STAKEHOLDER POWER IN DESTINATION BRANDING: A METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

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Abstract

This paper presents a methodology to assess stakeholder power within the context of destination branding that triangulates the positional, reputational and decision-making approaches to power. Power is everywhere in tourism and the study of power in tourism has been examined from different perspectives. From a macro perspective, power has been studied as an essential component of public policies and planning analysis as well as a critical issue that relates tourism to political economy and development. From a micro or image centred perspective, power in tourism has been discussed in Foucauldian terms as one of the major forces that shapes the construction of a tourist gaze. Stakeholder literature describes power as an attribute of a stakeholder together with legitimacy and urgency and stakeholder power is conceptualized in terms of the ability of a stakeholder to threaten an organization. The ability to characterize the stakeholders in terms of their relative power is a problematic issue and different measurement methods are available for assessing stakeholder power such as the positional method, the reputational method and the decision-making method. Following Westerheijden’s conceptualization, the positional, reputational and decision-making approaches to assess stakeholder power within the study of the process of destination branding may be combined. The use of the three methods together allows triangulation of results therefore providing greater generalizability in the study of stakeholder power in the process of destination branding.

Keywords: destination branding, power, stakeholder, collaboration, methodology
INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a methodology to assess stakeholder power within the context of destination branding that triangulates the positional, reputational and decision-making approaches to power. Rather than considering the image of the destination projected through the destination brand as a manifestation of power, this paper focuses on how stakeholder power is exerted in the process of branding a tourism destination. The study of power in the process of destination branding brings together the different, although not irreconcilable perspectives in the analysis of power in the context of tourism such as the planning/public policy perspective and the Foucauldian perspective. This study contributes to the field of tourism addressing Morgan and Pritchard’s (1999) concern that ‘power and the processes that structure its influence, have been relatively peripheral’ (p.10). In terms of practical contribution, research about power and the categorization of destination stakeholders in terms of their power, is critical to a better understanding decision processes in the context of tourism (Hall, 1994) contributing therefore to the sustainability of a tourism destination (Selin, 2000).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Power is everywhere in tourism (Cheong & Miller, 2000) and the study of power in tourism has been faced from different perspectives. From a macro perspective, power has been studied as an essential component of public policies and planning analysis (Hall, 1994; Hall & Jenkins, 1995; Richter, 1989) as well as a critical issue that relates tourism to political economy and development (Milne, 1998; Mowforth & Munt, 1998). From a micro or image centred perspective, power in tourism has been discussed in Foucauldian terms as one of the major forces that shapes the construction of a gaze (Urry, 1990). The description of a tourism destination as a combination of symbols and images (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2004; Pike, 2002; Trauer & Ryan, 2005) is especially relevant for the discussion of power in tourism because ‘seeing is so much a part of touristic experience and because the manipulation of the imagery is so important in the marketing of tourism’ (Cheong & Miller, 2000; p.376).

From the perspective of tourism planning, the definition of tourism as a complex system is central to the analysis of power relationships among the multiple stakeholders involved in the decision making processes. Using the concept of panarchy, the tourism system is described as structured around ‘a core [that] generally consists of an assemblage of structures, goods, services, and resources directly contributing to the sector, the comprehensive tourism system includes significant social, economic, geological, and ecological components, along with processes and functions that complement its totality and are essential to its sustainability’. (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004; p.279).

The complexity of the tourism system as described above is enhanced by the consideration that few other industries in the economy link so many diverse and different kinds of product and services as is the tourism industry (Edgell, 1990). The fragmentation of the tourism system (Shaw & Williams, 2002) implies that different players, with different values and interests are involved in a problem domain (Trist, 1983) making it critical to have a methodology that allows an understanding of the destination stakeholder power structure. Furthermore, tourism decision making processes are characterized in terms of collaboration (de Araujo & Bramwell, 2000; Keogh, 1990; Ladkin & Bertramini, 2002; Murphy, 1988) but as Reed (1997) observed ‘writers of community tourism are [not] silent about dimensions of power’ (p.568). Collaborative processes, like destination branding, are therefore at risk of power imbalances that can inhibit both their initiation and success (Jamal & Getz, 1995).

