

DESTINATION PERSONALITY: GAINING INSIGHTS FOR DESTINATION BRANDING THROUGH THE LENS OF THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to discuss challenges for destination branding, based on a twofold perspective of a recent literature review: destination personality and pandemic. The pandemic has radically transformed tourism demand and supply, thus urging tourism marketers to adapt to newly formed tourist needs, wants and choice-patterns. On the other hand, destination personality (DP) applications can be effectively used in market segmentation, (re)positioning and targeting but also in other aspects of marketing strategies and components of the marketing mix. Destination (brand) personality, a critical concept mainly developed in the last fifteen years, forms the basis of an extensive literature review and content analysis. The methodology for the DP literature review is based on the PRISMA protocol; insights gained from the content analysis are presented in the light of the pandemic and its major effects on the tourism market. The results provide evidence for the need of DMOs to invest in tourist-destination identification and build strong destination personalities, in order to differentiate themselves from the competition. Moreover, the importance of on-site experiences and identification of new determinants of tourist satisfaction in the post-pandemic era prove critical for destination personality and branding. Cultural differences and evolving tourist profiles should be monitored regularly and form the basis of market knowledge, tourism product design and communicational strategies.

Keywords:

destination personality, marketing, DMO, positioning, pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

Although it is still early to identify the full impact of the pandemic on tourist behavior, some authors (e.g., Kock *et al.*, 2020) estimate that it might be of seismic proportions. As competition in the tourism market increases and new destinations are positioned and repositioned, destination personality is seen as a viable metaphor for destination branding, crafting a unique identity for tourism places (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Gomez Aguilar *et al.* 2016). Positioning a destination around the feelings it generates, and its ability to offer visitors unique experiences and self-expressions can provide a strong competitive advantage (Dickinger & Lalicic, 2016).

Destination personality has been applied in various contexts e.g., FMCG, hotels, nations, and countries while respective measurement tools have been proposed. For example, D'Astous & Boujbel (2007)

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developed a scale to position countries in terms of human traits and identified six country personality dimensions. Leung and Law (2010) provided a review of the personality research in the tourism and hospitality context to conclude that prior studies can be grouped in seven dimensions, one of which was brand personality.

Although DMOs and NTOs use tourism promotion messages that emphasize distinct brand personality traits (De Moya & Jain, 2013), communicated messages are in most cases interpreted through the prism of tourists' perceptions and thus may lead to different responses to the intended brand message (Kim & Lehto, 2013). Hence, market knowledge and insights need to be comprehensively studied in order to capitalize market potential and create sustainable growth for tourism stakeholders. The purpose of this contribution is to present recent findings from the tourism marketing literature focusing on the pandemic and on destination personality, in order to extract valuable insights for tourism marketers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Identifying the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism demand and supply

It has been proposed that tourism behavior and responses varied during pandemic stages but still the pandemic could provide a transformational opportunity for every tourism stakeholder (Sigala, 2020). The impact of the pandemic has been studied in various aspects of tourist behavior by a number of scholars (e.g., Boto-García & Leoni, 2021; Itani & Hollebeek, 2021; Kim *et al.*, 2021; Sánchez-Pérez *et al.*, 2021; Mary & Pour, 2022). From a socio-psychological perspective, Kock *et al.* (2020) suggested that the pandemic has revived people's existential anxieties by reminding them of their vulnerability, thus activating deeply rooted evolutionary protection mechanisms. Miao *et al.* (2021) used terror management theory to predict post-covid tourism behavior and identify proximal and distal post-COVID travel behaviors while Zenker *et al.* (2021) went a step further to propose a Pandemic Anxiety Travel Scale (PATS).

Decision making in tourism has also been affected radically due to the pandemic and this is not only attributed to the imposed external restrictions (e.g., travel restrictions). According to Gupta *et al.* (2022) main factors relating to destination decision making, after the outburst of the pandemic, included health and hygiene, safety and security, accessibility and connectivity, information about destination, travel risk perception, and value for money. Ahmad *et al.* (2021) found that physical factors mainly influenced tourists' visit intention and that destination image significantly affected visit intention and mediated the relationship between the factors and visit intention. Nella and Tsaketa (2022) found that for Greek consumers the strongest post-pandemic tourist motives were connected to rejuvenation, tension relief & escapism from daily routine; short haul destinations were most preferred and given that cost was considered a significant travel restriction price discounts could encourage pre-booking. In China, Jin *et al.* (2022) confirmed the existence of a sizable and stable demographically heterogeneous and geographically diverse segment of consumers that was likely to be the market for a possible rebound in the post-pandemic era.

