459.)

As customers can increasingly be found on the internet, destination branding focus has also shifted towards digital marketing. Digital marketing offers the destination more adaptability, freedom of choice, cost savings and interactivity. (Natalija et al. 2016, 139–140.) Castañeda-García et al. (2020, 1447) recommend destination brands to adopt an integrated marketing communication strategy (IMC) which implies the coordination of all external messages with the desired positioning of the brand. The destination should ensure that promotional communications are disseminated across multiple media platforms and that those messages are aligned and characterized suitably to the specific target segment (Qi et al. 2024, 15). The consistency of these messages across all the platforms should be ensured, since consistency is found to be in a key role in successful destination brand communications (Castañeda-García et al. 2020, 1458). Natalija et al. (2016, 141) also highlight the importance of consistency but add that in a world saturated with messages and information, messaging should also be non-ambiguous, simple, visible and informative.

In an ideal situation, destination brand communication consistency would reach beyond the official destination brand to all stakeholders and tourists (Qi et al. 2024, 15). However, it is not easy to ensure consistency with a significant portion of the information on the destination produced by consumers with no stake in brand unity (Lim et al. 2012, 204–205). This represents a big shift for destination branders. In most cases, destination brands were created by the DMO's when a one-way conversation with the consumers was prevalent. One-directional media like television and print are easy to manage. (Lim et al. 2012, 197; Castañeda-García et al. 2020, 1458–1459.) However, the Internet and social media have made destination branding a two-way conversation, with consumer generated content having substantial power over how people assess the brand, often creating a different image than the one desired by the DMO (Lim et al. 2012). Indeed, visitors can quickly generate content about their travel experience that will reach a wide audience in the blink of an eye (Oliveira & Panyik 2015, 54). Therefore, the destination brand should embrace the consumers by actively engaging with them online and including them in the wider brand communication strategy (Qi et al. 2024, 3–4, 15). However, not only the tourists should be considered in the communication strategy. The local community should be included in the process by considering their needs and wants and including them in the online destination brand co-creation. (Oliveira & Panyik 2015, 63; Chen et al. 2026, 10.)

How should the digital communication strategy be conducted then? Oliveira & Panyik (2015, 62–63) recommend integrating traveler-generated content into the destination branding process and creating a clear plan on how to engage with it. They suggest maintaining communities of interest on social media, collecting content and displaying photos and videos from the visitors, emphasizing local events and finally encouraging word of mouth recommendations online. Suitable consumer generated content should be utilized to deliver messages that the destination marketers want to spread about their destination brand. Consumer comments on consumer and marketer generated content should also be utilized to inform brand development and improvement. (Lim et al. 2012, 205.) The destination should also engage with the tourists on social platforms. Proactive cooperation with the visitors and continuous interaction with them will create community and strengthen brand-tourist relationships. (Chen et al. 2026, 10–11.)

As part of the digital communication strategy, Chen et al. (2026, 10) recommend emphasizing implicit engagement with the customers over explicit engagement. Implicit engagement, such as user generated content and peer recommendations, have been noted to influence tourists' more positively than explicit communication. Chen et al. (2026, 10) further recommend finding influencers with enough reach that fit with the destination brand's values and story, to engage in

influencer marketing. The DMO should foster fan communities and work with both influencers and key opinion consumers, whom hold influence over smaller communities with their opinions. Indeed the digital engagement of grassroots communities should be prioritized, in order to foster organic destination brand images. (Chen et al. 2026, 10–11.) This is especially important, since people trust their peers opinions more than official marketers (Qualman 2011, 91–96).

Destinations should still partake in explicit engagement as well. They should be present on various social media platforms to foster explicit engagement. They can for example create trendy topics, host competitions related to the destination and facilitate interactions with and between tourists. (Chen et al. 2026, 10–11.) Additionally, the destination should create campaigns based on interactivity, including for example the use of geolocation tools, internet games, quizzes, augmented reality as well as encouraging participants to write blogs and stories, send post cards, take photos and videos or build travel and shopping plans (Kiráľová & Pavlíčka 2015, 363). Both the explicit and implicit communication strategies should be designed to aid in creating brand credibility, which helps build trust and emotional attachment (Chen et al. 2026, 10–11).

The destination should regularly monitor the content generated by consumers and sentiment expressed in the comments (Lim et al. 2012, 205). Indeed Oliveira & Panyik (2015, 63) recommend the DMO pays attention to all the information and content created by travelers. They add, that research conducted with effective methodology and understanding gained on how the destination is perceived and communicated about will provide compelling, well-timed and relevant pathways to successful destination branding. Castañeda-García et al. (2020, 1459) add, that the brand communication strategy should be based on ensuring the consistency of the messages that the destination can control, at the same time making efforts to be attentive to comments that are being freely exchanged online. The destination should use active listening systems, giving them the possibility to intervene directly in the conversations the consumers are having. If the destination marketers decide to intervene, they should do this respectfully and incrementally, only to provide new information or value to the conversation. (Castañeda-García et al. 2020, 1459.)