Considering power in tourism from an image centred perspective, it was argued that ‘tourism processes manifest power as they mirror and reinforce the distribution of power in society, operating as mechanism whereby inequalities are articulated and validated’ (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998; p.7). Within this perspective, the ‘cultural brokers of tourism’ (Dann, 1996; p.61) were described as playing a critical role in portraying a destination and its people, through moulding, manipulating and even creating the predispositions and motives of the tourists. The conflictive interactions among hosts and guests (Brunt & Courtney, 1999; Fredline & Faulkner, 2000; Smith, 1989; Smith & Brent, 2001) for example have been described in terms of power differentials. As Wearing and Wearing (1996) maintained ‘the power differentials between western
tourists and the dominant discourses of their culture and those of the host culture can mean that the tourist may merely impose his/her ideas onto the host culture’ (p.239).

Power in tourism is also manifested by the use of communication, described as a ‘language of power’ (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998). The creation of tourism images as a way to express power is consistent with an argument that is central to Said’s conceptualization of language and representations as demonstration of political, intellectual, cultural and moral power. An example of this is the development of the concept of orientalism. As Said (2003) maintains:

Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions; nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient; nor is it representative and expressive of some nefarious “Western” imperialist plot to hold down the “Oriental” world. It is rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts; it is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of “interests” which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world (p.13).

The creation of images is an essential part of a marketing strategy (Percy, Elliott & Rossiter, 2001). Images are created in order to address the human need to simplify decisions by creating symbolic representations to characterize a network of salient meanings (Hite & Bellizzi, 1985; Lindquist, 1974; Stern, Zinkhan & Jaju, 2001). In ‘traditional’ marketing, through the creation of a brand, a company has full control of the creation and management of the images associated to its products or services. Ownership and legal protection have been described as critical components of the brand and as a prerequisite for effective brand management and brand equity building (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). Tourism marketing, in this respect, is different from traditional product or service marketing. Tourism is described as an exchange process of an experience which has value to the tourist (Calantone & Mazanec, 1991). As part of this exchange process, the definition of a tourism product is problematic both in terms of the composite nature of it (Berno & Bricker, 2001; Papatheodorou, 2001) as well as in terms of the process that created it (Palmer & McCole, 2000).

The nature of the tourism product is an experience of place (location and people) at a particular time (Wheeler, 1995). The tourism product has been conceptualized in many different ways. Medlik and Middleton (1973) considered the tourism product as a bundle of activities, services, and benefits that constitute the entire tourism experience. Middleton (1989) looked at the tourism product under two different perspectives such as the specific or discrete product offered by a single business and the total product described as the whole experience of the tourist. Smith (1994) considered the tourism product as formed by five elements such as physical plant, service, hospitality, freedom of choice and involvement. The same author emphasized that ‘the tourism product is not a simple combination of the five elements, but the result of synergistic interaction among all the components’ (Smith, 1994; p.588). As observed by Palmer and Bejou (1995):

The total product offer of a tourism destination is complex, with both tangible and intangible dimensions. Tangibility is provided by the physical stock of hotels, visitor attractions, means of access, parking facilities etc. Intangibility is provided by the image of an area, augmented for example with historical associations. The complexity of the marketing task is compounded by the fragmented nature of the stakeholders who are responsible for components of the total offer (p.617).

The definition of the tourism product as an amalgam of different elements produced by different stakeholders (Cooper, Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert & Wanhill, 2005) leads to the understanding of tourism marketing and destination branding within it as substantially different from traditional product marketing. As observed by Ritchie and Ritchie (1998):

The primary difference relates to the very fundamental nature of what is being marketed. A
traditional product is usually a tangible, well-defined entity that is being marketed and delivered by a single firm or group of firms having very common interests and characteristics. In tourism, however, not only are we marketing a very diverse and complex product, but it is also one that is delivered by many different firms that are typically quite different in terms of their functions and capabilities. In effect, destination marketing – and thus destination branding – is much more of a collective phenomenon than is normally found in the generic marketing/branding situation (p.23-24).

