

DESTINATION BRANDING: BRAND IMAGE OF BUDAPEST

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Abstract

Budapest, as many other destinations around the world, competes every day for attracting new visitors. In this effort, the majority of destinations struggle to create a consistent brand which allows them to differentiate themselves from competitors. Most of them spend huge amounts of money to create original and appealing marketing campaigns. However, during this task, there is often a lack of research on a key part of brand theory, the visitors' insights about the destination, namely destination image.

Budapest has not been the exception and it has been identified a gap in regard to researches about the city image. For this reason, this exploratory research intended to find out the image of Budapest among visitors of the Generation Y before and after the visit.

Overall, the findings reveal a positive image of the destination, since many negative stereotypes were broken during the visit. Budapest is perceived as a convenient destination, given its good value and accessibility, but also as a city of contrasts, very welcoming and open. Its main competitors are Prague and Vienna.

Keywords: destination branding, destination image, brand image of Budapest

Absztrakt:

Budapest, mint sok más célállomás a világon, minden nap versenyez az új látogatók vonzása érdekében. Ebben az erőfeszítésben a célállomások többsége küzd, hogy egy konzisztens márkát hozzon létre, amely lehetővé teszi számukra, hogy megkülönböztessék magukat a versenytársaktól. Legtöbbjük hatalmas pénzeket költ, hogy eredeti és vonzó marketingkampányokat hozzon létre. E feladat során azonban gyakran hiányzik a kutatás a márkaelmélet kulcsfontosságú elemeiről, a látogatók célról való tájékozódásáról, azaz a desztinációs imázsról.

Ez alól Budapest sem volt kivétel, és a városimázsra vonatkozó kutatásokkal kapcsolatban rés került azonosításra. Ezen okból kifolyólag a jelen feltáró kutatás célja Budapest imázsának megismerése az Y generáció látogatói között a látogatás előtt és után.

Összességében az eredmények pozitív képet mutatnak az érkezési helyről, mivel a látogatás során számos negatív sztereotípiát tört meg. Budapest kényelmes célpontnak tekinthető, jó értéke és elérhetősége miatt, de kontrasztok városaként is, nagyon barátságos és nyitott. Fő versenytársa Prága és Bécs.

Kulcsszavak: desztináció márkázás, desztinációs imázs, Budapest márkaimázsa

Introduction

During the last years Budapest has become an important tourism destination of Europe. The city receives annually millions of tourists who feel attracted by its diversified offer. However, within an open and increasing tourism market, Budapest competes every day with both, traditional and emerging destinations from all over the world.

In this framework, the image of a destination seems to be very relevant nowadays, especially when differences among some destinations are getting blurred. Actually, it has been proven that beliefs and prejudices about a destination become fundamental in helping the audience to make their decisions (ANHOLT 2009) not only in the pre-consumption stage when choosing the destination, but also in the post-consumption stage when it comes to satisfaction and loyalty (MAHASUWEERACHAI – QU 2011).

In this sense, it is necessary to determine the image of Budapest as a tourist destination. In fact, previous studies on the topic have been carried out. For instance, PUCZKÓ – RÁTZ – SMITH (2007) developed a research about Perception, Positioning and Promotion of Budapest based on a compilation of independent studies and statistics from different organizations. Later, KAVARATZIS (2008) published a study about the city marketing and city branding of Budapest focusing on the supply side especially Destination Management Organizations, DMOs.

The current research aims to identify the brand image of Budapest. In other words, to understand how international visitors from Generation Y perceive Budapest before and after the visit, in order to lead the way on how Budapest should be brand. This tourist segment has been chosen taking into consideration these facts: i. it is one of the most important visitors' segments with the biggest growth (HUNGARIAN CENTRAL STATISTICAL OFFICE n.d.) ii. this generation by 2020 will become the consumers, managers and leaders of tourism worldwide (MOSCARDO et al. 2010).

This exploratory research applied two qualitative techniques, the focus group and the collage. Five focus groups were held. Participants were interviewed during their stay in Budapest through a semi-structured questionnaire asking them about the pre-post visit image of Budapest, the cognitive/affective associations with the destination as well as the main competitors and competitive advantage of Budapest.

