

Marketability & Image repositioning for Tourism Destinations in Crisis Case: South of Morocco, Region Souss Massa

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Abstract :

The sector of tourism is an affluent sector, which is continuing to know a remarkable growth throughout the globe regardless of the turmoil that some destinations might experience. No tourism destination is immune from crisis. Consequently, destination image crisis can be impacted by several unexpected issues; a sudden negative event like terrorist attack, or a natural disaster like a hurricane or an earthquake can affect negatively the image of a destination or it can be a simply the gradual outcome of an extended period of decline of a destination. Tourism professionals are continuously seeking to promote their destinations and work in building bridges to encourage culture sharing, creating exchange opportunities for people around the world and breaking down the barriers of stereotype, fear and ignorance. The aim of this communication is first to tackle all possible liabilities that are affecting the image of the destination of South Morocco Souss Massa region as a whole with a particular focus on the city of Agadir. Then how these liabilities can be converted to a true asset that will reposition the city and the region as an iconic South Moroccan region? Hence, the research question is what are the marketing restoration strategies that have an impact on tourism destination well being?

Key words: *Tourism, Image restoration, Marketing strategies, Destination.*

Résumé :

Le secteur du tourisme est un secteur prospère, qui continue de connaître une croissance remarquable dans le monde entier, bien que certaines destinations traversent des moments difficiles. Aucune destination touristique n'est à l'abri de la crise. Par conséquent, la crise de l'image de destination peut être affectée par plusieurs problèmes inattendus ; un événement négatif soudain comme une attaque terroriste ou une catastrophe naturelle comme un ouragan ou un tremblement de terre peut affecter négativement l'image d'une destination ou peut être simplement le résultat progressif d'une longue période de déclin. Les professionnels du tourisme cherchent continuellement à promouvoir leurs destinations et à travailler sur des différents partenariats et projets pour encourager le partage de la culture, créer des opportunités d'échange pour les gens du monde entier et briser les barrières du stéréotype, de la peur et de l'ignorance. L'objectif de cette communication est d'abord de s'attaquer à toutes les responsabilités possibles qui affectent l'image de la destination de la région du sud du Maroc Souss Massa dans son ensemble avec un accent particulier sur la ville d'Agadir. Ensuite, comment ces passifs peuvent-ils être convertis en un atout réel

qui va repositionner la ville et la région en tant que région sud-marocaine emblématique ? Par conséquent, la question de recherche est ce que sont les stratégies de restauration du marketing qui ont un impact sur le bien-être de la destination touristique ?

Mots clés: *Tourisme, Repositionnement de l'image, Stratégies de marketing, Destination.*

INTRODUCTION

Since September 11th, Arab spring and other terrorist attacks in Egypt, Tunisia and recently in Turkey the sphere of tourism is been experiencing several downturns that have affected negatively the image and the performance of some destinations. Despite, the turmoil international tourist arrivals reached 1 billion 138 million in 2014, an increase of 4.7% over the previous year and according to UNWTO, it is expected to continue growing for the coming years 2015 and 2016 by 3 to 4%. Today, the world is a small village and the mind set and choices of travelers have changed dramatically. Either act of man or nature can transform the image and the reputation of the most popular destinations overnight (Beirman, 2003). Indeed, cities regions and nations continue to compete even more than before to attract more tourists, and reposition their destinations as a destination of choice (Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013, P.31). Every destination has a life cycle just like a product at the launching step the demand and popularity will rise then overtime it will experience the fall and often the factors influencing the change can be either controllable or uncontrollable (WTO, 2007). For that purpose, destination marketers and key actors need to come up with a brand repositioning and efficient strategies, which will contribute to an efficient promotion to hurt destinations. In addition, neighboring destinations cannot neglect the negative impact but they will need to reinstate their image and reinforce the brand of their region or city in the mind of the tourist. As the latter, have a wide range of holiday and business travel choices. A destination s image receives extensive attention in the field of tourism research because of the belief that the success or failure of destinations depends on their image that shapes the minds of potential travelers (Avraham, 2016). Agadir destination needs an urgent repositioning, as the seaside product sold alone is no longer competitive. The image of the destination vanished in the tourist mind; the stagnation in product creation and weak marketability have caused a dramatic decline in Agadir city and the region as a whole. Many scholars and professionals believe that there is a strong correlation between a positive image and

continued tourism growth (Morakabati, Beavis & Fletcher, 2014). The manuscript's theoretical background section will present an overview about destination marketability and image repositioning in general and during crisis. Then, we will present the study's methodology and findings.