The definition of destination branding as a collective phenomenon carries critical implications. Firstly, the creation and the management of a destination brand are described as requiring collaborative effort among stakeholders (Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott, 2002). The destination brand is considered as the ‘common good’ (Hardin, 1968), outcome of an ongoing process of collaboration among stakeholders. This led Mundt (2002) to consider destination branding as a myth and a fallacy due the lack of identifiable ownership and therefore beyond the responsibility of the destination management. However, despite Mundt’s criticism, the practice of branding tourism destinations is widespread. Furthermore, collaboration among the stakeholders in destination branding must be balanced with the consideration that within a single tourism destination different stakeholders have different roles, different agenda and benefit from tourism in a different way (Aas, Ladkin & Fletcher, 2005). This implies that each stakeholder of a tourism destination tends to maximize their benefits (Buhalis, 2000). Although the destination brand is a positive outcome of unity and collaboration (Prideaux & Cooper, 2002) or synergies among stakeholders (Laws, Scott & Parfitt, 2002), an assessment of the power of the stakeholders involved (or excluded) from the process of destination branding is likely to reveal how power influence this collaborative process.

The co-existence of power and collaboration has been discussed within sociology (Gray, 1989; Wood & Gray, 1991), and the general planning literature (Healey, 1997; Healey, 2003; Margerum, 2002) as well as in the context of tourism (Jamal, Stein & Harper, 2002; Reed, 1997). Collaboration ‘occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engages in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain’ (Wood & Gray, 1991; p.146). Collaboration is not universal but it is constrained or enhanced by the definition of a problem domain (Jamal et al., 2002) and through collaboration, domain stakeholders attempt to influence the course of shared issues (Selsky & Barton, 2000). Moreover, a process which is described as collaborative does not imply that it is fully inclusive of all stakeholders (Gray, 1989; Wood & Gray, 1991). Collaboration theory and stakeholder theory are therefore similar in accepting that being a stakeholder is a potential quality. Being a stakeholder does not imply participation in the collaborative process (Evan & Freeman, 1993; Grimble & Wellard, 1997; Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997). Moreover a process can be identified as collaborative even if it takes place only among ‘the most powerful or influential stakeholders […] whatever their power’ (Wood & Gray, 1991; p.155). It is therefore essential in destination branding to be able to categorize the stakeholders in terms of their power which is here defined as the ‘ability to impose one’s will or advance one’s own interest’ (Reed, 1997; p.567).

**METHODOLOGY**

Stakeholder theory describes power as an attribute of a stakeholder together with legitimacy and urgency (Mitchell et al., 1997). Stakeholder power is conceptualized in terms of the ability of a stakeholder to threaten an organization (Savage, Nix, Whitehead & Blair, 1991). In particular, Savage et al. (1991) recognized that stakeholder's relative power and its relevance to a particular issue confronting the organization determines the stakeholder's capacity for threat. The capacity, opportunity, and willingness to do so are postulated to be a function of the player’s relative power and its relevance to a particular issue dealt with (Sheehan & Ritchie, 2005). However a stakeholder's capacity for threat is counterbalanced by the ability of stakeholders to generate a collaborative environment on the basis of ‘(1) the specific context and history of the organization's relations with that stakeholder and (2) other key stakeholders influencing the organization’ (Savage et al., 1991; p.64-65). It is therefore critical in the process of destination branding to be able to categorize stakeholders in terms of their power in order to be able to assess both their ability to threat or to collaborate in the process of branding a tourism destination.

The ability to characterize the stakeholders in terms of their relative power is a problematic issue (Phillips, 2003) and different measurement methods are available for assessing stakeholder power such as the positional method, the reputational method and the decision making method (Aiken & Mott, 1970). A
The positional method is based on the belief that ‘those holding positions of authority […] make key decisions while those who do not occupy such positions do not make key decisions’ (Bonjean & Olson, 1964; p.282). Under the positional approach, stakeholder power is determined by looking at stakeholder’s ‘official status in the community’s institutionalized economic, political and/or civic structures’. (Schulze & Blumberg, 1957; p.292). The relevance of positional method for understanding stakeholder power still proves to be relevant for management studies (Chakravarthy & Gargiulo, 1998; Reinmoeller, 2004; Wahlgren & Stewart, 2003).

