The Destination Image of Thessaloniki

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Abstract: *Destination marketing may develop at the city, region, or country level. The present study investigates the image of a destination, the city of Thessaloniki, drawing upon the destination marketing approach. The image of the city is an intermediate variable that works on two levels. On the supply side, the key issue becomes how city providers and destination planners wish to position the city to target tourists and other internal and external publics. On the demand side, the perceptions and predispositions of tourists regarding the city are crucial in choosing the destination and/or deciding to revisit. The present study employs mainly a demand-oriented perspective through the use of a questionnaire and supplements it a supply perspective consisting of in-depth interviews with three key tourism officials-managers. The structured questionnaire was administered to 83 visitor during the period December 20 2011 to January 12 2012. The analysis of the questionnaires reveals tourist perceptions regarding Thessaloniki as well as their evaluations regarding services being rendered. Findings depict the current image of Thessaloniki as a safe hospitable destination with most visitors willing to revisit and/or recommend the city to a friend or relative. Furthermore, in depth interviews with key tourism administrators took place in order to reveal the intentions of local authorities regarding the branding of Thessaloniki and to grasp a sense of the desired image promoted by the city's tourism managers and administrators. All of the above quantitative and qualitative data point in the direction that Thessaloniki could be promoted as a city break destination combining business with pleasure. In this sense, congress-convention tourism holds great development potential and should be a key ingredient in devising a destination strategy for Thessaloniki*
Keywords: *destination, image, Thessaloniki, destination marketing, tourist perceptions*

INTRODUCTION

The seventies was the decade characterized – among others - by the increase of tourism. Over the years, destinations and countries realized the great importance of tourism and the way it affects local and regional development forcing destinations to formulate those images that would appeal to as many tourists as possible (Sahin 2011, Ekinci and Hosany, 2006, Kozak and Baloglu, 2011).

As far as Greece is concerned, tourism contributed to the economic development of the destinations, increased employment as well as the national income. On the other hand, the increased demand led to a model of mass tourism that was widespread not only in Greece but also throughout the Mediterranean region (Italy, France, Spain, etc.) (Tsartas, 2000, Kokkosis, 2001). The specific model was put to questioning by tourists at first and then by destination management authorities of areas with natural and cultural resources which sought models emphasizing alternative forms of tourism or in combination with mass tourism so as to attain viable development features (Kokkosis, 2001, Tsartas, 2000).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Laws (1995) stresses the fact that researchers do not unanimously agree on the term «destination», using it alternatively with resort, area, or hotel complex. The author develops a typology for destinations using a variety from «capital cities» to developed traditional centers and «thematic resorts». Public administrative bodies usually determine the tourism destinations based on administrative criteria rather than visitors' preferences. Lundberg (1990) defines destination as any geographic entity that could have a common image. Ashworth and Voogd (1990) consider destinations to be handled as products since they are the consumption point of those activities that make up the tourism experience and are utterly what is supposed to be put for sale by the tourism market factors. Destination is simultaneously both the product and the package of products. To project the multidimensional character of a destination Mill & Morrison (1992) use the term «destination mix». Buhalis (2007) on the other hand characterizes tourism destinations as the "amalgams of tourism products, offering an integrated experience to consumers" while he claims that maps are not the ones defining a tourism destination but the visitors – tourists. Saraniemi and Kylanen (2010) finally, point out that tourism destination is the field where all the involved agencies (public – private bodies, tourists, locals) effectively cooperate to formulate tourism experiences.

Brand management is the most powerful tool of modern tourism destination marketing in order to confront the challenges of competition and claim a position in the world market (Ooi, 2009). Brand management can be defined as the strategy to

choose the mixture of elements that differentiate and project a destination among others via the positive projection of its image. (Cai, 2002). The importance of the destination image and the differentiation of a destination are inseparable elements for the creation of a strong destination brand name (Blain, Levy & Ritchie, 2005). It is worth noting that Anholt (2009), one of the most important researchers in the field of destination branding, claims in his book *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation* that when it comes to a nation there isn't such thing as branding. As he puts it, «it's a dangerous myth». Nations may have brand identities in the sense that they acquire and value reputation as important as a product's trade but it's practically impossible to apply branding on a nation. The various views on the issue of destination branding depend on the background and the research interests of the authors. (Kavaratzis, 2005).

