

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

STORYTELLING IN TOURISM DESTINATION BRANDING: THE CASE OF GIRONA

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism destinations aim to develop a distinctive brand image in order to influence tourist decision-making (Gartner, 1994; Pritchard y Morgan, 2004). A well-structured and successfully executed brand strategy contributes to the value, reputation and competitive power of any tourism destination (Yavuz *et al.*, 2016). Nevertheless, the complexity of place branding makes this a challenging task (Pike, 2005).

In this context, storytelling, which has already used successfully in product branding (Salomon, 2007), is a tool that tourism destinations can use for place branding. Storytelling is a technique which enables destination marketing organisations to effectively communicate their brand through stories and myths, thus transforming tangible experiences (Yavuz *et al.*, 2016). Storytelling empowers brands and tourism destinations to differentiate themselves from competitors, thus gaining a positive advantage (Yavuz *et al.*, 2016) by using myths, traditions or legends related to local culture and popular traditions.

Previous research has established that storytelling has become an increasingly important global marketing trend in the tourism industry (Akgün *et al.*, 2015; Mossberg *et al.*, 2011). However, few studies have explored the relationship between storytelling and place branding (Yavuz *et al.*, 2016; Keskin *et al.*, 2016).

Considering this background, this paper aims to analyse the extent to which a tourism destination can use storytelling as part of its branding strategy by focusing on traditional stories, myths or legends related to its cultural history.

2. METHODOLOGY

The city of Girona (Spain) was chosen as a case study to assess the extent to which the city's traditional legends are suitable for storytelling, and whether they have been used as part of narrative in the city's branding strategy.

This study takes a qualitative approach, and was developed in two stages. Firstly, a content analysis of 21 traditional stories was carried out. The analysis used five categories (characters, places, aim, conflict/experience and message) to determine the essential requirements of a story necessary for storytelling purposes, in line with previous studies (Frog *et al.*, 2010 and Yavuz *et al.*, 2016). The content analysis was conducted using NVivo 11. Secondly, in-depth interviews with key agents were conducted to give a better understanding of Girona's communication and branding strategy, and gain insights into how legends are used in the strategy.

3. FINDINGS

Results from the content analysis reveal that the traditional stories analysed possess the characteristics and key elements necessary for storytelling to be used in the branding strategy, in line with previous studies (Frog *et al.*, 2010 and Yavuz *et al.*, 2016). Findings show that the objects and places mentioned in the legends are located around the historical city centre, near the main tourist nodes. This illustrates the potential for a future tourism strategy based on storytelling.

Results from in-depth interviews with key agents in the city show a growing interest in improving city branding, although findings reveal that this has depends on political decisions. Interviews also reported that relevant improvements in tourism management and communications strategies since 2004 have been done; which has been materialized through a strategic plan in 2018. Regarding the communication and marketing strategy, interviews highlighted an interest in seeking good positioning for the city in incoming tourist markets by using a range of online and offline communication tools, and cooperating with other regional and national tourism agents to take advantage of synergies. Results also showed that various brands coexist in the city. This indicates a lack of a real branding strategy, despite that fact that the strategic planning guidelines advise the need to position, project and reinforce Girona's brand.

Data from the interviews also revealed some interesting insights regarding the use of traditional stories as part of the city's branding strategy. In particular, results showed that when theatrical guided tours based on the legends finished, the legends ceased to be commercialised as a tourism product, and were relegated to a mere cultural resource. The Association of Tour Guides and several museums have attempted to keep the legends alive by referring to them during guided tours, or through educational activities for children. There are also souvenirs related to the legends; however, the Local Marketing Organisation limits marketing traditional stories on the official website, as it considers them no more than a simple, immaterial heritage resource. The Local Marketing Organisation has no intention of including traditional stories as part of the narrative in the city's new branding strategy.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Considering the main results from the content analysis and in-depth interviews, it is concluded that traditional stories have the potential to be used in storytelling to reinforce the values and identity of the city's brand. However, Girona's Local Marketing Organisa-

tion has not been taking advantage of the benefits of storytelling conveyed by academic literature, and stories have not been used with this purpose.

The discussion in the paper highlights similarities and differences between this case and other similar cases in previous studies. It points out the need for collaboration from stakeholders and leadership from the Local Marketing Organisation to include storytelling in the branding strategy, and outlines the managerial implications for practice.

This study contributes to existing knowledge by providing insights into the usefulness of storytelling as a tool for place branding, and laying the ground work for further empirical studies in this field. Therefore, some future research challenges are reported in the paper, which include examining the resources used in developing storytelling, determining the effectiveness of storytelling in place branding, or analysing the process of developing a branding strategy based on storytelling, among others.