Tourism Promotion and Nation Branding: Insights From the Turkish Case

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This study explores the relationship between tourism and nation branding. Although tourism is generally seen as positively contributing to the nation brand image, we investigate a case, Turkey, where there is an incongruity between the two. While Turkey is in the world’s top ten in terms of tourism performance, the country continues to suffer from an unfavorable image. Through in-depth expert interview, we identify three key factors – strategic, experiential, and organizational – that appear to limit tourism’s impact on Turkey’s nation brand image. We discuss theoretical and managerial implications of our findings.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Nation branding, the management of a country’s image, has recently emerged as a distinct research domain with important theoretical and practical implications (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy 2000; Kotler and Gertner 2002; Morgan et al., 2002; Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002; Anholt, 2007). Effective management of a nation’s brand plays an important role in attracting tourists, investors, companies, and talented people as well as promoting the country’s export products in foreign markets. Tourism promotion constitutes one of the most visible tools of nation branding (Anholt, 2007; Morgan et al., 2004). The examples of Spain (Ollins 1999; Gilmore 2002) and New Zealand (Morgan et al. 2002) provide evidence of the role tourism can play in developing a strong national brand.

However, while the literature emphasizes the positive impact of tourism on nation brand, there are also cases for which a similar positive impact remains less apparent. Consider, for example, Turkey. Since 1989s, Turkey has emerged as a key travel destination in the eastern Mediterranean. Yet, despite its impressive performance in tourism, Turkey continues to suffer from what Kotler and Gertner (2002, p.254) have identified as a “troubled image.” Studies report that Turkey has not been favorably positioned in the minds of consumers (Baloglu and Brinberg 1997; Sönmez and Strakaya 2002; Tasci et al. 2007). Similarly, public opinion surveys and nation brand indices reveal a bleak outlook for Turkey’s image.

Intrigued by this paradox, we examine the factors that might limit tourism’s positive impact on nation branding. We collected data through in-depth expert interviews. In total we interviewed thirty-eight informants. Nine of the informants were Turkish while the remaining represented six different EU countries. Given that a substantial portion of international tourists come from the EU, we have focused on the EU countries. Experts from different fields such as politics, marketing, media, as well as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism officials were interviewed.

Analysis of the interview data revealed that there are three key factors that appear to limit tourism’s contribution to Turkey’s nation branding efforts. These are strategic, experiential and organizational factors. A core issue for Turkey’s tourism strategy and promotion is the lack of differentiation from its competitors. A substantial portion of Turkey’s tourism advertising fall under the generic sun-sand-sea category and revolve around the images of sandy beaches, warm weather, and attractive resorts. While such imagery may persuade potential visitors to choose Turkey for their summer holiday, it fails to contribute to the development of a unique nation brand image. Yet in differentiating in the tourism domain, Turkey faces a further positioning dilemma. On the one hand, it competes on similar propositions with the Western rivals like Italy, Spain, Greece and France. On the other hand, Turkey can also promise an exotic, slightly Oriental note. The challenge seems to be effectively combining these two opposing themes.

Furthermore, the holiday experience itself seems rather exchangeable. Turkey’s massive investment into package tours and all-inclusive resorts does not help to brand a holiday experience specific to Turkey and create a lasting emotional bonding with the country. Paradoxically, rather than help familiarize people with a place, partaking in mass tourism may even distance and alienate the visitor from the country. The gap between the experience at the resort and the experience in the countryside creates a tension that can negatively influence visitors’ perceptions of Turkey. While holiday experience can be highly favorable, it can also be largely disconnected from country-specific evaluations and remain as inauthentic. Such disconnection may weaken the positive effect of direct experience on building or changing attitudes and perceptions.

Our analysis also reveals various organizational challenges that Turkey faces in effectively utilizing tourism promotion for nation branding goals. First, due to various legislative, structural, and political reasons, the organization of tourism promotion lacks a professional approach. Instead of a big global communications company, Turkish government works with several small- to mid-size local or at best regional agencies. The outcome is market-specific tourism campaigns that differ tremendously in terms of their styles, slogans, and visuals. Second, it appears that there is a lack of use of marketing research and intelligence techniques in either devising or assessing tourism promotion efforts. Neither the Ministry nor the agencies track effectiveness of advertising campaigns and measure pre- and post-visit perceptions of consumers. Third, tourism promotion and other nation branding efforts are not coordinated. Different government agencies engage in various nation branding efforts that promote different aspects of Turkey. However, due to lack of a coordination mechanism, the activities often result in disconnected and short-term focused communication.

The findings of our study offer new insights into the nation branding literature. Until recently, except a few studies, image and reputation were often regarded as almost synonymous in the context of nation branding theory (Passow 2005; Anholt 2007). The Turkish case serves as a convincing example for the relevancy of the distinction between image and reputation for nation brands and the need for further research on the implications of reputation for nation branding theory. As the increasing number of tourists visiting the country indicates, Turkey is able to attract customers to its resorts. However, while sea-sun-sand advertisements, all-inclusive resorts, and quality service are able to promote a favorable image of Turkey as a “good value for money” travel destination in the Mediterranean, these tourism images and experiences appear not to be able to penetrate deeper and contribute to the reputation of Turkey.

At a deeper level, tourism promotion strategy and execution reveals that the Ministry subscribes to a management-centered, product-focused branding paradigm which assumes that brand meanings can be controlled and managed by the organization (Aaker, 1995). The Turkish case exemplifies the problem of controlling or managing nation brand meanings and the necessity of treating nation brands as complex entities that are formed by a network of multiple actors with different and often contradictory interests and goals. Such a recognition calls for a shift from management-centered to “cultural branding” (Holt, 2004) approaches which place more emphasis on the relational and co-constructive nature of brand building process.