

# **From an Integrated Tourism Model to a Place Branding Strategy. Perspectives of Mediterranean Tourism Experts**

Theodora Papatheochari<sup>1</sup>, Antonia Koutsopoulou<sup>1</sup>, Pelagia Moloni<sup>1</sup> and Spyros Niaris<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Thessaly, Pedion Areos, 38334, Volos, Greece

**Abstract.** The development of new and/or alternative tourism models has been an important practice towards effective and sustainable tourism management. Their aim is to ensure that tourism development is achieved through the lens of integration, responsibility and sustainability. The production of such models usually lacks the incorporation of place branding perspectives. Place branding strategies can act as important promotion actions of a tourism product, which is designed as a place-based strategy. In this context, this paper seeks to identify the parameters through which an integrated model could be transformed into a place branding strategy or incorporate place branding perspectives in order to promote the model itself as well as the destination as a whole. In order to do so, this paper builds upon the experience on tourism models developed under the Sustainable Tourism Community (STC) of projects of Interreg Med Programme. The method to serve the aim of the paper is dedicated interviews addressed to representatives of the STC, who have a good knowledge of their project activities and are experts in the field of tourism. The findings reveal that building a place branding strategy connected to the tourism models could be a valuable asset towards the sustainable development of tourist destinations. Although the development of tourism models share similar principles with place branding strategies, the key challenge is to align their focus since branding strategies are more place-based approaches with emphasis on the destination, while tourism models have a wider context with emphasis on the tourism type.

**Keywords:** Place Branding, Tourism Model, Sustainable Tourism, Mediterranean.

## 1 Introduction

The development of new and/or alternative tourism models is an important practice towards effective and sustainable tourism management. These models can take the form of integrated products, action plans, methodologies, packages etc. Their aim is to ensure that tourism development is achieved through the lens of integration, responsibility and sustainability taking into account social, economic and environmental specificities of tourism destinations and addressing the legal and policy framework behind them. Although the production of such models includes the design of measures, actions and directions towards their implementation, they usually lack the incorporation of place branding perspectives. They include soft and horizontal promotion actions, usually, not in full connection with the destinations they focus on and designed independently from other branding and/or promotion experiences of the same destination. Place branding strategies could fill in this gap by acting as promotion actions for tourism models which are designed in a place-based context. Tourism branding in particular is of special interest, given the complexity of developing unique tourist experiences and understanding the tourist decisional process [1][12].

In this context, this paper seeks to identify the parameters through which an integrated tourism model could be transformed into a place branding strategy or incorporate place branding perspectives in order to promote the model itself as well as the destination as a whole. The paper builds upon the experience of tourism models developed under the Sustainable Tourism Community (STC) of projects of Interreg Med Programme. The STC aimed at enhancing sustainable and responsible development of coastal and maritime tourism in the Mediterranean area. Through the 2014-2020 programming period the STC produced a series of models at a coastal destination level related to fishing areas, ecotouristic places, ports, underwater cultural heritage sites, mountain areas, cities and small towns etc. Five of them are selected for the purposes of this paper which were tested in various coastal destinations of the Mediterranean.

## 2 Methodological Framework

The method to serve the aim of the paper is dedicated interviews addressed to representatives of the STC, who have a good knowledge of their project activities and are experts in the field of tourism. The purpose is to challenge the respondents to comment on how they see the tourism models produced by their projects as potential starting points for developing place branding strategies incorporating the knowledge gained from their activities. The questions were addressed to five tourism experts - all active members of the STC Community - from different institutions across the Mediterranean (located in Italy, France, Greece and Spain) and was conducted in July 2023. The objective was to match the STC models with the most acknowledged place branding components identified through literature. The matching was achieved by designing a set of questions that each one of them challenged the respondents to assess each branding component chosen by this paper (chapter 2.2). The respondents had the opportunity to either openly discuss the characteristics of each component according to their model,

or assess their models' performance on a scale from 1 to 10. The collection of their responses was then elaborated by the authors and grouped under 3 categories of integration between the model and the component (low, medium, high). The outcome is an evaluation matrix that provides an assessment of whether the STC models cover place branding components and could be transformed into place branding strategies. The respondents had the opportunity to comment and provide feedback on each model taking into account the nine components described below. A purposive sampling method was applied which consisted of five experts (one for each model). The aim of the sampling method was to obtain a sample that represented the perceptions of experts with deep knowledge of tourism issues due to their involvement in the STC projects [15][17].

## 2.1 The STC Tourism Models

For the purposes of this paper, five tourism models were selected. The criteria behind their selection are the existence of a strategy and the development of a concrete tourism model. The models are described below:

**An all Year Round Tourism Model:** Mediterranean destinations are often dependent on the 3S tourism model (Sea-Sun-Sand). Seasonality is a major challenge both for overvisited areas and for unexploited destinations with important tourism potential. WINTERMED project addresses these issues by promoting alternative and sustainable all-year round use of tourism in Mediterranean island destinations.

