



# Analyzing destination branding and image from online sources: A web content mining approach



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## ABSTRACT

Destination image, place brand, and branding continue to receive attention by researchers and industry. However, a thorough definition and differentiation of these terms and further investigation are still necessary. Digital information sources provide relevant image formation and branding agents and thus, potentially impact travelers' image and serve as platforms to communicate perceptions. With abundant online information on places available, the data offer insights into the brand identity communications and the image perceptions by travelers. This study presents an automated web content mining approach. A total set of 5719 documents inform the online destination representation in various online sources. Results demonstrate how to extract destination brand identity and image through web content mining.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last decades, place branding, place marketing and place/destination image receive attention by researchers and industry (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Gertner, 2011). Surprisingly, research remains inconclusive regarding the clear definition of destination brand, brand image, and branding as well as lacks theoretical conceptualization. Tasci and Kozak (2006, p. 299) note the “lack of clear definition of destination brand, the confusion between brand and image, the lack of conception of similarities and differences between branding from consumer products and tourist destinations.” Similarly, Gertner's meta-analysis (2011, p. 97) on place marketing and place branding concludes: “Out of the 212 articles analyzed, 122 were categorized as being about ‘place branding’ and 23 about ‘place image’. Several alluded to brand and image, almost as if they were similar or interchangeable concepts.” Gnoth (2002) contends, that a destination brand exhibits functional, experiential, and symbolic components.

Places are at the heart of tourism products. When planning a holiday, customers make multiple decisions involving the place, length of stay, travel party, travel mode (Fodness & Murray, 1999). As travel decisions are complex and risky, customers engage in extended information searches (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). Information sources include various stakeholders such as destination marketing organizations, hotels, sights, and transport. The internet is an important information source for travelers and influences decision making (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). Online materials provide additional information including

travelers' blogs that share their trip perceptions and news media reports on destinations. This content provides a repository of online sources communicating certain aspects of destinations and potentially influencing tourists.

The internet provides an abundance of information to learn about brand image representation and perception (Stepchenkova, Kirilenko, & Morrison, 2009). Prior studies tend to focus on one information source as repository for data analysis, but the internet offers different information sources. Some studies investigate online sources and destination image representation (Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Liang, Soojin, Alastair, & Xinran, 2009), but they do not use a text mining approach. Text mining allows simultaneous analyses of hundreds of blog entries. Recent research introduces advanced content analysis procedures to investigate a city's online representation (Liang et al., 2009). Most studies investigating destination online image do not take into consideration the diversity of available online sources or understand the internet as one homogenous communication source (Govers & Go, 2005; Stepchenkova et al., 2009). To address this shortcoming, the present study uses a web content mining approach to extract information from three digital image formation agents. This process collects marketing information available through the websites of destination marketing organizations (DMOs), user generated content from review pages and blogs, and editorial content of Anglo-American news media sites. This research contrasts findings identifying place branding efforts by evaluating projected place images and perceptions of travelers regarding the city break destination Vienna in Austria.

## 2. Theoretical framework and study context

Applying web content mining to extract destination images and perceptions from different online sources is a novel approach. Therefore,

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the study draws on established research streams from place/destination branding and destination image literatures as a reference framework for the analyses.

### 2.1. Place branding

Place marketing research informs place branding (Anholt, 1998), attracting researchers from different disciplines. A meta-analysis investigating up to 260 articles relating to the topic stresses the field's multi-disciplinary nature, ranging beyond business and management to public policy, urban planning and design to other social sciences (Gertner, 2011). The research covers diverse topics such as attracting foreign direct investment and industry partners through strong place brands (Mak, 2011) or the local peoples' impact on place brands (Freire, 2009).

Similarly, the level of analysis covers considerable diversity regarding unit or entities of places. Place marketing and branding literature includes studies of various entities such as regions, countries, districts, cities, or groups of countries. However, factors influencing a country image differ from city images, suggesting geography affects tourism policy (Caldwell & Freire, 2004).

Place branding's origin extends at least as far back as the promotion of settlement of the United States (Gertner, 2011). Developing a strong place brand and image through advertising also positively impacts economic wellbeing and investment in a country (Stockburger-Sauer, 2011). Positive place brands consequently create cultural value and even affect product sales for a specific country (Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2003). Research shows that a strong place brand evokes emotional attachment (Gonzalez & Bello, 2002) and serves as an antecedent for revisit intention and long-term relationship between traveler and place (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Fournier, 1998).