2.6 Evaluating success

To make sure the brand that has been created and managed is doing well, the destination wants to be able to determine if the branding process has been successful. Evaluating destination brand success however is not a simple task and a single clear-cut solution does not exist. (Hildreth 2011, 155–156.) Traditionally success has been measured in growth in revenue and visitor numbers (Gartner 2014, 114). However, in the era of environmental concern and overtourism, this view has

increasingly been criticized (e.g. Gartner 2014; Aman et al. 2024). Indeed, to be able to measure success, it is first important to be able to shift thinking on what success looks like. Success evaluation should move from solely considering the consumers to including the satisfaction of all stakeholders as well as the long-term sustainability of the destination. (Buhalis 2000, 100; Aman et al. 2024 14–15.) As the world changes, the destination brand and its goals needs to keep adapting along with it. (Gartner 2014, 112, 114–115; Kavaratzis & Hatch 2021, 12–13.)

Kavaratzis and Hatch (2021, 3–4) highlight the need for strategic flexibility and re-invention as a key quality of a successful destination branding process. They remind that destination brand creation and management is not a liner process with a start and an end but instead the brand formation should be viewed as an ongoing process of creation and alteration, where the nature of the destination brand is open-ended. They posit the branding process as a wheel, where the steps of strategic branding continuously follow each other. (Figure 2)

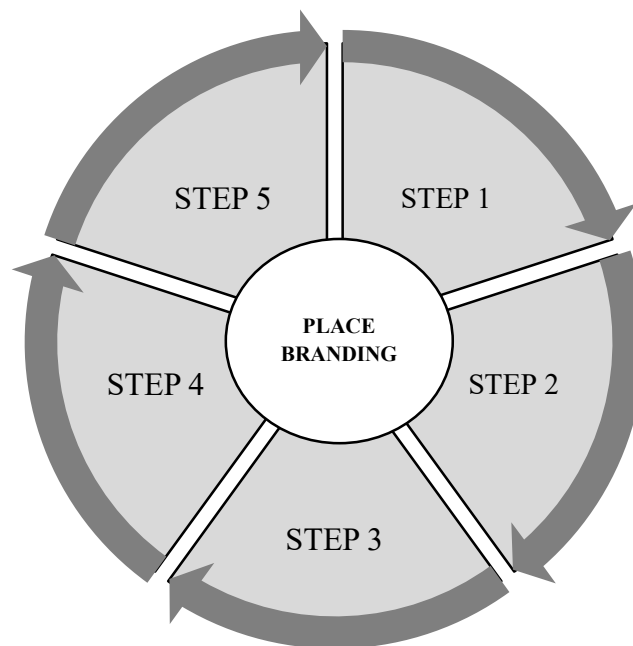


Figure 2. The wheel of place brand management. Adapted from Kavaratzis & Hatch (2021, 11)

Although Kavaratzis and Hatch (2021, 11–12) mainly present the branding wheel as relating to place branding, they add that the same process pertains to destinations. The approach to branding as a continuously monitored and updated wheel is proposed to ensure the strategy and the brand stay elastic in the changing world (Kavaratzis & Hatch 2021, 11–12). Indeed, flexibility and reconsideration are needed in the rapidly changing market. Besides the demand for destination sustainability, recent years have been marked by increased demand for safety – following COVID-19 and as other crises and disasters – as well as most recently changes brought by the rise of AI. As

the operating environment changes, so do consumers' wishes, shifting what is considered success for a destination brand. (Aman et al. 2024, 11, 14–15; Xu et al. 2025, 808.)

Even in the changing environment, metrics for success measurement do exist (Hildreth 2011, 155–156; Xu et al. 2025, 808–809). One of the most used ways to measure success is brand equity (e.g. Andéhn et al. 2014; Castañeda-García et al. 2020; Qi et al. 2024). The AMA (2026) defines brand equity as “the intangible value a brand holds in the minds of consumers.” Brand equity serves as a metric to how well the brand is recognized, perceived and trusted in the market. Strong brand equity correlates to increased market share and higher customer loyalty. (AMA 2026.) Brand equity offers competitive advantage by conveying additional value to the branded entity when being compared to a non-branded product, corporation or service (Kladou et al. 2017, 134). Kim and Lee (2018, 5–6) discuss advertising, price and word of mouth as influential factors affecting destination brand equity. Additionally, increased destination brand equity has been tied to a highly consistent communication strategy as well as active interaction with the consumers online (Castañeda-García et al. 2020, 1458; Qi et al. 2024, 15).

However, measuring destination brand equity is not as simple as traditional brand equity measurement. This is due to the fact that destinations do not provide a single product, but an agglomeration of services, experiences and unique features. Equity evaluation cannot be based on comparison to other destinations, since there is not a generic destination to serve as a base for evaluation on a marketplace. Therefore brand equity of a destination cannot be directly determined but instead should be based on visitation rates, expenditure and repeat versus renewal ratio of visitors. (Gartner 2014, 108–109.) However Gartner (2014, 114–115) reminds that increasing brand equity should not be the sole goal of the destination brand strategy. He adds that instead of only focusing on economic gains, the long-term health of the destination should be taken into consideration, since at the end of the day the prosperity of the destination is the only way to provide long-term value. Indeed Gartner (2014, 115) argues, that when it comes to destinations, sustainable development and brand equity are essentially the same concept.

