

Assessment and Role of Images of Tourist Destinations: The Case of North Portugal as a Rural Tourist Destination

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Introduction

"Image" may be understood as the way in which the public views products, brands, or companies. In an increasingly competitive business environment a product/brand needs to be recognized and evaluated as appealing before any subsequent purchase and satisfaction can occur. "Image" is hypothesized to impact consumer preference, choice and satisfaction. In fact, image might be more decisive for business success than other "objective" characteristics of an offering (Park et al. 1986). This is particularly true for products which are of high risk, difficult to judge, possess high status value and are of high personal importance to the buyer.

Tourist destinations are usually composed of several products that are marked by the service characteristics of inseparability, variability and intangibility. The complexity of the product "destination" inevitably leads to a high risk in destination choice. Furthermore, purchase and consumption activities are often made at great distances from each other. The importance of tourism in personal life, aiming at satisfying unmet needs, is evident.

Product, brand, company, country-of-origin and place images have been analyzed both from a holistic perspective and an attribute perspective. Cognitive and affective elements are suggested to be present in both approaches. Others distinguish functional, sensory/experiential and symbolic dimensions (Dobni and Zinkhan 1990). Sirgy (1985) has developed the symbolic dimension in a "self-congruency theory". Several authors have studied the image of tourist destinations and its role in consumer behavior and destination marketing (Chon 1990).

The Study

The present research project is particularly interested in the study of the relationship between the motivational structure of the tourist (benefit-segmentation) and his/her image of North Portugal as a rural tourist destination. Image is assessed via a semantic differential scale (adapted from Malhotra 1981), a Likert-scale-type battery of items (potential holiday

benefits), and some open ended questions. A survey of tourists staying in rural areas in North Portugal was undertaken from the summer of 1998 to summer of 1999.

Preliminary results point to the existence of different destination images held by different benefit-segments, as well as to specific relationships between destination- and self-image. In addition, differences between first time/repeat-visitors and domestic/international travelers seem to exist. Finally, destination image appears to be related to self-reported probability to return and to recommend North Portugal as a tourist destination. Ongoing data collection and analysis will help to clarify these relations. Destination marketing implications relate to target market selection and the appropriate positioning and development of a destination marketing mix.

References

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