

SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA AND ITS IMAGES IN THE ITALIAN TOURIST MARKET

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The image of Santiago de Compostela has always been international, and it has been associated with the pilgrimage to the tomb of the Apostle, which has taken on a “protective function” for Spain and has been central for the representation of Europe as territorial collectivity.

During the Middle Ages, Santiago was not only a Western reference point of the Christian Religion, but it inaugurated its role of University city and strengthened its function as centre of power. Today, together with Rome and Jerusalem, it constitutes the triad of Holy Cities of Pilgrimage, but it is no longer only a religious and pilgrimage destination.

Because of the growing tourist presence, tourism policies are responsible to show a new and different *urban image*. The investigation aims at determining whether recent tourism policies succeeded in creating and showing a new and different *image* of Santiago. It also aims at finding out if the *image* that Santiago wants “to project” corresponds to the one that it actually produces. Since Italy is an important tourist market for the city, it has been realized a social research to investigate the image that Italian tourists have before and after the visit to the city.

The questionnaire has been focused on the “*Image*”. The term *image* means not only a material aspect (i.e. advertising images or pictures) but it also indicates a set of ideas and expectations that precede the journey as well as sensations and emotions that tourist feel during and after the visit. For this reason, in drafting the questionnaire, the attention was towards: “*The baggage of pre-knowledge, prejudices, images of the place toward which it is addressed, and which are designed to meet or to disappoint tourists’ expectations*” (Minca, 1996:49).

The questionnaire was divided into sections regarding:

- a) Socio-demographic data: gender, age, region of residence, organization and motivation of travel, number of times relating to the visit to Santiago.
- b) The image of Santiago: the aim was to trace the creation process of the *personal image* of tourists about Santiago (advertising images, descriptions).
- c) Considerations about Santiago: tourists were asked to indicate which image(s) and which sensations the city produces, the satisfaction of expectations. The final question concerns the image of Santiago in Italy.

The tourist space is, first of all, an image (Raffestin, 1991; Miossec, 1991; Minca, 1996; Escudero Gómez, 2005) therefore a tourist destination presents itself by means of images that potential tourists see: “*For the tourist, the foreign country is the image that he has about it and that he hopes to find*” (Raffestin, 1991:6). According to Raffestin, tourism and tourist experience are not just forms of movement, but a process that begins before reaching the destination. The tourist experience begins with the search of information and with what the *collective imagination* knows about it; therefore it derives from the departure society. Because of this, the tourist image seeks not only to promote the destination, but it also has to second the desires of the community.

The first part of the questionnaire describes the socio-demographic aspects of the Italian tourists. Generally speaking, the Italian tourist is highly educated, comes from Northern Italy and he is “employee”. The 83% of tourists comes to Santiago for the first time. As far as the reason is concerned, the 66% comes for “holidays and leisure”. Finally, the 7% comes for “work and business motivations”. Italian tourists usually travel in company (with relatives or friends), the 15% travels with arranged tours and the 12.5% comes to visit relatives and friends.

Tourists play a pivotal role for the consolidation of a destination. The spreading of the image through the “*word-of-mouth*” is very important, in fact the results of the fieldwork show that Italians visit Santiago because they have been advised.

Further questions refer to “material images” about Santiago. The 53% of the Italian tourists visits Santiago without having seen any image of the city, this might suggest lack of information and low-impact of the tourism promotional material. With respect to advertising images, the most frequent topic representing Santiago is “Cathedral and Pilgrims along St. James’ Way”. Despite the rapid increase of the Internet in arranging journey, some tourists preferred traditional advertising (brochures, advertisements in print media).

Advertising and urban marketing grant visibility to a city: “*Tourist image is a filter that stands between the people and the environment*” (Escudero Gómez, 2005:63); that is why images need to be attractive, to gather all information and to create expectations. A successful key is the creation of a brand: “*Capable of generating positive identification of the destination and of what is produced and is put into service with the name of this place of tourism*” (Escudero Gómez, 2005:66). During the fieldwork, it has been possible to verify that the name of the city of Santiago is a *brand*, as it “evokes” historical legacy.

Other questions pretend to find out the satisfaction level of the Italian tourists with respect to: cleaning and safety in streets, public parking, easiness of movement in the city, parks, green spaces and gardens, tourist offices, degree of satisfaction about the heritage, culture, accommodation, food, price-quality relation and friendly restaurants. These elements show a good level of satisfaction about Santiago, and in fact the 93% of the surveyed Italians would advise to visit it, only 2.5% would not, while the 3.5% does not know whether it would come.