The total sample was made of 31 participants, aged from 20 to 40 years, of which 52% were male and 48% female. Among the participants there were two very well differentiated groups:

- Young students: visiting Budapest for few days or living in Budapest for less than 6 months (exchange students) and staying at Airbnb accommodations, hostels, flats and university dormitories.
- Adult professionals: visiting Budapest for few days, staying at hotels.

1. Destination Branding

An interesting definition of destination branding is given by the European Travel Commission and the World Tourism Organization, ETC-UNWTO (2009) by taking into account both players in the tourism market, supply (destination) and demand (visitor).

– *From the visitor side:* it is the sum of perceptions that someone has about a place (whether based on experience, hearsay or prejudice), which influence his/her attitudes towards that destination at an emotional level. It represents the mix of the core characteristics of the place that make it distinctive, memorable and different from all other places and competitors.

– *From the destination side:* it is the way in which a destination nurtures, develops and presents its core characteristics to its main audiences that enables it to establish, reinforce, or even change its reputation. This is otherwise known as the branding process.

This approach makes a distinction between two parts comprising destination branding. On the one hand, destination image that relates to what is perceived by the receiver; on the other hand, destination identity that relates to what is created or communicated by the sender (KAPFERER 1997 cited in QU – KIM – IM 2011). In this case, the receiver is the visitor, while the sender comprises: DMOs, marketers, service providers, etc.

As the ETC–UNWTO (2009) explains, the primary purpose of all branding is competitive differentiation. Therefore, “the core of destination branding is to build a positive destination image that identifies and differentiates the destination by selecting a consistent brand element mix” (CAI 2002 cited in QU – KIM – IM 2011: 465). In other words, destination branding is “the way to communicate a destination’s unique identity by differentiating a destination from its competitors” (MORRISON – ANDERSON 2002 cited in QU – KIM – IM 2011: 466). Such definitions demonstrate the importance of these two actions: building a *positive destination image* and communicating the destinations’ *unique identity*, for successfully branding a destination, which eventually brings about differentiation from competitors.

2. Destination image

HUNT (1975) was the pioneer in referring to the phenomenon of image and its relation with tourism destinations. His study suggested the influence of images and perceptions upon tourism development. In fact, the author recognized the significance of the image upon the success of a certain region. He also was one of the first in associating the term image with perceptions.

Since then, a large number of authors have studied destination image, mainly through the compilation and interpretation of previous empirical researches regarding conceptualizations, components and methodologies used for its measurement. Indeed, PIKE (2002) accounted 142 papers published from 1973 to 2000 about destination image. As a consequence, the definition has slightly evolved during this time. Overall, destination image is yet understood as the set of perceptions, feelings or ideas about a destination in the mind of the visitor (ECHTNER – RITCHIE 1991; FERREIRA LOPES 2011; GALLARZA – SAURA – GARCÍA 2002). However, destination image is further more complex in terms of structure and nature.

In this context, GALLARZA–SAURA–GARCÍA (2002) have identified four characteristics of destination image:

- Complexity: there are many concepts and interpretations about destination image, therefore it does not have a unique meaning.
- Multiplicity: in elements and processes as destination image is the outcome of multiple components interrelated in a number of stages.

- Relativism: is simultaneously subjective as destination image is the result of the interiorization of some perceptions which change from person to person.
- Dynamism: is not static. Destination image is influenced by time and space.

3. Role and importance of destination image

Nowadays, image has become “one of the main assets of a tourist destination” (FERREIRA LOPES 2011: 311). There are many reasons for making this consideration, as explained below:

- a) Destination image influences the tourism behaviour (HUNT 1975). It has been proven that destination image exerts a great influence on the decision making process by tourists when choosing a destination (ANHOLT 2009; FERREIRA LOPES 2011).
- b) Destination image is seen as a competitive advantage. Given the fact that travellers today are overwhelmed by the huge variety of available destinations, within crowded tourism markets, places are becoming increasingly substitutable and difficult to differentiate (PIKE 2005). However, as stated by LIM – O’CASS (2001): “a destination with a strong image is more easily differentiated from its competitors” (cited in FERREIRA LOPES 2011: 311).
- c) Destination image is profitable from an economic point of view. ANHOLT (2009) explains that a destination with a powerful and positive image will do less work and will spend less money on its promotion, because the marketplace already believes what it is telling them. On the contrary, a tourist destination with a reputation for being poor, uncultured, backward, dangerous or corrupt will find that everything they or their citizens try to achieve is harder.
- d) Destination image influences the intentions to revisit and recommend the destination to others. It was found that a visitor with a positive overall image is more likely to revisit the destination and recommend to others (QU – KIM – IM 2011).
- e) Destination image results in loyalty. It has been proven that “destination image has positive impacts on perceived value, satisfaction, and loyalty [...] this implies that the more favourable the image of a destination, the more likely tourists will become loyal to the destination” (MAHASUWEERACHAI – QU 2011: 3). Moreover, as widely known, retaining a customer is cheaper than attracting new customers.
- f) Destination image affects destination residents and the way residents identify, associate with and experience the place (KAVARATZIS 2004).

Certainly, as stated by TASNÁDI (2002): “the success of the destination is particularly determined by its image” (cited in SZIVA 2010: 21). Consequently, the image of a destination has become a crucial factor for either the success or failure of tourism management (FERREIRA LOPES 2011). In fact, considering the multiple benefits that a positive image brings for destinations, it is worth determining the image of a destination as the starting point for any further branding and along with that, destination development.

4. Destination image formation

As BROKAW (1990) said: “before image can be used to influence behavior, it is important to understand what influences image” (cited in BALOGLU – MCCLEARY 1999: 869). Certainly, it is crucial to understand how destination image is built. GALLARZA – SAURA – GARCÍA (2002) stated that destination image comprises a sequence of stages where several elements and factors influence and interrelate. In other words, destination image is built as a result of a process (formation process), comprising many elements (components) which are under different influences (influencing factors /forces).

Regarding the components of destination image or so-called dimensions, many studies have been published (Table 1).

Table 1: Components /Dimensions of Destination Image.

Category	Classification	Authors (year)
Dimensions	- Functional vs. Psychological characteristics - Holistic impressions vs. Individual attributes - Common traits vs. Unique features	ECHTNER - RITCHIE (1991)
Components	- Cognitive - Affective - Conative	GARTNER (1994)
Assessments	- Cognitive - Affective	BALOGLU-MCCLEARY (1999)
Components or Dimensions	- Perceptual /Cognitive - Affective	FERREIRA LOPES (2011)
Components or Brand associations	- Cognitive - Affective - Unique	QU-KIM-IM (2011)

Elaborated by the author.

From an overall interpretation, it can be distinguished three main dimensions or components of brand image:

- Cognitive, rational or functional: comes from the evaluation or value given to the attributes and attractions of the destination. They are observable and measurable (ECHTNER – RITCHIE 1991; FERREIRA LOPES 2011).

- Affective, emotional or psychological: referring to the feelings, emotions toward the destination. They are the abstract and intangible characteristics of the destination (ECHTNER – RITCHIE 1991; FERREIRA LOPES 2011).
- Unique: what makes a destination one-off (QU - KIM - IM 2011). They can be either features or feelings (ECHTNER – RITCHIE 1991). This dimension becomes relevant in the competitive advantage analysis of the destination.

According to GARTNER (1994), the image of a destination is first created during the cognitive stage and then evaluated during the affective stage.

In regards to the influencing factors/forces, many authors have made reference to them (BALOGLU – BRINBERG 1997; GARTNER 1993; GOVERS – GO – KUMAR 2007; MOUTINHO 1987; MURPHY – MOSCARDO – BENCKENDORFF 2007; STABLER 1988; WALMSLEY – YOUNG 1998) compiled by FERREIRA LOPES (2011). Through an analysis of the list, such factors/forces have been categorized as internal and external (Table 2). External comprising the stimulus that tourist receives from the environment, whereas internal referring to the tourist insights.

Table 2: Factors/forces influencing destination image.