I. Theoretical background

1.1. Destination marketability

The chosen positioning strategy to differentiate a destination from its rivals could be considered as the keystone of the destination's competitive strategy. The principal disciplines employed to foster an attractive image for places are place promotion and place marketing (Avraham, 2016). Capitalizing on the originality and the unique selling proposition and unique emotional proposition are key success factors for promoting a destination (Morgan & al, 2002) a communication campaign is to be appreciated, understood and memorized by the target customers. However, for this we must highlight the clear differentiation in the message that we are sending. How to attract the consumer's attention on an offer? How to get their emotion moving and dreaming about the destination? In the new era of tourism, it became tough for destinations to continue building their positioning on physical attributes such as climate or geography. Wang (2011) states that «destination marketing and management can be defined as a proactive, visitor-centered approach to the economic and cultural development of a destination that balances and integrates the interests of visitors, service providers and the community» (Wang, 2011: 3). Indeed, if we can build a good bonding among these three encounters it can trigger the emotional propositions that influence most traveler decision in choosing a destination. For consumers planning to go on holiday, it must be projected in a different space of time and imagine their ideal vacation days and moments. Indeed, the task of marketers is to create a communication that stimulates the imagination of the trip by dream initially bouncing off cravings to go on a trip and then helping the aspiring traveler to define what types of places and for what types of holiday he wishes for (Pan & Li, 2011). Finally, it is also to identify if the offer differing and harnessing the power of word of mouth. Advertising campaigns exploit the idealization of the holiday experience and symbolism of vacation utopias staging ideal vacation. Reunions, conviviality and pleasure of discovering according to a logical enhancement of

experience (experiential marketing), holiday times are staged. This is referring to the emotions and interactions that the individual can expect to live during his vacation. Researchers have suggested that tourist's overall destination image kept in their mind can be composed of three components: 1- affective, 2- cognitive and 3- conative, which reflect the behavioral side (Gartner, 1996 & Ryan, 2004; Pan & Li, 2011). Thus, the essential part is to be able to understand well target customers and create the motivation and the right product to choose a particular destination. Kotler (1997) defines the marketing concept as follows: «marketing concept holds that the key to achieving organizational goals consists in determining the needs and wants of target markets and deliver in the desired satisfactions more effectively efficiently than competitors. » Cities that have an identity and a positive image are better able to meet the demands of their stakeholders, whether they are visitors, residents, or business people. (Gilboa & al, 2015). The struggle in destination marketability is when the image of a destination is already perceived as a mature destination or when the tourist has a bad memory or a negative experience because of lack of safety, terror, or simply the tourist does not find anything appealing to his needs and wants in that particular destination case of Agadir. The city struggled for years to reposition its product and adapt to the new tourism developments. Hence, destination marketing and management tend to be a complex matter that entails a universal and systematic approach, which must include research and deep depth analysis to different environments (Avraham, 2016). Thus, the marketability and rebranding of a destination should be adapted to the current market trends, which influence directly or indirectly the traveler choices and behavior.

1.2. Destination rebranding and repositioning

Destinations marketability and city rebranding it became vital to ensure tourism growth and development (Asseraf & Shoham, 2016). Undeniably, setting an image is the first step in brand repositioning. Tourist icons are inseparable elements of the destination (countries or regions). For instance flags, emblems (the shamrock for Ireland), the local gastronomy impossible to go to Morocco without tasting couscous or drinking tea with mint; Corsica without tasting the traditional meat or Spain without drinking Sangria. These tourist icons are almost invariable whatever the origin of the tourist. So whether you are French, Finnish, Greek or Lebanese, a picture of a cowboy always think of the United States, as the image of a kangaroo is always thinking about Australia. The traveler decision is mainly based on feeling and attachment toward