### 2.2. Destination brands and image

Branding also applies to the tourism industry. A destination brand helps “to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors” (Aaker, 1991, p. 7). Similar to products, destination branding activities include brand name, logo, or symbol creation that identify and differentiate a place. Effective branding enables travelers to associate the symbols with the destination. Ideally, these efforts lead to emotional connection reducing perceived risk and creating a favorable image (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005). Furthermore, branding impacts a destination's positioning (Murphy, Benckendorff, & Moscardo, 2007).

Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) argue that a destination brand tends to be a sustainable strategic element, whereas destination image is more tactical. Central to the branding process is building a strong, favorable image (Aaker, 1991), resulting in a unique identity (Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006; Park & Petric, 2006; Prebensen, 2007). Branding activities which communicate all aspects of a brand identity create brand image. Product and service brands differ due to their intangibility, inseparability and heterogeneity. Service brands must convey more than functional elements. Symbolic, experiential, and emotional brand aspects also are important (Ekinci, Sirakaya, & Baloglu, 2007). Gnoth (2007) argues that a destination brand contains cultural, social, natural, and economic values. To measure brand image, a destination needs to be managed as a brand and obtain a unique brand identity. Brand identity serves as the basis for comparison against other destinations. Specific aspects within services marketing and tourism create challenges for product branding endeavors. Destinations are political entities and serve multiple roles to various stakeholders (e.g., accommodation, sights, and transportation) and the variety of contact points are hard to control. Hosany et al. (2006) apply brand theories to tourism places and identify emotional components of destination image to explain destination personality. This approach follows Morgan and Pritchard (2000) who argue that successful branding gains access to customers' hearts and minds. This strategy leads to creating favorable images in

the customers' minds. Aaker (1996) stresses that customers' associations are what a brand means to them.

At the heart of the branding debate is the confusion with the image concept. Destination image is “the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination” (Crompton, 1979, p. 18). More recently, Mazanec (2009, p. 502) notes that “this construct clearly describes a form of evaluative response of the individual to some object or stimulus” containing affective, cognitive, and conative components. Such broad definition, considering all components, might “dilute[s] the image construct up to a degree where it covers every type of semantic content” (Mazanec, p. 503). Other researchers support this notion and attest to an affect-centered understanding of image particular importance when only “limited knowledge based on experience and reality” exists (Tasci & Gartner, 2007, p. 419). Arguably, a destination's mental picture is even more influential than the actual facts when choosing a destination (see LaPage & Cormier, 1977; Leemans, 1994).

Researchers try to identify the variables leading to image formation and acknowledge a void in research in this field (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). In a tourism context, the brand cannot control image formation, thus a destination image does not relate uniquely to the brand. Brand image becomes a gestalt image combining projected images and visitor interpretations. At best, the brand image distorts the destination marketer's design. Image formation comes from cues delivered by image formation agents or marketer inputs and individual inputs (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 2000).

### 2.3. Study setting

Comparing projected and perceived images offers one way to evaluate a brand's success. Destination marketing organizations (DMO) want to communicate unique and distinct destination images; however, travelers' influences include a myriad of sources such as news media, word-of-mouth, books, and movies. Strong destination brand images occur when a DMO's projected image is similar to stories reported by other information sources.

The internet's plethora of information projects different impressions and images of places. These rich, influential electronic resources include text, pictures, and multimedia components. Not surprisingly, websites and online media do not create consistent or true representations of destinations, “as in information age, place projections are increasingly controlled by a network economy” (Werthner & Klein, 1999, p.3). Different information sources follow different communication goals and provide diverging destination representations. This research identifies similarities, differences, and core themes depending on the individual image formation agent's communication goals. Organic, induced, and autonomous information sources serve as image formation agents and inform complex destination images.

Autonomous information sources encompass news media, movies, and user generated content (UGC) (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). These sources are outside of a destination's control and they influence general knowledge. Due to their high credibility and ability to reach the masses, autonomous information influences image formation more than induced sources such as marketing driven DMO information (Gartner & Shen, 1992).

The online world's various information sources serve as agents for image formation. One information source derives from material posted by travelers. Travel blogs and social travel guides enable users to publish and consume travel related communication such as reports or reviews of hotels, destinations, or other points of interest. These UGC driven portals, especially reviews, equate to word-of-mouth communication (Dickinger & Mazanec, 2008). Becoming established and autonomous, UGC complements traditional information sources and serves as a credible agent of image formation. Social media's increasing relevance means that travel and tourism marketers face a powerful information source and a rich data repository provided by travelers (Dickinger, 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In comparison, DMO websites are

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