

A Perspective of the Image in Destination Tourism Regions: An Exploratory Approach in Arouca

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Abstract

The process of globalization and increasing competitiveness in domestic and international markets has put pressure, and continues to do it, on tourist destinations, leading them to adopt territorial marketing practices. From the point of view of strategic management, the establishment of place brands emerges as a powerful tool, since it gives the destination an identity and, especially, an image, differentiating it from its competitors and making it appealing, which will attract visitors. Place branding precisely seeks to develop strategies involving the diffusion and consequent perception of a strong and positive image of the destination. Arouca is a rural region that still possesses many areas in depression, but has grown considerably in the tourism sector. In the last years the county was able to revive the economy by increasing the number of tourists, a result of its natural resources and efforts on the part of public authorities, which allowed the development of Nature Tourism in the region. Through the selected methodology, we will examine Arouca's image as perceived by the tourists, and by trying to study the focus of the investigation, it can be created a guide for practical applications in the strategic management of the municipality. The primary objective of this study is to understand the influence that the image exert in each of the phases of the tourist buying behavior. Hence, we studied the relationship between the image and purchase intentions in both the destination of choice phase and the post-purchase behavior, and between image and evaluative perceptions, the result of the experience in the destination. The results of the empirical analysis show that a place's image is an antecedent of purchase, perceived quality, satisfaction and intent to return and recommend, demonstrating that this is a crucial factor in the management of place marketing.

Keywords: Territorial marketing, territorial brand, destination image, tourist buying behavior, Arouca

1. Introduction

The territories are increasingly subject to pressure from a competitive world, where consumers are demanding and the need to innovate and gain advantage over their competitors is fundamental. This occurs in attracting residents, investments, industries, tourists, which are means of revitalizing places. Globalization has made the differentiation of territory a key factor, which should seek to take advantage of its unique and singular characteristics. The Territorial Marketing has the preponderant role to undertake a strategic management of the territory, in order to develop the region at various levels (Kavaratzis, 2004) [1].

Moreover, a product that does not have a brand associated to itself is a product with no identity or image, which causes only a small, or almost null, impact on the consumer. The same applies to the territories, making territorial branding an indispensable tool in a target marketing strategy for the creation and management of territorial brands. In this context, countries, regions or

cities are adopting marketing plans oriented for the creation and management of strong brands, allowing them to self-promote and positioning themselves in the national and international market (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008) [2].

The tourism sector, in turn, has shown remarkable growth and, despite some fluctuations, uninterrupted. It is consolidated in many countries as a major economic activity, contributing with a high percentage to the GDP. According to data from the World Tourism Organization, in 2014 the sector accounted for about 9% of world GDP, generating revenues of 1.5 trillion dollars in exports, recording a total of 1113 million international tourist arrivals and revenues of 1245 million. In the case of Portugal, it was recorded in 2014, a total of 9,323 million international visitors and revenues of 13.808 million dollars (OMT, 2015).

This scenario leads the territories' marketing managers to focus on tourist activities, as a means for economic development, by seeking to use the techniques inherent to the branding of destinations, one of the

strongest activities for the attraction and retention tourists.

2. Territorial Marketing

Places have had, for quite some time, the need to differentiate from each other in order to claim their individuality and distinctive features in achieving economic, political or socio-psychological objectives [2]. Ashworth and Voogd (1994) state that the beginning of place promotion, by creating a favorable image of this to potential customers, investors or residents, appears in the eighth century when Leif Ericson started to look for new settlers to occupy their land "green" newly discovered. Although this is not yet marketing in its fullness, since promotion is just one of its tools, one begins now to show a concern to manage territories. Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2008) argue that the practice of Marketing developed through certain phases over time, grouping them into three categories, that do not follow a specific line of time, or a distinctive geographical area. In this context, you reach a targeted place marketing, with specific target audiences, and place branding is consolidated, emerging a concern with the image that the place transmits, rather than simple advertising [2].

For its part, territorial branding provides several advantages in terms of sustainable development of a region - stimulates exports, attracts tourism, investment and immigration, and creates positive perceptions and international attitudes (Fetscherin, 2010) [4] - however, the focus of research of this dissertation it is the tourism sector, so it will be mentioned mainly the relationship of the latter with the branding of destinations.

As a company, places, states and cities can also develop brands, which are implemented strategically and can become the most central factor of competitiveness (Moilanen and Rainisto, 2009) [5].

The spaces offer excellent branding opportunities yet to be explored, so there are already many countries, states or regions entering into the construction of territorial brands aiming tourism and economic development (Morgan *et al.*, 2004) [6]. Moreover, a country's brand image can shape its economic, cultural and political destiny, so it is imperative the creation of a brand of excellence (Aaker, 2014) [7]. Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) [7] highlight the idea that people do not achieve a quality brand based on just a slogan or a flashy logo, there must be a combination of the elements of a brand and attribute quality and value to this: the identity, the positioning and image.