For determining specific branding action success, the DMO can look at how specific brand campaigns are doing. Campaign success is typically measured by focusing on campaign awareness, response and conversion to real life visits. (Munro & Richards 2011, 149.) Today, most of the marketing campaigns are carried out on the internet, and therefore specific ways to look at online success should be utilized (Natalija et al. 2016, 139; Chen et al. 2026, 10). To measure success, the destination can look at site traffic, number of users, the amount of content that has been viewed and

on-site conversions as well as followers on social media and amount of engagement on each platform. These numbers communicate about the level of interest and attention in the brand. The set of metrics used to measure digital branding efforts should correlate with the specific goals of the destination brand and then drive key strategic and tactical decisions. (Munro & Richards 2011, 149.) Digital branding offers concrete numbers as indicators of success, which is often challenging to find in the case of destination brands (Gartner 2014, 109; Kiráľová & Pavlíčka 2015, 363–364). However, numbers online do not always correlate with results at the actual destination and therefore wider sentiment analysis should be conducted (Munro & Richards 2011, 149, 151–153).

In addition to determining brand equity and digital metrics, the destination can assess how people feel about the brand, by conducting market research and interviews (Munro & Richards 2011, 156–158). The brand can measure awareness of the destination which is divided typically into three parts: spontaneous, top-of-mind and aided awareness. Spontaneous awareness describes how many people would name the brand when asked without prompting them to name the brands they know in a certain category. Top-of-mind awareness then measures the percentage of people that, when using the same question, name the certain destination brand first. Finally, when measuring aided awareness, people are presented a list of brand names and the aided awareness of the brand is the percentage of people who say they know said brand. (Hildreth 2011, 155–156.) In addition to measuring who knows about the brand, the DMO can measure how the existing visitors feel about the brand. One of the most important indicators of a successful destination brand is considered loyalty. (Aro et al. 2018, 78–79.) Loyalty can be described as a preference and a psychological commitment towards a brand (Kim & Lee 2018, 6). It can be divided into attitudinal and behavioral: the intention to visit the destination again and in action visiting the destination again (Aro et al. 2018, 78–79). Customer loyalty then can be assessed by measuring revisit intention and recommendation intention (Chen et al. 2020, 1–2).

Aro et al. (2018) suggest that a sign of a truly successful destination brand is destination brand love. They define destination brand love as a satisfied customer's emotional attachment toward a brand and add that such love can be formed and showcased in different ways for different people, but usually includes identification with the brand to some degree (Aro et al. 2018, 73). Examples of leading factors, antecedents, towards destination brand love and the consequences of the phenomenon are presented in Figure 3.