According to ETC (2022), tourists became more cautious due to the pandemic: they avoided booking holidays too far in advance, they started planning their trips in detail and followed the COVID-19 protocols when travelling. According to the same study, flexible cancellation policies and enhanced hygiene measures are here to stay as important decision-making criteria while travel insurance and visiting nearby destinations have become preferred choices. Though, another recent survey, conducted by Ipsos (2022), confirmed a gradual return to some pre-Covid travel habits and that COVID-19 as concern has been overcome by both inflation and personal / family reasons concerns. Within this context, tourism supply and DMO needed to adapt fast. For example, Pasquinelli *et al.* (2022), analyzed pre- and post-pandemic brand communication of four Italian destinations on social media to conclude highlighting the importance of adaptive and transformative brand responses to the pandemic crisis.



Destination personality

Murphy *et al.* (2007a, b) suggested that tourists can articulate different destination brand personalities for each region, though more research was necessary in order to adapt the concept of brand personality to destinations. Destination personality (DP) can be defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a destination (Ekinci and Hosany, 2006); the authors identified three dimensions of DP, namely sincerity, excitement, and conviviality. Other scholars also put emphasis on the measurement of the DP construct (e.g., Kovačić *et al.*, 2020). Kumar & Nayak (2014) conducted an initial extensive review of destination personality literature and defined its meaning and conceptualization. Although the field had not drawn increased research attention before 2013 (Xie & Lee, 2013; Nella, 2022), during the last decade researchers seemed to increasingly acknowledge its importance.

Destination personality is a complex construct which is difficult to measure. Its relationships with other marketing concepts have been studied in recent studies, such as destination branding (Apostolopoulou & Papadimitriou, 2015; Hultman *et al.*, 2017), destination image (Hosany *et al.*, 2006; Papadimitrou *et al.*, 2015; Souiden *et al.*, 2017), destination brand equity (Salehzadeh *et al.*, 2016) and brand attachment (Huang *et al.*, 2017), positioning (Hanna & Rowley, 2019; Kumar & Nayak, 2018), involvement (Chi *et al.*, 2018; Liu *et al.*, 2021), loyalty and behavioral intentions (Ekinci and Hosany, 2006; Baloglu *et al.*, 2014; Pool *et al.*, 2018; Yang *et al.*, 2020; Liu *et al.*, 2021). The relationship of destination personality with self-congruity (e.g., Yang *et al.*, 2022), self-identity or tourist-destination identification (Huaman-Ramirez *et al.*, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2022) is another critical issue in the relevant literature, especially if we consider that it may act as a partial mediator on the relationship between destination personality and tourist's behavioral intentions (Usakli and Baloglu, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

In order to fulfill the aim of this contribution, the basic principles and steps of the PRISMA protocol (Page *et al.*, 2022) were followed for reviewing destination personality literature. The PRISMA protocol has been recently applied by other tourism scholars (e.g., Takata & Hallmann, 2021; Papavasileiou *et al.*, 2022). Given that our research objective was to gain insights for destination competitiveness based on a systematic review of scientific papers focusing on destination (brand) personality in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on tourism behavior, the basic steps of the protocol were taken. Inclusion criteria for this review included strict focus on the destination personality concept and publication in high-impact scientific journals. Exclusion criteria included publication in books, reports, conference proceedings and other sources of scientific knowledge. Publications not written in English were also excluded from our literature review. Google Scholar was used as the primary database for the identification of relevant papers. The search terms used were “destination” and “personality.” Produced search results exceeded 130 contributions and covered the period 2006-2022. The lists of Q1 journals in subject areas “Tourism, Leisure and Hospitality Management” and “Marketing” of “Scimago Journal & Country Rank” were chosen as a filter for high-impact journals. Thus, 40 papers published in Scimago Q1-listed journals were finally included to form the basis for this analysis (Table 1); all of the selected articles were available in English and published in the period 2006-2022, thus confirming that destination personality is a scientific field formed quite recently. A content analysis of these 40 papers followed, with emphasis on identifying critical insights for destination competitiveness and destination branding through the lens of the pandemic.