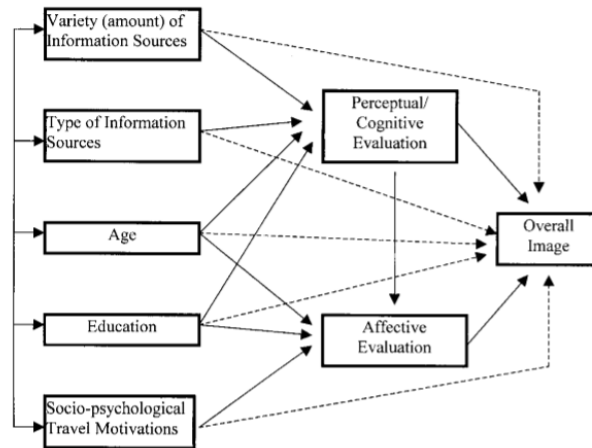
Internal factors	External factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Demographic factors: social and economic characteristics such as: country of origin, level of education - Psychological factors: personal traits, motivations, value system, perceptions, experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Media: T.V., magazines, books, movies - Marketing Communications - Word-of-Mouth, WOM

Elaborated by the author, adapted from FERREIRA LOPES 2011: 308.

Certainly, it is necessary to acknowledge the existence of a wide variety of influencing factors. In this sense, KISLALI – KAVARATZIS – SAREN (2016) have identified new and up-to-date forces influencing destination image, such as technology (used by the destination’s stakeholders, influencing what will be commented upon and perceived by potential visitors) or user generated content (determining the content of communication not only between the DMO and the consumers but also between consumers themselves).

Given the complexity of destination image formation, many models have been proposed by a number of authors. However, BALOGLU – MCCLEARY (1999) introduced an interesting diagram which depicts the relation among dimensions and forces, and their impact on the image formation (Figure 1).

Figure 1: PATH model of the determinants of the destination image



Source: BALOGLU – MCCLEARY 1999: 871.

As shown in Figure 1, the global image of a destination would be the result of a combination of both, cognitive and affective assessments of the visitor, influenced by factors externally and internally originated such as: information sources, characteristics of the visitor, etc.

4.1 Stages of destination image formation

ECHTNER – RITCHIE (1991) recognized that individuals may have an image of a destination even if they have never visited it or even been exposed to commercial messages. Any person can build – in his mind – an image of any destination without ever having been there (FERREIRA LOPES 2011). However, “there are changes in destination image before and after visitation” (ECHTNER – RITCHIE 1991: 39). In fact, “a pleasant holiday experience self-evidently has the power to change the ‘brand image’ of that country, quickly and possibly forever, in the mind of the holidaymaker. People often abandon their preconceptions about countries once they visit them” (ANHOLT 2009: 12). Therefore, the image a tourist has about a destination before the visit may result positively or negatively affected after the visit.

In this context, FERREIRA LOPES (2011) proposed the division of destination image into two stages: the primary image (developed after visiting the tourist destination) and the secondary image (created before visiting the tourist destination).

However, other authors have pointed out that destination image can also be created at another stage, which is during the visit.

In fact, DI MARINO (2008) studied the change in perceptions about the destination at three stages; before, during and after the visit:

- Perception *a priori*: mental construction an individual makes of a place without having a physical connection with the place. When tourists have already visited a place, before they have physically been there.

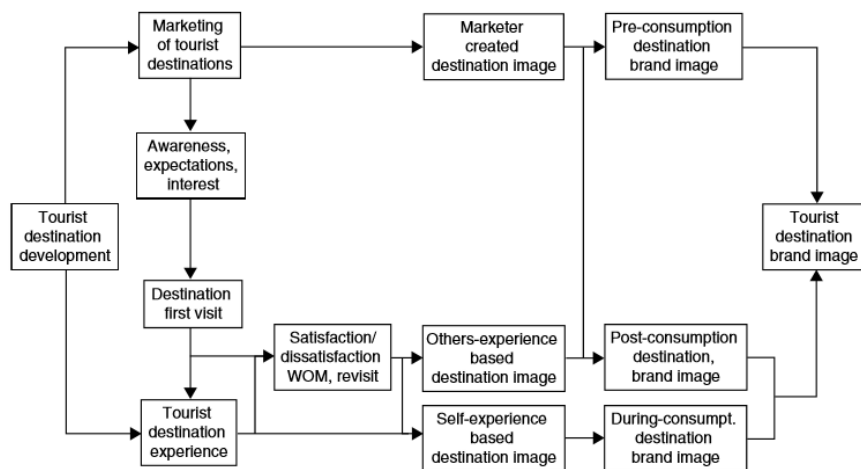
- Perception *in situ*: key moment in the tourists’ experience that contrasts what they have imagined. Tourists never arrive with a null perception: they have a previous image of the place that can be confirmed or not.
- Perception *a posteriori*: indicates that tourists’ experience does not end with the trip, but they consume some elements in their daily life. For instance, the role that these photographs have in order to capture a moment of the trip or specific elements of the destination.