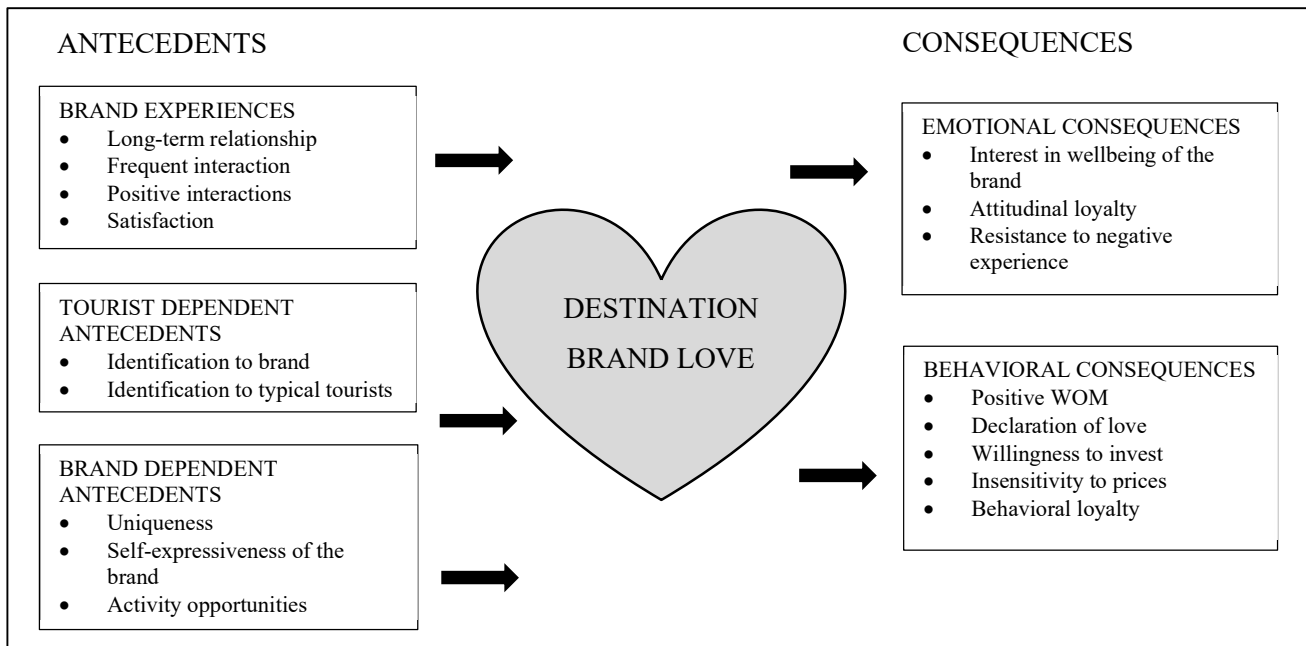


Figure 3. Antecedents and consequences of destination brand love. Adapted from Aro et al. (2018, 76)

Establishing destination brand love takes time, multiple positive interactions and experiences, identification with the brand and others at the destination as well as a uniqueness and self-expressiveness – i.e. the brand aligning with the consumer’s own self – of the brand. However, when established, the consequences are favorable for the destination brand. Destination brand love leads to, among other things, interest in wellbeing of the brand, resistance to negative experiences, insensitivity to prices, positive WOM and most importantly, loyalty towards the destination brand. (Aro et al. 2018, 73, 78–80.) Swanson (2017, 95) adds, that destination brand love also increases visitation and therefore expenditure at the destination. Establishing destination brand love in visitors can therefore be seen as extremely beneficial to the destination, and thus it is an important phenomenon to understand. The extent of destination brand love can be found out by interviewing the visitors to find out how they feel about the brand. When the destination finds people that fall into the category, understanding their specific reasons for such feelings can create future avenues towards further improving the brand. (Aro et al. 2018, 78–80.)

3 Conclusions

In this thesis the aim was to explore the process of strategic destination branding. The main theme was explored under three sub-questions: (1) What is destination branding? (2) What are the steps of strategic destination branding? (3) How should the success of the branding process be evaluated? The first sub-question was answered in chapter 2.1 by providing a definition of destination branding as well as other important definitions such as what a destination is and who conducts the branding. The second sub-question was answered throughout chapters 2.2-2.6. Finally, the last sub-question was mainly explored in chapter 2.6, although different criteria for successful branding are touched on throughout the thesis.

Based on the process mapped out in this thesis as well as a strategic branding framework suggested by Stephens Balakrishnan (2009, 622), this thesis proposes the following framework for the strategic destination branding process (Figure 4):