In this context, Arouca is a place that is integrated into the sub-region Entre Douro e Vouga North of Portugal region and belongs to the district of Aveiro, lying about 60 km from this. It occupies a total area of 328 km² and has 22,359 inhabitants spread over twenty parishes: Albergaria da Serra, Alvarenga, Arouca, Burgo, Cabreiros, Canelas, Key, Covelo Paivó, Escariz, Espiunca, Fermedo, Janarde, Mansores, Molds, Rossas, Santa Eulalia, Mato S.

Miguel, Tripping, Urrô and Lowland (AGA, 2008). The county has a low population density, with an average of 68 inhabitants / km² (Pordata).

The tourism sector has gain importance in Arouca and contributed to the sustainable development of the region. Making use of natural resources and potentialities of the territory, several attractions were developed that enticed a considerable number of tourists and enabled the construction and improvement of hotel establishments and the development of other sectors, particularly in the catering and local trade.

The National Statistics Institute does not provide any statistical data on tourism in Arouca, so it is difficult to talk about numbers. However, the Arouca Geopark Association created a Tourism Observatory to collect some information to the sector and, in 2014, there was the existence of 6 accommodation establishments and a number of nights stays by about 6000, 93% of nationality Portuguese and 7% from countries like Spain, Germany, Brazil and France.

The two main tourism niches that serve as the foundation for the sector in Arouca are nature tourism and cultural tourism, while it can also be mentioned the gastronomy and wines that are part of the identity of the territory and that are highly appreciated by visitors.

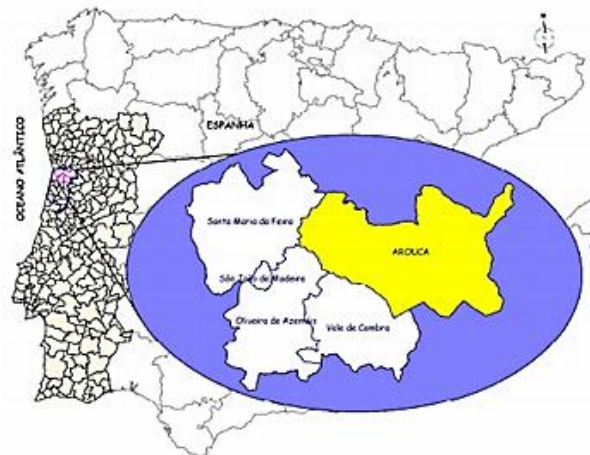


Figure 1: Arouca

3. The role of the image in consumer behavior in tourism

Given the above, it was adopted a conceptual model developed by Bigné *et al.* (2001) [8], which sets the relationship between different variables based on the set of postulated hypotheses to test in this context study. The authors aim with this model to understand the role of the image in post-purchase behavior of tourists, thus providing five variables: image, quality, satisfaction, return and recommend. However, this paper is intended to study the role of the image throughout the whole process of tourist buying behavior, so it was added a sixth variable: purchase.

The choice of these variables relates to all stages inherent to the tourist buying behavior process. First, the

tourist makes a request for information and evaluates alternatives, taking then a buying decision (purchase variable). During his stay the visitor lives the experience, which can offer him quality or not (variable quality) and, consequently, satisfaction or dissatisfaction (variable satisfaction). Taking into account the feelings and memories with which the tourist was left, it may have the intention of returning to visit the destination (variable return) and recommend it to family and friends (variable recommend). These variables appear to understand the role of this mechanism throughout.

In this study the sampling process culminated in a non-probabilistic sample of convenience (Oliveira, 2001) [9], since it was intended to ascertain the opinions and feelings of Arouca tourists regarding their visit to the county.

Thus, the survey, on paper, was made by direct administration, being delivered to tourists in the busiest county areas, in particular *Passadiços do Paiva*, the historical center, the hotel units and rural houses, and cafes/traditional restaurants.

Data were collected during the month of February 2016, yielding a total of 172 surveys, however, as some had to be canceled due to incomplete or invalid responses, it was managed a total of 161 surveys for analysis. The number of respondents was limited to this amount due to seasonality, since at this time of the year the influx of tourists to the county is much minor and the reopening of the *Passadiços do Paiva*, the biggest attraction of Arouca, only took place on February 13th 2016. However, it is considered that, given the size of the region and data on the same tour, the number of responses obtained is sufficient to test the hypotheses of the study.

4. Analysis and Discussion of Results

The growing competitiveness that the territories are subject, particularly in the tourism sector, leads to the need for strategic management of these through marketing tools. The territorial branding emerges as one of the most beneficial strategies to attract visitors, based on the most influential element of a territorial brand - image.