Thereby some authors suggest the strategic use of persuasive messages about the destination at the first stage and the use messages recalling past experiences during last stage (FERREIRA LOPES 2011).

A similar approach was given by MANHAS –MANRAI – MANRAI (2016). As described in the model (Figure 2), destination image is the output of every stage of consumption:

- Pre-travel or pre consumption stage: the brand image results from the marketing communications and promotion of the destination as well as the positive or negative feedback (word-of-mouth) from other visitors.
- During travel or during consumption stage: the brand image results from experiences either influenced by the destination’s characteristics (first visit) or modified by cumulative experiences (repeat visit).
- Post travel or post consumption stage: the brand image results from the satisfaction/ dissatisfaction, positive/negative word-of-mouth.

Figure 2: Conceptual model of Tourism Destination Development



Source: MANHAS – MANRAI – MANRAI 2016: 27.

Based on the model (Figure 2) it is necessary to highlight the clear interaction among stakeholders and how their actions at, on, or toward the tourist destination have direct impact on the destination image. In other words, every strategy undertaken by marketers and DMOs, every experience delivered by service providers and consequently lived by the visitors, altogether or separately; create an image of the destination.

5. Measuring of Destination Image:

Due to the complex nature of tourism products, special attention should be drawn to the methodologies used to measure destination image when it comes to guarantee both, reliability and validity (ECHTNER – RITCHIE 1991).

A qualitative research aims to get elicit answers from deeper motivational questions. In this sense, it has been claimed that “qualitative research is the most effective way to identify consumer perceptions of the destination” (ETC – UNWTO 2009: 19). Actually, two of the most effective and often used techniques for undertaking consumer perception researches are: focus groups and in-depth individual interviews.

In fact, a qualitative analysis enables the understanding of people’s perceptions of a destination; people’s deep motivation for traveling; people’s feelings and attitudes towards the destination. In contrast, a quantitative research is limited to the measurement of visitors’ likes and dislikes.

Despite the fact that destination image has been referred and studied by authors more than 40 years ago, theories about the measurement of a destination image are relatively new. Indeed, ECHTNER – RITCHIE (1991, 1993) were the pioneers on this topic. In 1991 they proposed a three dimensional model by the combination of both methodologies, structured (scale items) and unstructured (open-ended questions); in order to measure attribute-based images, holistic impressions, as well as functional, psychological, unique and common characteristics of a destination. Later, in 1993, by using the focus group technique, these authors finally created a conceptual framework to measure destination image.

Since then, many authors have attempted to identify and measure destinations’ brand images by means of varied exploratory researches. For research purposes there have been identified some previous studies that have certain similarity to the current research in terms of objectives and methodologies (Table 3).

Table 3: Researches on destination image using qualitative techniques.

Title	Authors	Year	Objective	Methodology
The image of Europe in North America	European Travel Commission (ETC)	2004	Explore perceptions and images of Europe as a tourist destination in the US and Canada and to ascertain how best to position Europe in these two important source markets.	Consisted of a combination of in-depth interviews conducted to tour operators from US and Canada and nine focus groups with international pleasure travellers from the US and Canada.
The images of Germany as a holiday destination held by British visitors, and those who have not yet visited that country	Achterkamp, I. Robinson, T. Moital, M.	2010	Ascertain whether there are differences in perceptions between actual and potential tourists. Make recommendations for tourism marketers to portray meaningful images in the UK market.	The study employed semi-structured focus group interviews as the data collection method
Australia's Destination Image among mainland Chinese Travelers: an exploratory study	Huang, S. Gross, M. J.	2010	Explore Australia's destination image among mainland Chinese travellers by employing a multifaceted image assessment framework	Data were collected in Beijing using focus groups comprising both past visitors and non-visitors to Australia. It explores participants' evaluation of Australia as a tourist destination in terms of cognitive, affective and multi-sensory image components.
Understanding the identity of Ibiza, Spain	Berrozpe, A. Campo, S. Yagüe, M. J.	2017	Define what is the identity and dimensions that it is made up	Focus groups considering tourists who had visited Ibiza in the past

Elaborated by the author.