Nowadays, visitors are well informed and educated and their demands go beyond the triangle transportation – accommodation – food. Therefore, what they seek from a destination is to fulfill their desires as a whole and not exclusively via the individual products that compose the destination image. Therefore, the success of a destination brand is to capture and satisfy what the visitors wish. The task is extremely difficult and presupposes that it is ingrained in the visitor's perception that the destination may indeed satisfy his/her needs. After all, tourism and perception are based on the emotional state of the visitor rather than cognitive elements. As Kouris (2009) states "Image is the meaning of a destination, and is 'what the destination is' *in the mind of tourists*". In order to formulate branding of a destination one must first begin with image building (see Figure 1). Features like destination "goods" and characteristics of offering are the base of the pyramid towards the formulation of the destination branding (Kouris, 2009, Barlett, 2002).

Pike (2002) thoroughly analyzed 142 studies on destination management and concluded that the rank order in terms of popularity places countries at the top being followed by states, cities, resorts and provinces. In line with the most recent destination image studies that focus on city images (Sahin, 2011, Pike, 2002), the current study intends to identify the image of the city of Thessaloniki located in Northern Greece.
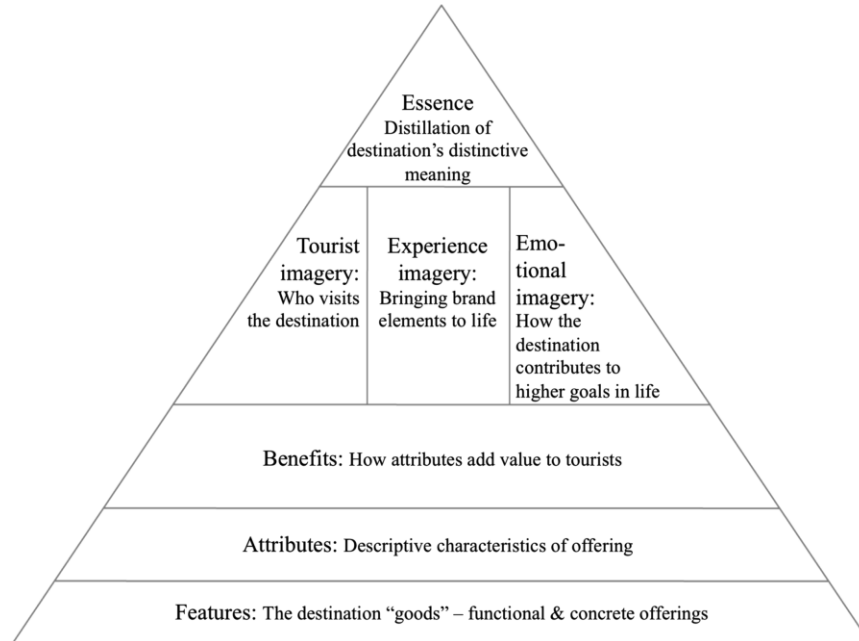
Figure 1: Destination Brand through Image Building
Thessaloniki

The tourism market of Thessaloniki is experiencing a significant change. According to the local Hotel Association 31,09% more foreigners stayed in the hotels between January and September 2011 compared to 2010 data whereas the relative percentage of Greeks dropped by 5,5%. Thus for 2011 Greeks comprised the 58,24% of those who stayed in accommodations in Thessaloniki and foreigners represented the 41,76%. The tourism market of Thessaloniki is undergoing a structural change considering that for the past 35 years Greeks were the major segment of the market (75%).

As Table 1 shows, Israelis (331,67%,) Egyptians (283,01%), Norwegians (166,98%), Ukrainians (122,22%), and Russians (96,41%), are the top 5 nationalities that record the highest rates of increase in visitor numbers (Table 1).

The troublesome situation in the neighboring countries of North Africa as well as the establishment of new air connections to Thessaloniki (Ryanair) are the main reasons for the increase in the numbers of Egyptians, Norwegians and Swedish visiting Thessaloniki. Notwithstanding these increases, the largest number of visitors moved to nearby summer resort areas instead of staying in the city.

Table 1: Nationalities recording the biggest increase, 2011

JANUARY – SEPTEMBER 2011			
COUNTRY	OVERNIGHTS 2011	OVERNIGHTS 2010	CHANGE
ISRAEL	51.809	12.002	331,67%
EGYPT	3.539	924	283,01%
NORWAY	3.647	1.366	166,98%
UKRAINE	3.991	1.796	122,22%
RUSSIA	27.790	14.149	96,41%
F.Y.R.O.M.	9.445	5.490	72,04%
DENMARK	2.549	1.552	64,24%
TURKEY	25.429	15.546	63,57%
ALBANIA	21.999	13.513	62,80%
SWEDEN	5.282	3.315	59,34%
SWITZERLAND	5.259	3.766	39,64%
SPAIN	8.289	6.134	35,13%
ITALY	37.174	28.425	30,78%
BELGIUM	5.213	4.049	28,75%
FRANCE	15.144	12.154	24,60%
ROMANIA	22.974	19.097	20,30%
SERBIA	28.324	23.673	19,65%
BULGARIA	25.490	21.654	17,71%
UK	18.041	15.569	15,88%
USA	25.516	22.131	15,30%