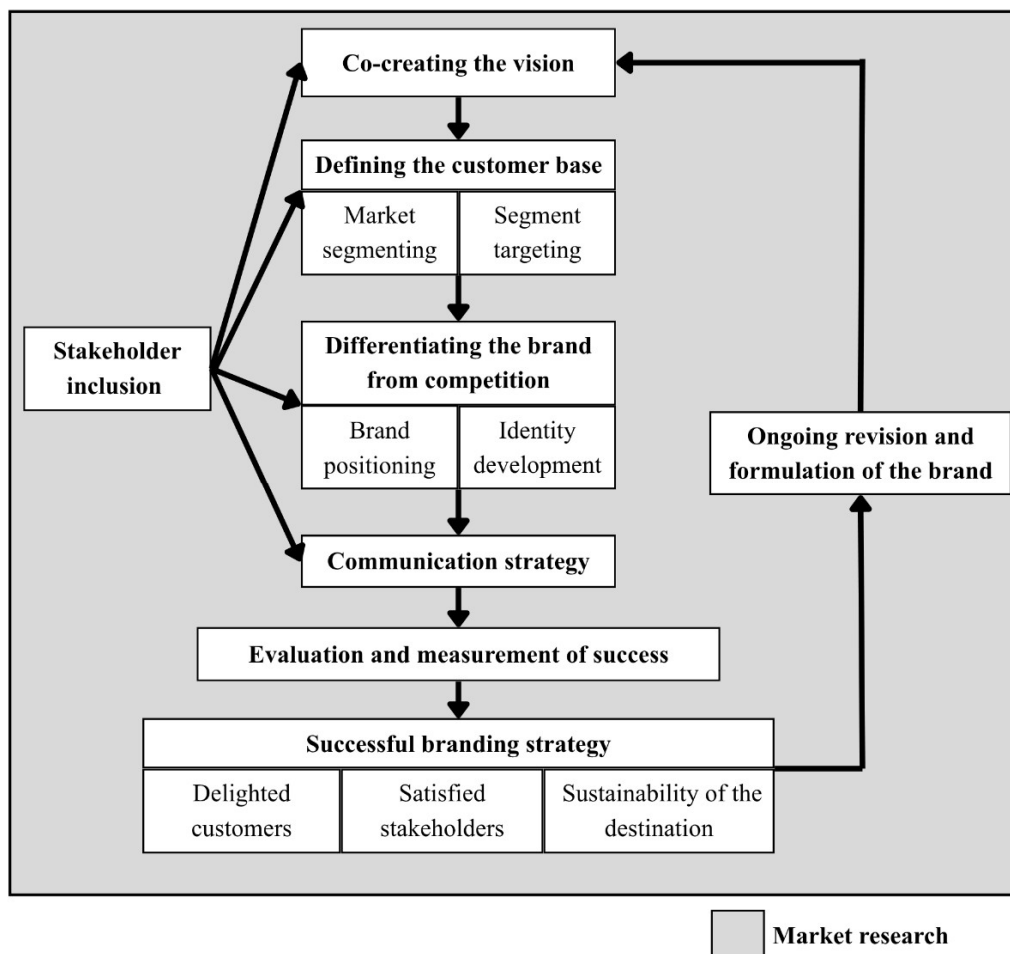


Figure 4. The strategic destination branding framework. Adapted from Stephens Balakrishnan (2009, 622)

Strategic destination branding should start with vision creation. Destination brand vision does not only pertain to branding activities but guides the direction of the destination's long-term development. Therefore, it is vital that the vision is co-created with the stakeholders. The local stakeholders are not only affected by the development of the destination, but the desired future is not possible without stakeholder participation. When it comes to destination brands, the local stakeholders have as much of a right to the brand as does the organization responsible for the branding.

Once the vision of the destination brand is decided, the next step is understanding the customer base. No branding activity can be successful before first understanding who the brand is created for. This is done by first dividing the market into customer segments and then choosing the most suitable ones to target. The targeting decisions should be made based on the measurability, substantiality, accessibility and actionability of each segment (Tkaczynski et al. 2018), choosing a few of the segments the criterion matches the best. To gain a more accurate understanding of the potential target markets of the destination, interviews with local stakeholders are recommended.

The third step of a successful destination branding strategy is differentiating the brand from competition. This is done through positioning the brand in a unique and competitive spot compared to the competition. In order to create a fruitful positioning strategy, the destination identity needs to be understood and further developed based on the chosen positioning strategy. A destination has many qualities that affect the choice of competitive position. The inherent tangible characteristics such as geological makeup, weather and country of origin as well as intangible characteristics such as the history and culture of the place cannot be conveniently formed around a desired brand identity but instead the brand identity needs to be formed around these characteristics. Although posing limitation to the possible positioning strategy, the inherent characteristics of a destination are also what makes it unique and therefore serve as invaluable differentiating factors.

Once the vision is created, target segments defined and competitive positioning decided, it is time to create a communication strategy. Communication can happen in many ways, but nowadays most people find out about destinations online. The Internet provides many opportunities for the destination brand but also requires adaptation from traditional one-way communication. Indeed, destination brands are increasingly co-created online by tourists. Tourists hold power to shift sentiments about the destination by sharing their experiences and opinions online. Therefore, the destination marketer needs to carefully tailor a communication strategy based on digital communication, interaction and authenticity.

Lastly, it is time to determine if the strategic branding process has been successful. Success should be considered a combination of customer contentment, wider stakeholder satisfaction as well as long-term sustainability and prosperity of the destination. The success of the destination brand can be measured by evaluating destination brand equity, awareness of the brand and measuring customers' and other stakeholders' sentiments about the brand. Positive experiences, interactions and identification with the brand lead to customer loyalty and can even lead to destination brand love. Requirements for what is considered a successful destination brand change over time and therefore creating and managing a destination brand should not be viewed in a linear fashion but instead understood as an ongoing process requiring revision, flexibility and updating, to stay competitive in the rapidly changing world.

The key themes highlighted in destination branding literature are the need to look at destination branding as a holistic concept – where the whole destination matters and branding practices are not separated from real life – (e.g. Boisen et al, 2018, 7; Aman et al. 2024, 4), vitality of stakeholder involvement and the shift towards brand co-creation (e.g. Oliveira & Panyik 2015; Saraniemi & Komppula 2019) and the need to consider the long-term sustainability of the destination (e.g. Zouganeli et al. 2012, 741; Aman et al. 2024, 14–15). The three themes are interconnected, since viewing a destination in a holistic manner includes considering aspects of stakeholder inclusion and sustainability, and sustainability is not possible without the stakeholders. In addition to these, the rise and prevalence of digital communications and adapting to this is highlighted as a key to success (e.g. Lim et al. 2012; Chen et al. 2026). Since these themes have been deemed vital by various authors, they have also been examined throughout the thesis.

This thesis has aimed to create a comprehensible understanding of the strategic destination branding process as well as providing suggestions on how this process should be conducted successfully. A combination of best practices for destination branding as well as new trends highlighted important in the literature have been utilized to create suggestions suitable for the present day. This thesis can provide a useful picture of destination branding as well as utilizable suggestions for a DMO or any party responsible for the branding of a destination. Since general strategic branding frameworks have not been notably created in recent years (Giannopoulos et al. 2020, 149, 152), future research could offer an updated framework, diving deeper into the topic than can be done in a bachelor's thesis. Furthermore, the applicability and effectiveness of an updated strategic branding framework could be tested empirically in different destination contexts.