While through positional approach, power is function of holding an office, stakeholder power under the reputational approach is determined by asking informants to name and rank who they believe hold power (Bonjean & Olson, 1964). Reputational power is the power that ‘an actor is said to have according to the other actors in the network’ (Sciarini, Fischer & Nicolet, 2004; p.366). The reputational approach to power was first used by Hunter (1953) in an assessment of community power in Humboldt County and it has then been consistently used and criticized since then. The major criticism against reputational power is that it does not measure real power but only perception of power (D'Antonio & Erickson, 1962; Sharp, 2000). As Wolfinger (1960) maintains:

There are two major causes of ambiguity inherent in asking respondents to name in rank order the most powerful members of their community: the variability of power from one type of issue to another; and the difficulty of making sure that researcher and respondent share the same definition of power (p.538).
Finally, the decision making method related power to the ability of taking decisions. As Dahl (1961) maintained analyzing the decision making process in several USA municipalities:

[...]or each decision [it was determined] which participants had initiated alternatives that were finally adopted, had vetoed alternative initiated by others, or had proposed alternatives that were turned down. These actions were then tabulated as individual “successes” or “defeats”. The participants with the greatest proportion of successes out of the total number of successes were the considered to be the most influential (p.336).

The separate use of the three methods was criticized by Westerheijden (1987). His analysis of the different approaches to the study of power is based on several assumptions. First, ‘the appearance of power can be as useful as the real thing’ (Kaplowitz, 1978; p.133) which implies that stakeholder power is function both of the power that stakeholder actually possess as well as the perception of power on the part of the other stakeholders they interact with. In other words, as observed by Lieshout and De Vree (1985) the belief that a stakeholder has the ability to carry out threats and promises is a condition sufficient enough to attribute power to that particular stakeholder. In the same way marketing images are created in order to address the human need to simplify decisions, the reputation for power attributed to a stakeholder helps ‘economize on search’(Stigler, 1961). Second, following Hobbes (1651/1998), power is considered as energy that every individual uses to obtain and advantage. Third, power is conceptualized as influence weather intended or unintended. As Westerheijden (1987) affirms ‘the mere expectation on the part of i that j will react may [influence i] – though undoubtedly, i’s expectations may be wrong, and i can alter its behaviour in ways unintended, even unhoped-for, by j’(p.41). On the basis of the above assumptions and after the understanding of the stakeholder power can be assessed by a combination of the positional, reputational and decision-making approach.

Following Westerheijden’s (1987) conceptualization, the practical application of positional, reputational and decision-making approach in order to assess stakeholder power within the study of the process of destination branding requires combining different methods. Positional power is determined by looking at the formal hierarchy of position within a tourism destination. This approach is feasible in light of the widely shared opinion that there is a hierarchy of tourism organizations charged with the development and promotion of destination images from local, through regional, to national levels (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003; Edgell, 1990; Morrison & Mill, 1998). Reputation as source of stakeholder power is to be assessed through interviews of stakeholders involved and not involved in the process of destination branding. Decision-making power is finally assed by content analysis of the documents, reports and memoirs developed during the process. The use of the three methods together aims to triangulate results instead of providing different dimensions of stakeholder power. As observed by Scott (2003) triangulation is based on the triangle analogy, which implies that a single point is considered from three different and independent sources. Derived from topography, the concept has been fruitfully adapted to social science inquiry. Triangulation may be viewed as mixing qualitative and quantitative methods, and as a complementary rather than rival approach to quantitative research and limits personal and methodological biases, therefore and enhancing a study’s generalizability (Jick, 1983).

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the relevance of stakeholder power to the study of the process of destination branding. Power in destination branding has been described in terms of the ability of different stakeholders to bring their competing values and interests within the process of branding in order to influence how a destination is portrayed. The assessment of power has a characteristics of a stakeholder has been problematic. A triangulation technique to assess stakeholder power in destination branding was discussed on the basis of Westerheijden’s (1987) argument about the appropriateness and usefulness of addressing the issue of stakeholder power through the use of positional, reputational and decision-making approach to power.

By combining the three different approaches to power, this method provides a series of advantages. In terms of enhancing the generalizability of the research, the combined use of the three methods, meets the requirement for triangulation. Moreover, it allows the researcher not to embrace an a priori philosophical standpoint on power assessment, allowing at the same time to undercover power from any of the different
dimensional perspectives presented by the literature (Lukes, 2004). In terms of sampling, this proposed methodology does not interfere with sampling strategies. In particular, it has been observed that the understanding of stakeholder power in multi-stakeholder processes must consider both those stakeholders that are involved in the process as well as those who were excluded from the process (Healey, 1997). Since exclusion from a process has been conceptualized as a manifestation of power (Skorvetz & Willer, 1993), it is suggested that research in stakeholder power in the process of destination branding takes into account both stakeholders that participate in the process as well as those who were explicitly excluded from it.

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REFERENCES