SOURCE: Hotel Association of Thessaloniki

«Macedonia» Airport of Thessaloniki is the main gate for international visitors of Thessaloniki covering most of the European markets via connections to European capital cities. A large segment of the visitors however don't have as their main destination the area of Thessaloniki but rather the summer resort areas of Chalkidiki and Pieria. The airport is the second largest airport of the country and ranks fourth in number of tourist arrivals. In 2011 1,2 million foreigners arrived at the airport (11,18% more than 2010).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A structured questionnaire was used to conduct research. The questions and the scales used were based on previous studies carried out by the University of the Aegean (2010) and were adjusted for the city of Thessaloniki. 115 questionnaires were collected out of which 83 were finally used (72%). The questionnaires were statistically elaborated with SPSS v.17 and charts were exported in Microsoft Excel XP. The research took place between December 20, 2011 and January 10, 2012 at the «Macedonia» airport of Thessaloniki. The interviewees were visitors who had checked in for departure from Thessaloniki.

The questionnaire included 29 questions divided into four sections. The first section included eleven questions regarding the choice of Thessaloniki as a holiday destination, the choice criteria and a comparison of the image of city during the current visit compared to the previous one or to the image the visitor had in mind prior to his/her visit. In the same section, visitors were asked to report the city's main sights they visited as well as the transportation means they used during their stay.

The second section included 36 items. A five-point Likert scale was used with visitors being asked to agree or disagree with. In order to identify the degree of satisfaction visitors derived from their stay in Thessaloniki, they were asked to evaluate features of the accommodation facilities (infrastructure, hotel facilities, satisfaction from prices paid, quality of services provided, etc.) To grasp an understanding of the image visitors held about the city, they were probed as to their intentions to revisit the city and/or recommend it as a destination to friends and relatives (9 items).

The final section of the questionnaire concerned demographic data of the visitors (residence area, sex, age, educational level, monthly income and family status) as well as the basic motives for their selection of the holiday destination.

The second part of the survey focused on the offer. In depth interviews were conducted with executives dealing with local tourism policy development. In particular interviews were carried out with the manager of the Organization of Marketing of Thessaloniki, a representative of a Congress Organization and a local tour operator.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding age, the majority of the respondents (55,42%) were between 35 and 44 years old whereas 15,66% up to 25 years old, 13,25% between 25-24 years of age and finally 9,64% were over 55 years old. In terms of sex, 77,1% were women and 22,9% men . Regarding education, most of the interviewees (33,7%) possessed higher education level degrees and 28,9%

were high school graduates. In terms of income, nearly half of the respondents, 55,4% , earn up 2.500 Euro per month, 27,7% earn 2501 – 3000 Euro and finally 16,9% earn more than 3000 Euro per month. As far as the permanent residence is concerned, 33,8% of the respondents were Greek residents (Chania, Rhodes, Mytilene, Athens), 62,2% foreigners (Stockholm, Oslo, London, Paris, Rome) and 3,6% Cypriots.

The main purpose for travel was holidays (37,3%) followed by visiting friends and relatives (21,7%) –a logical finding considering the time of the survey. It is, however, noteworthy that 16.9% of the respondents travelled to Thessaloniki in order to participate in a congress-conference, highlighting the dynamic factor of convention tourism (see Table 2).

Table 2: Purpose of travel

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Holidays	31	37.3	37.3
Visiting friends and relatives	18	21.7	59.0
Congress participation	14	16.9	75.9
Business travel	12	14.5	90.4
Health reasons	8	9.6	100.0
Total	83	100.0	

The general image of Thessaloniki is pretty good since the 46,7% totally disagreed with the statement «Very bad the general image of the area I visited» (Table 3). Major traffic problems as well as the heavy air pollution are the city's main problems since 39,8% and 35% agree or totally agree respectively that both issues reflect negatively on Thessaloniki's image. However, there is a 30% who remain indifferent to the aforementioned problems. Moreover, Thessaloniki is considered a safe city for its visitors (62,75) with many shopping opportunities (77,8%). It is not considered, though, friendly to pedestrians or bicyclists.

Table 3: The image of the area I visited was very bad

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Percentage	I totally disagree	21	25.3	28.0	28.0
	I disagree	14	16.9	18.7	46.7
	Indifferent	15	18.1	20.0	66.7
	I agree	15	18.1	20.0	86.7
	I totally agree	10	12.0	13.3	100.0
	Total	75	90.4	100.0	
Missing	System	8	9.6		
Total		83	100.0		

Generally speaking, the image of Thessaloniki prior to the visit was Average (24,6%), Indifferent (36,1%), Good (13,1%) or Very Good (26,2%). The city's image as a tourism destination after the visit was considerably improved as shown in the lower numbers recorded for the categories of Average (7,2%) and Indifferent (21,7%) and the significant increase given to the characterization of Good (55,4%). It is noteworthy that 78,3% of the visitors intend to repeat the visit in the future and suggest Thessaloniki as a tourism destination to a friend or relative.