Concerning the perceived image of the city, tourists are asked to suggest an adjective to describe Santiago as: “*The tourist space is (...) image and evocation of what tourists bring with them and spread to others*” (Minca, 1996:49). Since it is an open question, different adjectives disclose how Italians would describe Santiago once back in their

country. According to 11.5% of the surveyed tourists, the city is “magic/suggestive” and the same percentage describes it as “quiet/safe” one. According to others, the city is “alive young” (8.5%), “nice/pleasant to live in” (7%) and “historical” (7%).

According to the 2% of the questioned tourists, Santiago de Compostela is “contradictory”, in fact the city appears “spiritual and joyful” at the same time (1%) or it is “relaxing” (2%). In general, it produces the image of a quiet city (23.5%); according to tourists such tranquillity is reflected in its people. Moreover, Santiago is peaceful, pleasant, friendly and welcoming.

With regard to feelings, the city transmits “magic” (7.5%) and “relax” (6%). Concerning the religious dimension, tourists feel “religion” (7%) and “spirituality” (2%). It is very interesting the image of a “city suspended in the past” (4.5%), which is somewhat related to the image of a “modern medieval city”(1.5%); further feelings are “youth/recreation” (2.5%) and “freedom”(1.5%).

The advertising images, the narratives of friends and relatives and any other source of information create a *previous image*. As images are active knowledge means, they have evocative power that influences tourists’ expectations.

As far as expectations are concerned, the 46.5% answers that it had no idea of how the city could be. Tourists are surprised by the lifestyle, the structure of the city, architecture and friendliness of local people. Indeed, the attitude of local people and of tourism operators is fundamental for a positive city image (Falabrino, 1991), as anything happening in the city belongs to its experience. Another attribute that Italian tourists do not know is the artistic heritage, perhaps because in Italy Santiago is not represented as City of Art.

The final question pretends to recover all the previously gathered information: “How do you think is considered Santiago de Compostela in Italy?”. Italian tourists reveal a *traditional image* of Santiago, as it is still linked to its role of religious and pilgrimage centre; in effect, Santiago surprises especially for its “intense nightlife” and/or a “young and alive city”. Since it is as well a *historic image* which has been settling slowly throughout history, many investments are required to renew it.

With respect to the image of Santiago as “religious city/sacred place”, there are two major groups of mental associations:

a) At European level: the image of Santiago is often associated with the religious cities of Fatima and Lourdes;

b) At national level: the image of Santiago de Compostela is associated with the Italian religious cities of St. Francis of Assisi and San Giovanni Rotondo.

There is no doubt that in Italy the image of Santiago de Compostela is not close to reality; indeed, the journey to Santiago is the only way to make the city reveal its true essence. With respect to the Italian market, it dominates a “wrong image, as it is still too related to the religious dimension”.

In the information society, various means of communication allow the spreading of any image. Since it is a “powerful and important tool”, the tourist image needs continual renewal, besides being a visual fact which has to be attractive. Therefore, when arguing about tourist image it is essential to take into consideration aesthetic factors, because the present society of *hypervisibility* (Copeta, 2009) requires images to be “attractive”, if they want to capture attention.

As the city is the image that it shows, and since in Italy the image of Santiago de Compostela is still a religious one, this will remain so until an effective promotion would change it. Indeed, with respect to the Italian market, it would be appropriate to change the *pre-built image* of Santiago to attract a very important tourist market segment: the young people.

In order to change this image, one solution might be a Strategic Plan addressed to the Italian Market, which would give more visibility to the “unknown attributes” of Santiago. The implementation of a communication policy involves the study of market-oriented strategies (Copeta, 2009). To communicate means to make known and therefore communication and promotion are closely related, in addition successful promotion has to take advantage and to employ different communication media to ensure greater visibility. The lack of adequate knowledge about Santiago might be due to the lack of information, so that in the Italian context more presence in the media is required, and tour operators should encourage visiting Santiago.

In other words, the results reveal a certain distance between *presentation* and *representation*, between the available images and the “tourists’ narratives”; the presentation (tourist experience) offers much more than the representation (tourist image). According to the Italians tourists, the images which “represent Santiago” are unable to express its true nature. Only feelings and emotions that the experience in/of the city produces offer a complete image of the city. These confirm or refute the expectations and Italian tourists change positively their image: “*Through the journey you do the reverse route and you pass from one representation to a presentation*” (Raffestin, 1991:7).