a specific destination (Tosun, Dedeoglu, & Fyall; 2015). City branding can promote city's tangible and intangible assets. Some cities' revenues and consumer spending falling, small businesses and hotels closing like Agadir city. Cities must strategically reposition their approach to tourism growth and economic development (Gilboa, Jaffee, Vianelli, Pastore & Herstein 2015). The rebranding can be critical if all stakeholders and key players are not lining up in the same direction and have different views in regards to destination repositioning. Although, there are many examples in the literature review of destinations that use countless exhibitions, cultural events, sports activities, business activities and different health services to rebrand their destinations (Avraham, 2013). It is essential for every destination managers, marketers and decision makers to question themselves the following question: Who are we, what do we offer, and how we want to be perceived? Repositioning strategies involves tweaking consumer's perceptions (Trout, Rivkin s 2010 & Owolabi, 2013). Hence, repositioning entails the importance of organizations strategy in different industries. Nowadays, competition in the tourism industry is continuing to grow the brand of a destination can age quickly and vanish in the mind of the tourist if it does not offer anything that suits their needs. The role also of international media, journalists, press conferences, ministry of tourism and other tourism institutions is important to clarify certain perceptions that tourists have about certain destinations (Kapuscinski & Richards, 2016). Particularly, destinations that are neighboring destinations in crisis. For instance, terrorist attacks in France, Tunisia and Egypt had a significant negative impact on Moroccan tourism. Some foreign authorities and embassies categorized Morocco as a high-risk country to travel to. Even though, the country is very safe and politically stable and does not represent any threat to travelers. Simply because the country has similar identity, geographical positioning or same religion as the terrorist or the troubled destination, it became suddenly a subject to negative image and unattractive destination (Beirman & van Walbeek, 2011). In sum, destination marketers and managers face many challenges that are not easy to overcome when the current destination image is problematic.

1.3. Destination image repair during crisis

Researchers suggest several strategies for repairing the image of people, groups and organization. "The multistep model for altering place image" proposed by Avraham & Ketter (2008:188) focuses on the source that affect the negative image of a destination and how it can be converted

by marketers to change the negative impact. The components of the media strategy groups are 1- Source, 2-Audience, 3- Message (Avraham; 2016). The source can be international or national and they usually have a heavy impact on the audience (Mair & al, 2014). The perception of the audience to the message released by the media will depend eventually on their values and beliefs connotation of a destination with a lack of safety has been the main concern of many destination managers, marketers, tourism entities and travelers. In today, distressed world, it is common for visitors to be reticent in making traveling decisions unless they are mentally and physically ready to take the risk and invest again in a particular destination. The idea that countries, regions or cities have an image it s not innovative (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2006, P. 9; Asseraf & Shoham, 2016). To be competitive, companies are continuously seeking to build a strong brand or image of their products and services to differentiate themselves from competitors. Similar to destinations, once their image is destroyed either by man or nature destination marketers and all key players need to repair their image and continue to be competitive. Indeed, main marketing strategies used during post disaster included correcting misperceptions about the image and restore confidence in a destination (Mair & al, 2014). With increasing competition around the globe, it is hard for cities to stand out in each of the markets they focus on (Insch & Bowden, 2016). In the context of advanced regionalization in Morocco, the tourism sector has a place of choice as socio regional economic development vector in the region Souss Massa. Any development of gait should be based on an overall strategy that respects the specificities of tourism products in its every province. Furthermore, the repositioning of the destination and image restoration can be complex if we lack accurate evaluation of all the factors that have an impact on the image and on how it s been seen by visitors (Beerli & Martin, 2004). Eventually, natural resources, general infrastructure and tourist infrastructure are the main attributes that determine the perceived image destination. Hence, it is focal to identify a match between target market preferences and the city's assets and resources to serve those (Insch & Bowden, 2016). Agadir image and region is been in the decline for almost three decades; the action of repairing the image is no longer a choice (Moudoud, 2007). In order to understand the ins and outs of tourism sector in regional development level, the elected representatives, authorities, decision makers in the tourism industry and all stakeholders should be aware of the difficulties of the sector and most importantly work in synergy. If other Moroccan cities such as Marrakesh, Tangier, Casablanca made it possible why not Agadir and region? Clear the Arab Spring and

other jeopardizing events took place in neighboring countries but Agadir and region was not ready to cease the opportunity. Morocco is stable in North Africa and can easily drag more tourism if the right positive image is spread out throughout targeted markets and the right products are developed to respond to the interest of visitors, service providers and the community (Wang, 2011). Furthermore, the great battle will be necessary to find funding for making a professional regional promotion that will be as efficient as other competitive destinations such as Israel, Turkey, Spain, or UAE. Also, the diversity of potential target groups such as investors local and international, residents native and immigrants, tourists local and international; generates complexity for city authorities and city brand managers to identify needs , values and expectations for the city (Janiszweka & Insh,2012).