As Table 3. shows, these researches included questionnaires/discussions designed specifically to find out the perceptions about a destination, motivations for the visit and experiences on the destination. They also had similar objectives: defining a destination image and its dimensions, determining salient attributes and differences in perceptions. They also included some dynamic activities such as the elaboration of cards or collages with real images and photographs of the destination, in order to identify the ones which best evoke the ideas about destination.

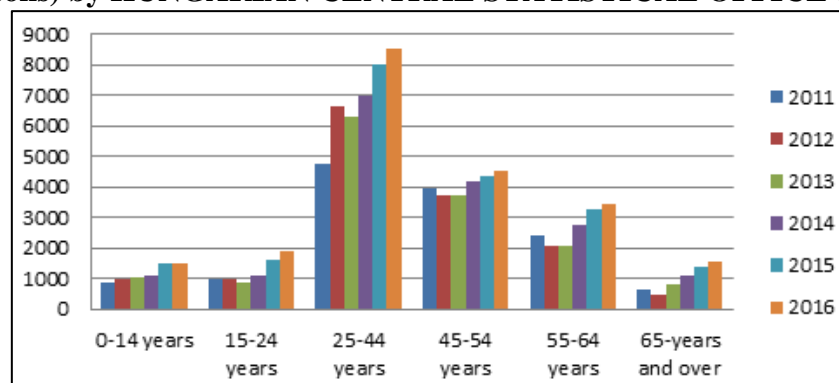
In this context, at being the destination image the result of inner perceptions of visitors about the place; and with base on previous researches, the use and utility of qualitative methodologies for measuring destination image is unquestionable.

Methodology

The research aimed to understand how international visitors of the Generation Y perceive Budapest before and after the experience.

On the one hand, according to MOSCARDO et. al. (2010) Generation Y comprises people born between 1982-2002 who are now reaching adulthood and who by 2020 will become the leaders, managers and consumers of tourism experiences. On the other hand, according to the statistics provided by the HUNGARIAN CENTRAL STATISTICAL OFFICE (n.d.) for inbound tourism in Hungary, visitors aged between 25-44 years (mostly Millennials⁶) is the most important group with the fastest growth (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Number of inbound trips to Hungary by age groups for tourists purposes (thousand persons) by HUNGARIAN CENTRAL STATISTICAL OFFICE (n.d.).



Elaborated by the author.

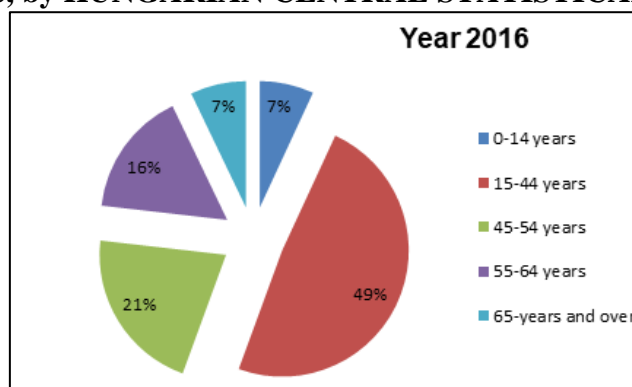
Therefore, the current research focused on this specific visitors segment in order to found out their insights, impressions, feelings and thoughts about Budapest as a tourism destination as well as the strongest competitive features and unique characteristics of the destination.

⁶ Individuals who belong to Generation Y.

This qualitative research used two different techniques to collect data: focus groups⁷ and collage⁸. The results were obtained through data analysis by the identification of clear patterns regarding frequency, context, and consistency of both, words and ideas (SILVERMAN 2016).

Despite the fact that the age-range of Generation Y in 2017 is 15-35 years, the target segment of the current research comprised visitors aged from 15-44 years given the special segmentation of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office which shared Millennials into two age groups (15-24 years) and (25-44 years). Actually, if both age segments are grouped, Generation Y becomes even bigger (Figure 4), representing almost the 50% of the total amount of international tourists visiting Hungary.