References

- AMA. (2026). Branding. American Marketing Association. <<https://www.ama.org/topics/brand-and-branding/>>, retrieved 6.3.3026.
- Aman, Eliyas Ebrahim – Papp-Váry, Árpád Ferenc – Kangai, Deborah – Odunga, Sebastian Ongango. (2024). Building a sustainable future: Challenges, opportunities, and innovative strategies for destination branding in tourism. *Administrative Sciences*, Vol. 14 (12), 1-20.
- Andéhn, Mikael – Kazeminia, Azadeh – Lucarelli, Andrea – Sevin, Efe. (2014). User-generated place brand equity on Twitter: The dynamics of brand associations in social media. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 10 (2), 132–144.
- Anholt, Simon. (2011). Competitive identity. In *Destination brands: Managing place reputation* 3rd ed., eds. Morgan, Nigel – Pritchard, Annette – Pride, Roger, 21–31. Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford.
- Aro, Kaisa – Suomi, Kati – Saraniemi, Saila. (2018). Antecedents and consequences of destination brand love—A case study from Finnish Lapland. *Tourism Management*, Vol. 67, 71–81.
- Baker, Michael J. – Cameron, Emma. (2008). Critical success factors in destination marketing. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, Vol. 8 (2), 79–97.
- Benur, Abdelati M. – Bramwell, Bill. (2015). Tourism product development and product diversification in destinations. *Tourism Management*, Vol. 50, 213–224.
- Blain, Carmen – Levy, Stuart E. – Ritchie, J. R. Brent. (2005). Destination branding: Insights and practices from destination management organizations. *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 43 (4), 328–338.
- Boisen, Martin – Terlouw, Kees – Groote, Peter – Couwenberg, Oscar. (2018). Reframing place promotion, place marketing, and place branding—Moving beyond conceptual confusion. *Cities, city marketing and branding as urban policy*, Vol. 80, 4–11.
- Briciu, Victor-Alexandru. (2013). Differences between place branding and destination branding for local brand strategy development. *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brasov, Series VII: Social Sciences & Law*, Vol 1, 9–14.
- Buhalis, Dimitrios. (2000). Marketing the competitive destination of the future. *Tourism Management*, Vol. 21 (1), 97–116.
- Castañeda-García, J. A. – Frías-Jamilena, D. M. – Del Barrio-García, S. – Rodríguez-Molina, M. A. (2020). The effect of message consistency and destination-positioning brand strategy type on consumer-based destination brand equity. *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 59 (8), 1447–1463.

- Cha, Sukbin – McCleary, Ken W. – Uysal, Muzaffer. (1995). Travel motivations of Japanese overseas travelers: A factor-cluster segmentation approach. *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 34 (1), 33–39.
- Chen, Liying – Zhang, Jing – Zhang, Mo – Pang, Hongli. (2026). How does tourists' digital engagement impact destination brand digital experience and brand value co-creation? The moderating role of digital credibility. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, Vol. 28 (2), 70234.
- Chen, Ruixia – Zhou, Zhimin – Zhan, Ge – Zhou, Nan. (2020). The impact of destination brand authenticity and destination brand self-congruence on tourist loyalty: The mediating role of destination brand engagement. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, Vol. 15, 100402.
- Choo, Hyungsuk – Park, Sun-Young – Petrick, James F. (2011). The influence of the resident's identification with a tourism destination brand on their behavior. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, Vol. 20 (2), 198–216.
- Daye, Marcella. (2010). Challenges and prospects of differentiating destination brands: The case of the Dutch Caribbean Islands. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 27 (1), 1–13.
- de Chernatony, Leslie – Dall'Olmo Riley, Francesca. (1998). Modelling the components of the brand. *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 32 (11–12), 1074–1090.
- Escobar-Farfán, Manuel – Cervera-Taulet, Amparo – Schlesinger, Walesska. (2024). Destination brand identity: Challenges, opportunities, and future research agenda. *Cogent Social Sciences*, Vol.10 (1), 2302803.
- Fan, Ying. (2006). Branding the nation: What is being branded? *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 12 (1), 5–14.
- Fyall, Alan. (2011). The partnership challenge. In *Destination brands: Managing place reputation* 3rd ed., eds. Morgan, Nigel – Pritchard, Annette – Pride, Roger, 91–103. Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford.
- Gartner, William C. (2014). Brand equity in a tourism destination. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 10 (2), 108–116.
- Giannopoulos, Antonios – Piha, Lamprini – Skourtis, George. (2020). Destination branding and co-creation: A service ecosystem perspective. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, Vol. 30 (1), 148–166.
- Gunn, Clare – Var, Turgut. (2002). *Tourism planning: Basics, concepts, cases*, 4th ed. Routledge, New York, NY.