II. Methodology

2.1. Qualitative research

As the main objective of this communication is to explore liabilities that are impacting the image of Agadir destination and identify a set of marketing restoration strategies that can help convert these liabilities to true assets which will contribute to tourism destination well being. This exploratory study will help us get familiar better with the phenomenon of study and produce a valid knowledge by interacting directly with the practitioners (Thierat and coll, 2007). We conducted an exploratory study using semi-directed interviews with 3 practitioners in tourism, 3 national visitors, 3 international visitors and 4 residents. The interview guide included three main open-ended questions: 1- What images come to your mind when you think of Agadir? 2- How will you describe Agadir destination to others after the Arab spring and terrorist attacks in the Arab world? 3- How do you perceive image restoration for Agadir as a destination? The data collected was analyzed by using the method of content analysis to understand better how the image of destination Agadir is been perceived by all the participants and uncover marketing restoration strategies that can be a good tool to position destination Agadir as a destination of choice and contribute to the Souss Massa region development and growth.

2.2. Tourism in Agadir and crises repercussions

According to the Regional Center of Tourism the tourism market has registered an increase in arrivals of + 9.44% and 4% in terms of overnight stays. The number of tourists rose 128,744 arrivals in 2015 to 140,901 in 2016, or 12,157 additional arrivals. Correlated overnight stays increased from 657,858 in 2015 to 682,598 in 2016, a gain of 24,740 nights. This increase in sales reflects increases in some major source markets headed by the national market with 7835 extra visitors (11.37%), followed by the Russian market has increased to about 344, 19% (4089 customers). However, the destination registered a significant decrease in some traditional international markets namely: The French market with 10% in arrivals and overnight stays. The Belgian market with 13% -10% in arrival and overnight stays. The German market with 4% in arrival and -3 nights. This main decrease is due to terrorist attacks in other Arab destinations, negative messages sent by the media about Muslim countries, lack of efficient marketing strategies to alter the image and lack of offering new products that will respond to today's consumer choice. The Arab spring started in late 2010 and it just hit some countries before others, but definitely it had a tremendous impact on the tourism industry in the entire Arab region and Muslim countries (Mansfeld & Winckler, 2015). Unquestionably, the safety and security measures has gotten a big deal of attention and interest from researchers, government and all stakeholders but could not help Arab tourism destination sustain a competitive advantage and gain an above average return for the tourism as an economic sector to perform profitably (Beirman, 2009). Thus, the tourism industry is almost the sole economic and social mechanism that can help alleviate the poverty in Agadir and region. Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan, the tourism industry has become the largest private sector employer and the most fundamental earner of hard currency (Tang & Abosedra, 2014).

III. Findings and discussion

The aim to the present research project was to understand better how the image of Agadir destination is been perceived by different groups and identify variables that influenced the conception of the image in the mind of the sample population chosen. The results were able to guide us towards some proposed image repair restoration strategies already highlighted in our theoretical background. It was also interesting to find some similarities with previous research