The image of the city is composed of the following elements: A hospitable city (73,5%), sunny (66,7%), with many entertainment options (46,7%), not exclusively linked to student life (58%) but with few business opportunities (68%).

On the supply side, the most interesting remarks made by tourism executives regarding the image of Thessaloniki and the city's brand name are the following:

- «Visitors experience the lack of information regarding the services, the streets, the sightseeing as well as the incredible lack of cleaning service and everyday traffic jam»
- «The city's promotion should begin from the neighboring Balkan countries where there is easy access via the highway network and proceed to the countries directly linked with Thessaloniki via air connections».
- «Promotion efforts should be directed to the neighboring Balkan countries and Turkey and save some resources to be spent on western capital cities, i.e. London».
- «Thessaloniki should be promoted to the big tourism fairs of major capital cities such as Tirana, Skopje, Beograd, Zagreb, Sofia, Istanbul and possibly Moscow. Cyprus should also be included in the promotion activities».

- «Thessaloniki is a very beautiful city during Christmas and it should be promoted as a Christmas Holiday destination».
- «Apart from the urban complex, Thessaloniki has a lot more to offer and in particular the suburbs of the city like Peraia where there are very nice renovated hotels, and clean beaches, an element worth promoting since visitors from the Balkan countries have the impression that Thessaloniki and the Thermaikos Gulf are very dirty»

DISCUSSION

The survey revealed that the demand for Thessaloniki as a brand name has low commercial value, which changes for the better after the visit has been realized. Thus, prior to the visit, tourists evaluate the city's image as average or indifferent indicating that Thessaloniki faces a branding problem that should be attended by local development agencies. The fact that Thessaloniki is the second biggest city of the country or that it is a metropolitan city of the Mediterranean or the Balkan states is practically unknown to foreign visitors who tend to confuse the city with the resort area of Chalkidiki.

The characterization of tourism as an industry, as well as, its growth owes a lot to convention tourism (Priporas, 2005). Conventions are a major source of income for cities since delegates spend approximately 525USD to 970USD per day and they stay in a city between 3.8 days to 4.5 days (Priporas, 2005). In addition to that, convention tourism could be the answer to seasonality since most conventions are held in spring and fall, mainly May and October, which are low demand periods for tourism destinations (Athanassiou, 2002). Finally, convention attendees can be the best promoters for a destination using the Word of Mouth (Haywood, 1989). As Taylor (2002) underlines "the basic advantage of conventions and meetings is that they constitute the most assured way in order to ensure tourist flows". Thessaloniki excels as a convention destination since it is suitable for any size of conferences and meets the requirements of even the most demanding delegate.

To boost Thessaloniki's image as a tourism destination., the emphasis should be placed on the promotion and development of Congress-convention tourism. It is our view that Congress-Convention tourism is Thessaloniki's great development opportunity and is a key ingredient in developing a branding destination strategy for the city. Compared to Athens, which keeps losing its share of the congress market due to strikes and high crime rates, Thessaloniki can base its strategic competitive advantage on the calm and safe everyday life. As our findings indicate, to attract major congresses-conventions-fairs to the city, more well equipped and staffed congress halls must be built and special attention must be given to educating the staff servicing Congress delegates. Other measures that supplement the branding of Thessaloniki as a Congress-convention tourism destination concern the upgrading of the status of its international "Macedonia" airport, promotion with a sizeable increase of inbound and outbound flights, the development of more 4* and 5* hotels, the revitalization of the "Helexpo" Convention Center, the marketing of the annual Thessaloniki Film Festival an as well as a more systematic approach in projecting the city's rich Byzantine heritage and promoting the gastronomic experiences that visitors enjoy around the areas of Ladadika, Afytos Square and Old Town where most of the city's restaurants are located.

In conclusion, Thessaloniki is a city that has a lot to offer to its visitors starting with its beautiful scenery, rich history, easy access to main attraction points, and low crime rates. Unfortunately, the serene environment of the city, its rich history and its gastronomy to name just a few features are not communicated to the wider public and its potential visitors. Local tourism policy developers should proceed with developing a strong image for the city, positioning Thessaloniki as a city-break destination ideally suited for hosting international congresses-conventions and fairs. Such an image would blend nicely with the cosmopolitan outlook of the city.

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