RESULTS

In the current DP literature review, papers were published before the eleusis of the pandemic; thus, direct links between destination personality and the pandemic were not profound. The aim of the content analysis was to utilize findings and practical implications of the destination personality literature in the light of the significant changes imposed on the tourism market due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Withing this context, the conducted content analysis provided insights that can be grouped in the following three thematic pillars: *a) the critical issue of tourist-destination identification, b) the vital importance of on-site experience for destination personality and positive behavioral intentions and c) the need to consider cross-cultural differences.*



The critical issue of tourist-destination identification: Tourists tend to access the level of similarity between the personality of the product and the aspired personality that they want to project of themselves (Pereira *et al.*, 2015). Based on the premise that people seek similarity rather than complementarity, Bekk *et al.* (2016) supported that tourist–destination personality similarity (TDPS) can be a driver of perceived overall fit (POF) between destinations and tourists; POF increased tourists' satisfaction and actual recommendations of the destination. Chen & Phou (2013) supported the idea that destination image and destination personality are critical antecedents of the tourist–destination relationship. Hultman *et al.* (2015) also emphasized the critical role of destination personality for tourist-destination identification. In the same line, Kumar (2016) supported that destination personality and self-congruity positively influence the tourist-destination relationship, which further leads to destination loyalty. As significant psychological effects of the pandemic are becoming more profound, the issue of tourist-destination identification should be examined and handled from a post-pandemic perspective. For example, revenge travel patterns appearing in recent years may need augmented authentic experiences on behalf of the destinations in order to meet the underlying tourist needs.

The vital importance of on-site experience for destination personality and positive behavioral intentions: Wang *et al.* (2022) used neuroscience methods to confirm the vital role of on-site experience in destination personality. Built environment, socially responsible environment, and local people are important in projecting destination personality (Xie & Lee, 2013). Destination personality drives tourists' behavioral intentions, such as intention to revisit and positive word of mouth creation (Apostolopoulou & Papadimitriou, 2015; Guiry & Vequist 2015; Hultman *et al.*, 2015; Xu *et al.*, 2018). In the same line, Souiden *et al.* (2017) found that destination personality has a direct impact on attitude toward a destination and an indirect effect on behavioral intentions. The relationship between service quality, satisfaction and positive behavioral intentions has been well documented in the services marketing literature. Hence, in the post pandemic tourism market, it seems vital to ensure that provided tourist experiences depict the desired destination personality and are used as an important opportunity to build loyalty.

The need to consider cross-cultural differences: As tourism destinations are increasingly using brand-personification strategies to evoke favorable consumer reactions, tourists' cultural and sociodemographic differences should be taken into account at a larger extent (Matzler *et al.*, 2016; Pan *et al.*, 2017; Šagovnovic & Kovacic, 2020). Utility of personality traits for cross-cultural branding strategies has also been supported (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2017; Pan *et al.*, 2021). Within this context, communicational campaigns and media are combined in a way that constitutes destination personality agile to fit with diversified post-pandemic needs and considers cultural differences.



Table 1. Destination personality: list of articles published in Q1 Scimago-listed journals (2006-2022)

DESTINATION PERSONALITY: LIST OF ARTICLES PUBLISHED IN Q1 SCIMAGO-LISTED JOURNALS (2006-2022)			
	<i>Authors</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Journal</i>
1	Ekinci & Hosany	2006	<i>Journal of Travel Research</i>
2	Hosany, Ekinci & Uysal	2006	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>
3	Murphy, Benckendorff & Moscardo	2007	<i>Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing</i>
4	Murphy, Moscardo & Benckendorff	2007	<i>Journal of Travel Research</i>
5	d'Astous & Boujbel	2007	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>
6	Leung & Law	2010	<i>Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing</i>
7	Usakli & Baloglu	2011	<i>Tourism Management</i>
8	Chen & Phou	2013	<i>Tourism Management</i>
9	De Moya & Jain	2013	<i>Public Relations Review</i>
10	Kim & Lehto	2013	<i>Journal of Travel Research</i>
11	Xie & Lee	2013	<i>Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing</i>
12	Baloglu, Henthorne & Sahin	2014	<i>Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing</i>
13	Kumar & Nayak	2014	<i>Tourism Management Perspectives</i>
14	Apostolopoulou & Papadimitriou	2015	<i>Current Issues in Tourism</i>
15	Guiry & Vequist	2015	<i>Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research</i>
16	Hultman, Skarmeas, Oghazi & Beheshti	2015	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>
17	Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou & Kaplanidou	2015	<i>Journal of Travel Research</i>
18	Pereira, Correia & Schutz	2015	<i>Journal of Destination Marketing & Management</i>
19	Bekk Spörrle & Kruse	2016	<i>Journal of Travel Research</i>
20	Dickinger & Lalicic	2016	<i>Information Technology & Tourism</i>
21	Gomez Aguilar, Yaguee Guillen & Villasenor Roman	2016	<i>International Journal of Tourism Research</i>
22	Kumar	2016	<i>Tourism Management Perspectives</i>
23	Matzler, Strobl, Stokburger-Sauer, Bobovnick & Bauer	2016	<i>Tourism Management</i>
24	Salehzadeh, Pool & Soleimani	2016	<i>Tourism Review</i>
25	Huang, Zhang & Hu	2017	<i>Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing</i>
26	Hultman, Strandberg, Oghazi, & Mostaghel	2017	<i>Psychology & Marketing</i>
27	Kim & Stepchenkova	2017	<i>Journal of Destination Marketing & Management</i>
28	Pan, Zhang, Gursoy & Lu	2017	<i>Tourism Management</i>
29	Souiden, Ladhari & Chiadmi	2017	<i>Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management</i>
30	Chi, Pan & Del Chiappa	2018	<i>Journal of Destination Marketing & Management</i>
31	Kumar & Nayak	2018	<i>Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research</i>
32	Xu & Tavitiyaman	2018	<i>Tourism Analysis</i>
33	Sertkan, Neidhardt & Werthner	2019	<i>Information Technology & Tourism</i>
34	Vinyals-Mirabent, Kavaratzis & Fernández-Cavia	2019	<i>Tourism Management</i>
35	Zhang, Huang, Cao & Chen	2019	<i>Tourism Management</i>
36	Liu, Zhang & Cheng	2021	<i>Journal of Vacation Marketing</i>
37	Pan, Lu & Zhang	2021	<i>Tourism Management</i>
38	Pasquinelli, Trunfio, Bellini & Rossi	2022	<i>Cities</i>
39	Wang, Li, Li, Li & Lin	2022	<i>Annals of Tourism Research</i>
40	Yang, Isa & Ramayah	2022	<i>Journal of Destination Marketing & Management</i>