and few variations in terms of components impacting the city image (Gilboa & al, 2015). Most of respondents related their image perception to: a- infrastructure, b- product and services offered, c- entertainment and leisure, d- environment and national citizen's social responsibility, e- culture, history and heritage, f- safety, g- price and cost efficiency. Amazingly on how residents and national tourists 7/13 respondents accorded a huge importance to lack of entertainment and leisure plus they were also price sensitive, they perceived Agadir as a destination that is highly priced for what it offers to local residents and national tourists. The price that you pay for a destination can definitely help you build an image especially if the quality of the product and service offered doesn't meet your expectations (Byon & Zhang, 2009; Gilboa et al, 2015). The 6/13 respondents international tourists and practitioners accorded a huge importance to safety, they considered the stability and the safety of a country as prerequisites to travel decision. Furthermore, traveling to developing countries it triggers always a list of complexities and challenges that the traveler might face (Avraham & Ketter, 2016). Indeed, 3 practitioners claimed negative stereotypes by international media about Muslim countries and lack of safety for tourists. In addition, we cannot deny that the Arab Spring turmoil had caused several international arrivals cancellation and contributed to shape a negative image about the Arab countries. The role of destination marketers and tourism institutions is to make the effort to convey the negative image to a positive one (Avraham, 2016). Therefore, countries specialized in Triple-S tourism (Sea, Sun and Sand) such as Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt were replaced quickly by secure and similarly attractive alternative destinations, namely Turkey, Greece (Shoukry, 2013). The other 3 international tourists stated that safety is very important to them too but they were willing to take the risk regardless of what they have read in social media or heard in news media. Hence, risk perception will depend largely on the traveler who is experiencing uncertainty with some consequences that may occur during his experience to visit a destination (Kapuscinski & Richards, 2016). The image drawn in the mind of the international respondents was not clear since it was their first time travelling to Agadir. One tourist was from USA and the other two were from Germany. Unfortunately, situations of lack of safety, terrorism, instability tend to create unattractive image that abolishes tourism (Walters & Mair, 2012; Avraham, 2016). In addition, they found the landscape in rural areas very attractive but not well developed to emphasize different heritage and culture. Environment protection and cleanliness were their main concern also, Morocco is hosting a mega event Cope 22 in Marrakech and mega events can bring

several changes to the host country (Kaplanidou & al, 2016). Will this event create a networking opportunity and business legacy to promote tourism in Agadir and region? Hope it will since Marrakech is only two hours away and the road is really good. But all stakeholders need to be able to establish relationships and ties that can help reposition Morocco and Agadir destination with its rural attractive landscape and beautiful beaches. Although, developing countries need to adopt a special set of tourism marketing tools different than those available in tourism marketing literature (Avraham & Ketter, 2016 p:3). Thus, to alter the image and battle the stereotype of a long lasting negative image and wrong perceptions it can be really challenging when you don't have the right marketing and financial management tools in place (WTO, 2007). The Moroccan tourism sector stays the only important vector for socio-economic development at national and regional level. Agadir destination and region have munificent resources and tremendous tourist potentialities that should be well developed and well promoted to restore the image at the international and national level. All respondents made the same comment about lack of Agadir international brand awareness that can be identified with iconic attractions and availability of visual positive images and real time videos, TV reality shows that can stimulate viewers. Managing a negative image can be improved by visual positive images, logos to build brand awareness of destinations (Hem & Iversen, 2004). According to the president of CRT the regional center of tourism the three fundamentals to reposition Agadir destination is the creation of quality products, aerial services and efficient promotion.

Table 1 : Frequency analysis of descriptors used in 39 studies of city image

Scale Items	Frequency (%)
History and heritage	53
Culture	47
Economy	47
Entertainment and Night life	47
Infrastructure (roads, communication, transportation, etc.)	35
Shopping centers	29
Environment (pollution, water, etc.)	29
Recreational activities	29
Housing	24
Safety	18
Sport facilities	18
Parks	18
Services	12
Access to Highways	12
Medical facilities	8
Restaurants	8
Green spaces	8

Source: Gilboa & al, 20016. A summated rating scale for measuring city image.

The experts in the field of tourism management exist in our neighboring Canary Island which was able to develop a great tourism activities and reported continuously outstanding numbers. Benchmarking exercises can be a good starting point to assess city s image and develop strategies to enhance their image in order to attract new businesses, major events, tourism and residents (Insch & Bowden 2016; O connor, 2002). Israel is another country that worked intensively in repositioning its image from war and political conflicts to an attractive destination. The latter, focused on building brand manuals, interactive website offers 72 videos illustrating different itineraries in Israel, organizing visits to Israel for global iconic celebrities, designers, actors, targeted a new segment of potential visitors, ect...(Asseraf & Shoham, 2016). Hence, the strength of a destination brand and positive image will definitely come with the effort allocated to the brand and image restoration strategies.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of our exploratory study showed that the sample population interviewed constructed their image perception based on some descriptors already discussed in the literature. But to have a better understanding to our study phenomenon, we need a larger sample in form of cluster destinations or cities and evaluate different image perceptions for declining destinations. Also for a future research, we can focus on primary factors involved in the selection of marketing restoration activities and possible testing to the multi-step model suggested by Avraham and Ketter; 2008.

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