Figure 4: Percentage of inbound trips to Hungary by age groups for tourist purposes (thousand persons) in 2016, by HUNGARIAN CENTRAL STATISTICAL OFFICE (n.d.).



Elaborated by the author.

Eventually, there were held five focus groups seized from 5 to 8 participants. Tourists were reached during their stay at Budapest. The focus groups took place between March and April of 2017 at public and private places such as: Great Market hall (1 focus group), Szimpla ruin pub (2 focus groups), and flats (2 focus groups, including one group of exchange students). Participants were selected based on two criteria, age and accommodation type; except the group of exchange students who met two extra requirements, duration of stay and occupation. The general aim was to develop the focus groups in places where tourists may feel relaxed, without interrupting their vacations.

The final sample comprised 31 participants, 28 of them were visiting Budapest for a first time whereas 3 of them were visiting the city for a second time. In regards to demographics, it is important to highlight the quasi parity among male (52%) and female (48%) participants. The sample also was very varied regarding nationalities, having participants from different continents namely Europe (17), South America (5), North America (3), Asia (4) and Oceania (2). Participants were aged from 20 to 40 years, 61 % of them was between 15-24 years old while 39% was between 25-44 years old. From the sample, 81% of the interviewed were tourists visiting the city for few days – less than a week – The remaining 19% of the interviewed were exchange students, living in Budapest for more than 3 months and less than 6 months.

The total sample consisted of two very well differentiated subgroups, with similar characteristics among the members, having similar perceptions toward the city.

⁷ Informal group discussion, on a selected topic, among persons who do not know one another but have a common experience (CAREY – ASBURY 2016).

⁸ Dynamic part of focus group based on visual methods that stimulate thoughts by the display of images in a collage creation (FERNÁNDEZ - SANTOS - BLANCO 2010).

- Young students: visiting Budapest or living in Budapest (exchange students). They stayed at Airbnb accommodation, hostel, flats and university dormitories.
- Adult professionals: visiting Budapest for few days, staying in hotels.

The interview was based in a semi-structured questionnaire, with a combination of both multiple choice and open-ended questions, covering the following topics:

- i. Before the visit
 - Motivation
 - Expectation
- ii. After the visit
 - Cognitive features
 - Emotional features
 - Unique features
 - Perceptions
 - Competitors
 - Brand essence

For the collage activity participants of the first focus group received a variety of magazines not necessarily linked to the city. They were free to choose photographs, and write or paste words or phrases on a blank sheet, which according to their view represented the image of the city. It is important to mention that due to the number of participants (8 people), the group was divided in two subgroups to develop this activity.

The rest of focus groups received a large number of pictures and descriptive words which had been pre-selected by the researcher. Participants were asked to freely pick those that portray their perceptions about Budapest and paste them on a blank sheet, with the sole condition of having a previous consensus among the group.

The time for answering these questions and participating in the collage activity was calculated in one hour approximately.

Results

Cognitive or rational image:

Millennials see Budapest not only as a very convenient destination in terms of costs and accessibility but also very appealing because of its rich history and scenic beauty.

The good value allows to both groups, young students and adult professionals, to feel relaxed and enjoy the visit. However, when it comes to convenience, Youngers are focused on exploring and trying things/services that are not able to afford at home, while for adults this is the opportunity to get high quality things/services for affordable prices.

Participants appreciate the privileged location of Hungary in the centre of Europe, as well as the low cost flights arriving to Budapest. These two factors make this destination very close and accessible for them. Moreover, these features enable to visitors to travel from Budapest to many destinations, which is specially valued by exchange students living in this city.

But, Budapest is not only considered accessible from other countries. There is a remarkable accessibility within the city. In fact, the short distances and closeness among the main attractions make them reachable by walk in a short period of time.

Affective or emotional image:

Participants were also able to describe subjective attributes that they found suitable for Budapest.

Contrary to purely touristy cities such as Prague, Budapest is considered authentic, a real city, where people live, do their normal daily activities and coexist harmoniously with tourism. Budapest is also considered as an inclusive destination. It is seen as a very open city where everyone easily fits in, disregarding the condition or status.