- Hanna, Sonya – Rowley, Jennifer. (2008). An analysis of terminology use in place branding. *Place Branding & Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 4 (1), 61–75.
- Hanna, Sonya – Rowley, Jennifer – Keegan, Brendan. (2021). Place and destination branding: A review and conceptual mapping of the domain. *European Management Review*, Vol. 18 (2), 105–117.
- Harrison-Walker, L. Jean. (2001). The measurement of word-of-mouth communication and an investigation of service quality and customer commitment as potential antecedents. *Journal of Service Research*. Vol. 4 (1), 60-75
- Hatch, Mary Jo – Schultz, Majken. (2010). Toward a theory of brand co-creation with implications for brand governance. *Journal of Brand Management*, Vol. 17 (8), 590–604.
- Hildreth, Jeremy. (2011). The measurement challenge. In *Destination brands: Managing place reputation*, 3rd ed., eds. Morgan, Nigel – Pritchard, Annette – Pride, Roger, 155–168. Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford.
- Kavaratzis, Mihalis – Hatch, Mary Jo. (2021). The elusive destination brand and the ATLAS wheel of place brand management. *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 60 (1), 3–15.
- Kim, Hwa-Kyung – Lee, Timothy J. (2018). Brand equity of a tourist destination. *Sustainability*, Vol. 10 (2), 431.
- King, John. (2002). Destination marketing organisations—Connecting the experience rather than promoting the place. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*. Vol. 8 (2), 105-108
- Kiráľová, Alžbeta – Pavličeka, Antonín. (2015). Development of social media strategies in tourism destination. *Procedia - Social and behavioral Sciences, Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Strategic Innovative Marketing (IC-SIM 2014)*, Vol. 175, 358–366.
- Kladou, Stella – Kavaratzis, Mihalis – Rigopoulou, Irini – Salonika, Eleftheria. (2017). The role of brand elements in destination branding. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, Vol. 6 (4), 426–435.
- Kotler, Philip – Armstrong, Gary – Harris, Lloyd – Piercy, Nigel. (2017). *Principles of marketing* (7th European Edition). Pearson Education Limited, Harlow, England.
- Kotsi, Filareti – Pike, Steven. (2020). Destination brand positioning theme development based on consumers’ personal values. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, Vol. 45 (3).
- Lim, Yumi – Chung, Yeasun – Weaver, Pamela A. (2012). The impact of social media on destination branding: Consumer-generated videos versus destination marketer-generated videos. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 18 (3), 197–206.

- Maccioni, Samuele – d’Angella, Francesca – De Carlo, Manuela – Sfogliarini, Bruno. (2024). Stakeholder engagement and triggers for sustainable development in complex fragile ecosystems: Evidence from Alpine Trentino region. *Sustainability*, Vol. 16 (22), 9879.
- Mandagi, Deske W. – Centeno, Dave. (2025). Destination brand gestalt: Dimensionalizing co-created tourism destination branding. *International Journal of Tourism Cities*. Vol. 11 (3-4), 530-563
- Morgan, Nigel – Pitchard, Annette – Roger, Pride. (2011). Tourism places, brands and reputation management. In *Destination brands: Managing place reputation*, 3rd ed., eds. Morgan, Nigel – Pritchard, Annette – Pride, Roger, 3–19. Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford.
- Munro, Jon – Richards, Bethan. (2011). The digital challenge. In *Destination brands: Managing place reputation*, 3rd ed., 3rd ed., eds. Morgan, Nigel – Pritchard, Annette – Pride, Roger, 142–154. Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford.
- Nadeau, John – Heslop, Louise – O’Reilly, Norm – Luk, Peter. (2008). Destination in a country image context. *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 35 (1), 84–106.
- Natalija, Parlov – Davor, Perkov – Željko, Sičaja. (2016). New trends in tourism destination branding by means of digital marketing. *Acta Economica et Turistica*, Vol. 2 (2), 139–146.
- Oliveira, Eduardo – Panyik, Emese. (2015). Content, context and co-creation: Digital challenges in destination branding with references to Portugal as a tourist destination. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 21 (1), 53–74.
- Park, Sun-Young – Petrick, James F. (2006). Destinations’ perspectives of branding. *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 33 (1), 262–265.
- Perkins, Rachel – Khoo-Lattimore, Catheryn – Arcodia, Charles. (2020). Understanding the contribution of stakeholder collaboration towards regional destination branding: A systematic narrative literature review. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, Vol. 43, 250–258.
- Pike, Steven. (2011). *Destination marketing organisations*. Routledge, New York, NY.
- Qi, Meng – Abdullah, Zulhamri – Rahman, Saiful Nujaimi Abdul. (2024). Navigating the digital landscape: Evaluating the impacts of digital IMC on building and maintaining destination brand equity. *Sustainability*, Vol. 16 (20), 8914.
- Qu, Hailin – Kim, Lisa Hyunjung – Im, Holly Hyunjung. (2011). A model of destination branding: Integrating the concepts of the branding and destination image. *Tourism Management*, Vol. 32 (3), 465–476.
- Qualman, Erik. (2011). *Socialnomics: How social media transforms the way we live and do business* (Rev. and updated). John Wiley & Sons, Inc, Hoboken, New Jersey.