**Emblematic Mountains of Slow Tourism:** Tourism destinations do not only encompass the coastal strip, in direct contact with the sea, but also include the hinterland. EMbleMatiC project aimed at creating and promoting an alternative form of tourism offer, one that is reflected through “emblematic” mountain areas. These are well-known mountains, consolidated tourism destinations close to the Mediterranean coast. The project's approach was to define the “EMbleMatiC dimension” and create an umbrella brand for its network of mountains.

**Ecotourism for Protected Areas:** Part of the tourism demand is the authentication of local culture, the close encounter with important natural assets and biodiversity. Under this notion, DestiMED and DESTIMED PLUS, created and promoted the Local Ecotourism Cluster (LEC). LECs aim at creating sustainable and competitive ecotourism products in protected areas and are supported and promoted under the Mediterranean Experience of Ecotourism (MEET) brand, a network for managing commercially viable and conservation-focused ecotourism products.

**Sustainable and Quality Tourism in Small Towns:** Local and small scale areas often face the challenge of decline of the tourism sector due to lack of planning and promoting themselves as tourism destinations. SuSTowns project addressed this challenge by developing tools for the planning and management of tourism. It proposed a local-based model, which used the Total Quality Management (TQM) approach to build action plans for small Mediterranean towns.

**A Fishing Tourism Business Model:** Tourism can be an opportunity for small fishing communities to strengthen their local economy, maintain their traditional identity and preserve the marine environment by creating unique touristic experiences for visitors. To this end, a FishingTourism business model was developed by TOURISMED

project with the aim to design, manage and implement experiential tourism activities [8].

## 2.2 The Branding Elements

existing literature on the most acknowledged place branding management components highlights nine essential elements and their interactions for the successful implementation of a place branding strategy [7]. In this vein, the questions addressed to the STC tourism experts was based on the following elements:

**Brand Evaluation:** The techniques used to acquire feedback on a brand's experience and image are referred to as brand evaluation. To guarantee that brand infrastructure meets and exceeds expectations, strong coordination with stakeholders is required [7]. Evaluation of place brand equity reveals which brand equity components may support a particular place's brand and what possible relationships may exist between these factors [16].

**Stakeholder Engagement:** "Stakeholder engagement" describes the techniques used to identify stakeholders, their interests, and the management of their interactions [5]. Recognizing contemporary long-term place branding strategies based on community involvement requires a stakeholder-oriented approach to place branding as well as the adoption of a participatory methodology [11][13].

**Brand Infrastructure:** The existence, accessibility and sufficiency of a brand's functional and experiential features are referred to as brand infrastructure (regeneration) [2][6].

**Brand Identity:** Brand identity is among the most important elements in branding is since it establishes how stakeholders wish the location to be perceived [6]. It is expressed through a variety of key elements such as the physical characteristics of a location and its functional and experiential qualities [14].

**Brand Architecture:** Brand architecture contributes to achieving synergies, avoiding internal competition while creating a strong profile [3][4]. Brand architecture is defined as "*the relationship between the city's various internal locations, entities, and experiences within its boundaries*" [2].

**Brand Articulation:** Brand articulation is the link between brand identity and brand communication, taking into account the brand architecture [6]. It is defined as '*the brand's visual and verbal identity expressed through the brand name, logo, color, palettes and photographs*' [2].

**Brand Communication:** Brand communication refers to '*the promotional mix used to communicate the brand*' [2]. It builds upon and is closely tied with brand articulation and it has a direct impact on perceptions and the reality of the brand experience [6].

**Word of Mouth (WOM):** WOM is the informal exchange of information among "consumers" of the brand experience [6]. Word-of-mouth communication is "*the exchange of comments, thoughts, or ideas between two or more customers, none of which is a source of marketing*" [9]. WOM is recognized as a crucial channel for disseminating opinions about intangible tourist attractions, which has a significant impact on the popularity of travel destinations [10].

**Brand Experience:** Brand experience refers to the way a consumer interacts with a brand and how that interaction affects their perceptions. A destination brand experience occurs when a person visits a place with a well-known brand and then receives enjoyable experiences from that visit [7][12]. Positive brand experiences promote repeat visits to the same place and spread favorable word of mouth about it [18].