Source: Author's analysis, 2022



CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The pandemic will eventually fade, and travel barriers will be lifted, though tourist behavior will likely settle on a new equilibrium; therefore, understanding the adjusted tourist behavior will be a crucial success factor during and after the COVID-19 era (Kock *et al.*, 2020). Based on the three thematic pillars identified above, some useful conclusions can be drawn. As for *the critical issue of tourist-destination identification*, as tourist behavior has changed significantly due to the pandemic, DMOs should strive to maintain or build a strong identification between their target-markets and the destination; health and safety issues and changes in attitudes and other psychographic characteristics or differentiation of travel habits need to be considered carefully while branding a destination in the post-covid era. The vital importance of on-site experience for destination personality and positive behavioral intentions has also been highlighted by the destination personality literature. Service quality and tourist satisfaction at the destination remain as key success drivers and perhaps have a growing importance due to increased expectations and needs caused by the pandemic and the restrictions it caused on psychological and social aspects of our lives. DMOs should focus on major determinants of service quality and satisfaction as formed during and after the pandemic and design their offerings and services on this new basis of elevated standards. Social media provide new opportunities for DMOs to reach out to consumers and position a destination around the feelings it generates, and its ability to offer visitors unique experiences, relationships, meanings, and self-expressions is a strong competitive advantage (Dickinger & Lalicic, 2016). All of the above remarks need to be considered from a cross-cultural perspective leading to customized offerings and communication strategies. As Hultman *et al.* (2017) suggest, it is important to actively communicate the destination brand to consumers, since positive effects of strong personalities increase when successfully communicated. The use of the appropriate vocabulary in destination content is useful to better project the desired personality as varying information for tourism destinations promotes different personality traits (Vinyals-Mirabent *et al.*, 2019). Automated clustering or classification of existent or new products can facilitate not only the campaign but also the package building (Sertkan *et al.*, 2018). In the same context, intelligent data analysis tools, such as machine learning can be extremely valuable for DMOs (Zhang *et al.*, 2019).

Conducting marketing research on a more regular basis and ensuring strong market orientation should be the fundamental basis of any recovery attempt. The sector, in order to retain its competitiveness, should constantly and appropriately readjust its marketing planning, with a special focus on destination personality and its conveyed messages. Emphasis should be put on cultural differences and the concept of self-congruity while the importance of the on-site experience, service quality and tourist satisfaction cannot be neglected. Marketers should keep modifying and/or developing tourist experiences by utilizing User Generated Content knowledge or intelligent data analysis tools. Collaborative marketing practices are essential within this context in order to co-create a unique tourist experience. As Baloglu *et al.* (2014) suggest, it is also important for DMOs to customize their marketing communication for each segment based on what aspects of brand personality influence behavior and positive word-of-mouth. To conclude, primary and comparative research on the impact of the pandemic on brand personalities of various destinations could be added to this discussion.

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