Indeed, the focus of this work was to verify if the image really had an impact on tourist buying behavior in order to understand its importance in destination branding and whether to embark on a strategy based, or with emphasis, on it.

First, the literature review related to territorial marketing, territorial branding, brand image, tourist buying behavior, allowed knowledge and foundation of the concepts necessary for the course of the investigation, proving and already offering some answers to initial questions.

In addition, the empirical study by means of a quantitative approach resulted in the finding and confirmation of all hypotheses. These findings

demonstrate a concise manner, the need for the destination marketer worry about improving the image and perceived quality of the place.

The image of a destination positively influences all the variables that make up the tourist buying behavior process: purchase, return and recommend (behavioral variables), and the perceived quality and satisfaction (evaluative variables). Thus, a tourist will first choose to visit a destination on which he has a more positive image. If during the experience the image that he had is improved, there is a greater likelihood of him returning and recommending it to others, as well as to consider a higher level of quality and make a positive assessment of the stay, describing it as very satisfactory.

In this context, destination marketers should not overlook image management and focus on the best approach to improve it. There are various external factors that affect the formation of the image (climate change, political conflicts, acts of terrorism), however, you can manipulate some elements that contribute to this, such as advertising, information stations tourism, PR, travel agents and tour operators and promotional tools (Bigné *et al.*, 2001).

The Arouca municipality, the case study, has a very positive image from the perspective of the respondents, and managers of the territory should take this advantage and seek to develop the tourism industry, bringing it to another level.

All correlations made between the study variables were positive and significant, however, those with less significant values were associated with the variable return. This may not mean that tourists have been dissatisfied with their stay, taking into account that it was verified that they were very satisfied, but they might want to know new destinations or believe that Arouca no longer has nothing new to offer them for a next stay. However, there should be a concern to change this thought, since the return is one of the factors that brings loyalty to the destination, and it is very important that there is a link between the tourist and the place.

In this connection, both in Arouca, as in another tourist destination, should be sought to provide the tourist an experience that improves the image he has of the place, offering a quality service, as this will determine his satisfaction and therefore intend to re-visit the place and say positive things about it to family and friends. For this mechanism to work optimally, destination marketers should find out the perceived level of quality that the tourist has of the destination, his level of satisfaction and his intention to return and recommend it, comprising, thus, failures and deciding which strategic direction to be followed.

In short, given that the tourism market is quite competitive, destinations must take their image, make it very positive and appealing, and communicate it in order to stand out from their competitors and attract an increasing number of visitors. In the case of Arouca, the strategy to follow is the same, knowing as one of the

points to study and improve is the return to the destination.

5. Limitations and next steps

With regard to the main topic of research, the intended objectives were achieved, however, there were also some limitations to it.

One of the major limitations of the study is related to seasonality, and at the time of the data collection the influx of tourists to the county was much minor and the reopening of the *Passadiços do Paiva*, the biggest attraction of Arouca, only took place on February 13th, 2016. This situation affected in the first place, the number of respondents who participated in completing the questionnaire, and we managed to get 172 tourists fulfilled, however, as some had to be canceled due to incomplete or invalid responses, we could only obtain a total of 161 surveys for analysis. In addition, the low season may explain the fact that a large part of the sample is national tourists, and there is a low variety of nationalities.

On the other hand, the completion of the questionnaire on paper and by direct administration complicated the task, taking more time and should be noted, also, the reluctance on the part of tourists in completing the survey. Another limitation is that the sample can be considered low, and is also non-probability, impossible to generalize the data collected.

In addition, it is considered that the size of the study variables were not addressed thoroughly, keeping up in surveys, a number of smaller, more simple questions items. This may limit the study of the variables of the conceptual model and does not cover all the concepts inherent to them.

Regarding the case study, Arouca municipality, the lack of information on it was also a limitation, since much of the data needed was found only in the council's website, in its reports or by the Association Arouca Geopark, or other websites about the county.

This research contributed to analyze a relatively new area of study and, although there already exist several contributions on the subject, there are not many investigations involving the study of the relation of the image with all the variables of tourist buying behavior.

In addition, this work focused on the analysis of a rural region that is developing and growing in the tourist sector and can help those responsible for the strategic management of the territory to understand the perceptions of tourists and create branding strategies and improve Arouca's image.

Tourism is an economic sector that has generated a lot of wealth and jobs, and can therefore revitalize the county.

In terms of suggestions for future research, it would be interesting to address the limitations mentioned. It is suggested to study the extent to different types of destination and the deepening of variables through a multidimensional approach. In addition, research to seek to achieve longer times and higher, that it is possible to study a broader sample. It would also be interesting to engage in research around this topic bodies responsible for land management, in terms of the tourism sector, to determine how the management is done and their point of view in relation to the theme and concepts associated with this. In this case, the choice would be of a mixed methodological approach, adopting methods for collecting qualitative and quantitative data.

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