### 3 Results and Discussion: From a Tourism Model to a Place Branding Strategy

The outcome of the methodological framework was the creation of an evaluation matrix that integrates the results of the interviews assessing the STC tourism models in the context of the identified place branding components necessary for transforming tourism models into place branding strategies. Based on the respondents' answers, each model was assigned a qualitative rating (low, medium, high) for each of the nine branding elements based on the integration of each element in the models' strategy. The integrated results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Evaluation matrix (own elaboration)

STC model	Place branding components								
	Stakeholder engagement	Tangible & intangible infrastructure	Brand identity	Brand architecture	Brand articulation	Brand communications	Word of mouth	Brand experience	Brand evaluation
Ecotourism model	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Slow tourism model	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Tourism model for small towns	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Fishing tourism model	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Tourism for insular areas	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

• Low    ● Medium    ● High

Taking into account stakeholder engagement, all models seem to have foreseen engagement actions in order for the model to be accepted and implemented in the Mediterranean territories. The experts were asked not only about the type of the stakeholders and the level of their engagement for the successful implementation of the model but also about their role in the implementation and the engagement actions that took place to support it. Most actions included intensive activities such as the organization of workshops, local focus groups, training, establishment of consortia, committees and associations, awareness campaigns etc.

Regarding the infrastructure (tangible or intangible) for the promotion of the tourism models (e.g. equipment and facilities related to the built environment and entertainment and cultural services) all models score between medium and high. This means that all models managed to identify the elements of the built and natural environment that compose the appropriate conditions for the promotion of the tourism model. Of course, each model is related to different types of infrastructure, depending on the type of tourism it

focuses on. For example, ecotourism clusters call for online platforms and training, fishing tourism is highly dependent on the fishing equipment (e.g. condition of vessels) and its related services (cultural and entertainment services) while slow mountain tourism needs include signing, interpretation panels, equipment in huts/public buildings, picnic areas etc.

What is interesting is that almost all tourism models have a very well defined identity behind them as well as the actions to promote it. It seems that the identity of the destination played an integral role for building the STC tourism models and proves the obvious relationship between the destination's elements that form its identity and the tourism potential that is identified by the destination.

In terms of brand communication, all models worked significantly towards the promotion of tourism experience inside the pilot destinations and to similar territories sharing a common identity. More specifically, the models included communication strategies, promotional packages, social media campaigns and international media outlets, online platforms etc.

The same goes for the brand articulation of the models (medium and high scores) regarding the expression of the brand through audio and visual elements. All models invested in the design of logos, slogans, leaflets, posters, story-telling videos etc. for the promotion of the tourism experience. This shows a deep understanding of the need for consistent and well targeted messages to the selected target groups. On the contrary, very few was accomplished in linking the brand of the models to other place-based distinctive brands and activities. This is attributed to the implementation framework of the models which were developed and tested under the umbrella of Interreg MED and therefore limited to specific activities.

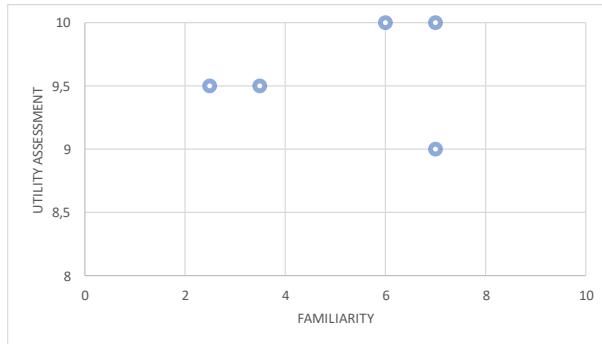
Brand experience is of particular interest to the analysis given that it is the component in which the end-users engage with the brand and formulate their own perceptions. As can be seen from the matrix, the models' scores range from medium to high depending on the actions taken to support the interaction between the brand and the end-users. These actions included Local Action Plans, mobile applications, familiarization visits, interpretation facilities, local guidance services, free trials etc.

On the other hand, the matrix shows high fluctuation among the Word of Mouth scores of the models. Informal communication between consumers of the brand experience is very hard to accomplish within the limits of a project. However, some projects managed to score highly on the board as in the case of the *Fishingtourism* model. Fishermen acted as storytellers of the communities passing on not only the tourism experience but the local traditions and culture of the place.

Finally, regarding the actions taken to assess the models, gather feedback and monitor the experience, the models scored medium rating on average. The models included either quantifiable or qualitative methods to measure and monitor the brand experience. These methods varied from indicator sets to laboratories and associations acting as networks for monitoring the quality of the experience and identifying potential barriers.

All in all, the experts were all highly in favor of building a place branding strategy to promote the model, regardless of how familiar they are with such strategies. They highlighted how useful – if not required - it could be to build a place branding strategy that is aligned with the tourism model that is being promoted and integrates the local

community. It is worth noting that the foundations have already been set by the models by incorporating several branding components in their design and actions.