- Rainisto, Seppo – Helsinki University of Technology. Institute of strategy and international Business. (2003). *Success factors of place marketing: A study of place marketing practices in Northern Europe and the United States*. Doctoral Dissertation. Helsinki University of Technology.
- Reinhold, Stephan – Beritelli, Pietro. (2022). Destination management organization (DMO). In *Encyclopedia of tourism management and marketing*. ed. Dimitrios Buhalis, Vol. 1, 877–881. Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, UK.
- Ritchie, J. R. Brent. (1993). Crafting a destination vision: Putting the concept of resident responsive tourism into practice. *Tourism Management*, Vol. 14 (5), 379–389.
- Ruiz-Real, José Luis – Uribe-Toril, Juan – Gázquez-Abad, Juan Carlos. (2020). Destination branding: Opportunities and new challenges. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, Vol. 17, 100453.
- Saqib, Natasha. (2020). Positioning – a literature review. *PSU Research Review*, Vol. 5 (2), 141–169.
- Saraniemi, Saila – Komppula, Raija. (2019). The development of a destination brand identity: A story of stakeholder collaboration. *Current Issues in Tourism*, Vol. 22 (9), 1116–1132.
- Sarantakou, Efthymia. (2023). Contemporary challenges in destination planning: A Geographical typology approach. *Geographies*, Vol. 3 (4), 687–708.
- Simpson, Ken. (2001). Strategic planning and community involvement as contributors to sustainable tourism development. *Current Issues in Tourism*, Vol. 4 (1), 3–41.
- Spotts, Daniel M. – Mahoney, Edward M. (1991). Segmenting visitors to a destination region based on the volume of their expenditures. *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 29 (4), 24–31.
- Stephens Balakrishnan, Melodena. (2008). Dubai – a star in the east: A case study in strategic destination branding. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, Vol. 1 (1), 62–91.
- Stephens Balakrishnan, Melodena. (2009). Strategic branding of destinations: A framework. *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 43 (5–6), 611–629.
- Stephens Balakrishnan, Melodena – Nekhili, Ramzi – Lewis, Clifford. (2011). Destination brand components. *International Journal of Culture Tourism and Hospitality Research*, Vol. 5 (1), 4–25.
- Swanson, Kathryn. (2017). Destination brand love: Managerial implications and applications to tourism businesses. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, Vol. 10 (1), 88–97.
- Tkaczynski, Aaron – Rundle-Thiele, Sharyn – Beaumont, Narelle. (2010). Destination segmentation: A recommended two-step approach. *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 49 (2), 139–152.

- Tkaczynski, Aaron – Rundle-Thiele, Sharyn. (2011). Segmenting destinations: In the eyes of the stakeholders. *International Journal of Culture Tourism and Hospitality Research*, Vol. 5 (3), 255–268.
- Tkaczynski, Aaron – Rundle-Thiele, Sharyn – Prebensen, Nina Katrine. (2018). To segment or not? That is the question. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 24 (1), 16–28.
- Tsaur, Sheng-Hsiung – Yen, Chang-Hua – Yan, Yu-Ting. (2016). Destination brand identity: Scale development and validation. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, Vol. 21 (12), 1310–1323.
- UN Tourism. (n.d.). *UN Tourism World Tourism Barometer*. <<https://www.untourism.int/un-tourism-world-tourism-barometer-data>>, retrieved 5.3.2026
- UNWTO. (n.d.). *UNWTO Tourism Highlights, 2001 Edition | World Tourism Organization*. <<https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/book/10.18111/9789284406845>>, retrieved, 5.3.2026
- Vanolo, Alberto. (2015). The image of the creative city, eight years later: Turin, urban branding and the economic crisis taboo. *Cities*, Vol. 46, 1–7.
- Weaver, Adam. (2015). Target markets as working archetypes: Classifying consumers at Tourism New Zealand. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 21 (2), 163–174.
- Wheeler, Fiona – Frost, Warwick – Weiler, Betty. (2011). Destination brand identity, values, and community: A case study from Rural Victoria, Australia. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 28 (1), 13–26.
- Woodside, Arch G. – Dubelaar, Chris. (2002). A general theory of tourism consumption systems: A conceptual framework and an empirical exploration. *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 41 (2), 120–132.
- Xu, Jing (Bill) – McKercher, Bob – Sau-ying Ho, Pamela. (2025). Tourists' perceptions of the competitive destination. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 31 (4).
- Yavuz, Mehmet – Sumbul, Muzaffer – Ergeç, Nuket – Derdiyok, Cetin. (2016). Storytelling in destination brand communication: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of Global Business Insights*, Vol. 1 (2), 63–72.
- Zouganeli, Stathia – Trihas, Nikolaos – Antonaki, Maria – Kladou, Stella. (2012). Aspects of sustainability in the destination branding process: A bottom-up approach. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, Vol. 21 (7), 739–757.