**Fig. 1.** Experts' assessment on the utility of building a place branding strategy connected to the tourism models (own elaboration)

#### 4 Conclusions

This paper has attempted to bring to the forefront the integration between tourism models and branding strategies in order to support sustainable tourism development by giving emphasis not only to the type of tourism potential but also to the destination. In this context, place branding strategies and tourism models have been at the core of this analysis that aimed to identify the parameters through which an integrated tourism model could incorporate place branding perspectives and be transformed into a place branding strategy. In order to do so, the paper has chosen, on the one hand, a community of tourism models and, on the other hand, a set of place branding components, highlighted in recent literature. The findings of the paper reveal that the development of tourism models share similar principles with place branding strategies, such as the identification of the destination's particularities and competitive advantages, the definition of the stakeholders responsible for effective and sustainable tourism development and the promotion of effective governance at different levels.

The findings also highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the tourism models in terms of incorporating branding elements. Among the strongest elements of the models are stakeholder engagement, brand identity, brand articulation and brand communications. On the other hand, brand architecture and word of mouth were not easy to incorporate within the models' context. Finally, the models managed to take significant steps towards building the appropriate tangible and intangible infrastructure for the implementation of the model, engaging the end-users with the brand and evaluating the brand experience. The experts clearly highlighted that building a place branding strategy connected to the tourism models could be a valuable asset towards the sustainable development of tourist destinations. The key challenge is to align their focus since branding strategies are more place-based approaches with emphasis on the destination, while tourism models have a wider context with emphasis on the tourism type. This alignment

could assist tourism stakeholders in better understanding the identity of a destination in order to build and offer an integrated model and experience.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to sincerely thank Alessandro Melillo (PRISM Impresa Sociale s.r.l.), Arnau Teixidor Costa (IUCN Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation), Charalampos Vasileiadis (ANATOLIKI S.A.) Flora Leroy (Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions) and Konstantinos Zapounidis (Pieriki Anaptixiaki S.A.) for their expertise and contribution to the paper.

## References

1. Almeyda-Ibáñez, M., and George, B.: Place branding in tourism: A review of theoretical approaches and management practices. *Tourism & Management Studies* 13(4), 10–19 (2017).
2. Baker, B.: Destination branding for small cities: The essentials for successful place branding. 1<sup>st</sup> edn. Creative Leap Books, Portland OH (2007).
3. Chailan, C.: Brands Portfolios and competitive advantage: An empirical study. *Journal of Product & Brand Management* 17(4), 254-264 (2008).
4. Datriza-Masip, J., Poluzzi, A.: Brand architecture management: The case of four tourist destination in Catalonia. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management* 3(1), 48-58 (2014).
5. Eugenio-Vela, J., Ginesta, X., Kavaratzis, M.: The critical role of stakeholder engagement in a place branding strategy: A case study of the Emporda brand. *European Planning Studies* 28(7), 1393-1412 (2020).
6. Hanna, S., Rowley, J.: A practitioner-led strategic place brand-management model. *Journal of Marketing Management* 29(15-16), 1782-1815 (2013).
7. Hanna, S., Rowley, J.: Towards a strategic place brand-management model. *Journal of Marketing Management* 27(5-6), 458-476 (2011).
8. INTERREG MED Sustainable Tourism Homepage, <https://sustainable-tourism.interreg-med.eu/>, last accessed 2023/07/21.
9. Ismail, A. R., Spinelli, G.: Effects of Brand Love, Personality and Image on Word of Mouth: The Case of Fashion Brands among Young Consumers. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management* 16, 386-398 (2012).
10. Jeuring, J. H. G., Haartsen, T.: Destination Branding by Residents: The Role of Perceived Responsibility in Positive and Negative Word-of-Mouth. *Tourism Planning & Development* 14(2), 240-259 (2017).
11. Kavaratzis, M.: From ‘necessary evil’ to necessity: stakeholders’ involvement in place branding. *Journal of Place Management and Development* 5(1), 7-19 (2012).
12. Kavoura, A., Stavrianea, A.: A Brand Experiences’ Model for Visitors’ Attitudinal Loyalty. *Tourismos* 11(4), 1-21 (2016).
13. Kemp, E., Williams, K. H., Bordelon, B. M.: The impact of marketing in internal stakeholders in destination branding: The case of a musical city. *Journal of Vacation Marketing* 18(2), 121-133 (2011).
14. Niininen, O., Hosany, S., Ekinci, H., Airey, D.: Building a place brand: A case study of Surrey Hills. *Tourism Analysis* 12, 371-385 (2007).
15. Patton, M.Q.: Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods. SAGE Publications, Inc., London, UK (2002).

16. Pike, S.: Consumer-Based Brand Equity for Destinations. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing* 22(1) 51-61 (2007).
17. Saunders, M.N.: Choosing research participants. In: *The Practice of Qualitative Organizational Research: Core Methods and Current Challenges*. Sage, London, UK (2012).
18. Singh, R., Mehraj, N.: Desination Brand Experience and its relationship with Tourists Satisfaction and Intention to Recommend: A Conceptual Model. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure* 7(1), 1-13 (2018).