Given the particular ambience and beautiful landscape of the city, Youngers describe this as an inspiring destination, in the sense it evokes a feeling of mindfulness, happiness and motivation to try new things

Budapest is described by both subgroups as a place of contrast. The city is perceived as *alive* but *quiet*, *young* but *old*, *modern* but *historical*, *active* but *calm*, with something of *Western* and something of *Eastern Europe*. Nevertheless, participants argue that these contrasting features seem to be living in harmony and balance.

Unique image:

Participants point out that the uniqueness of Budapest relies on the city's composition. They not only mention the city's structure, at being made of different cities or parts -Buda, Pest and Óbuda-. They also described Budapest as a city with a good combination of different elements such as nature, architecture, history and nightlife.

Brand essence:

From the analysis of the collages, it can be seen that the city is considered historical since the word *history* was present in the collages of every focus group.

Another of the most salient features of Budapest is the city's landscape. It is mainly represented by the Danube river and the bridges over as well as the most prominent buildings such as the Parliament and Buda Castle, including the words: *panorama* and *view*.

Good value and affordability were also represented in the collages through words such as *cheap* and *easy*, respectively.

This finding confirms that the most important attributes of the city (post-visit) are history, scenic beauty, good value and affordability.

Participants also represented their feelings about Budapest. Most of them are associated to social life which was symbolized by images of people partying, hanging out and words/phrases such as *chilling, welcoming, share happiness, more friends*. Another salient characteristic was related with the positive emotions that visitors experienced or perceived, represented by words such as: *peace, enjoy, alive, romantic*. Other perceptions of the city such as diversity were expressed through words such as *colourful*.

Some concurrences were detected at describing Budapest personality. Some participants explain that because of the young spirit of the city -with parties and active nightlife- on the one hand, and the old and historical buildings on the other hand, Budapest could be associated to an elderly person with a young heart or even with “*someone old who tries to stay young...*”.

Motivations:

Youngers chose Budapest as a tourist destination mainly motivated by the culture. However, for them is still very motivating the fact of finding cheap flights to and from the destination. Other aspect which is often mentioned as an important motivation for his group is nightlife, especially for Europeans from western countries; whereas for people from other regions of the world this aspect is not very well known.

In the case of exchange students, they chose Budapest as a destination motivated also for other factors such as the prestige and well ranked universities, as well as the good living conditions for affordable prices.

For professional adults history is the main motivation for visiting Budapest, followed by good value and accessibility.

Pre visit image: Perception “a priori”

Perceptions before traveling to Budapest were very diverse. However, there were identified the following “stereotypes”⁹ which affected the previous image of the city, mainly because Hungary is considered by the interviewed as an Eastern European country:

- Some participants acknowledged to have associated Budapest and Hungary with poverty, dirty and underdevelopment. They didn’t expect a modern city.
- Some participants expected to find reserved and unfriendly people.
- Some participants were warned about the security and expected an unsafe place.
- Participants from North America, Asia and Oceania in general considered Eastern Europe, as an unknown/exotic place.

Post visit image: Perception “a posteriori”

It was found that perceptions about the destination changed significantly after the experience. The total of participants admitted to have changed their perceptions about Budapest positively after visiting the city. In fact, good experiences modified the pre-conceived image of Budapest to the extent of breaking stereotypes:

⁹ “Publicly held common mental picture of that destination” (ECHTNER – RITCHIE 1991: 42).

- Participants described to have found a clean city with good living conditions.
- Participants got surprised after meeting happy, friendly people.
- Participants during their stay did not face problems of insecurity and perceived Budapest as a safe city.
- Participants did not find the city as different as they expected.

As a result of this positive post-visit image of the city, hundred per cent of participants expressed their willingness to recommend the destination. Moreover, they considered to Budapest as a city for all tastes, disregarding age, interest or condition; from Erasmus students to their parents.

Competitors:

Prague and Vienna are the main competitors of Budapest, not only because of the location -being really close to each other- but also because of the similarities in terms of landscape - Danube river-, buildings, streets, history, atmosphere and affordable prices.

Conclusions

The pre-visit cognitive image of Budapest is conditioned to its location (Hungary as part of the Eastern Europe region). That is the main reason to be perceived as accessible and affordable. However, its location also triggers some region stereotypes in terms of development, local's behaviour, security and level of familiarity.

On the other hand, the pre-visit image is highly influenced by the word-of-mouth. Regarding this last point, Budapest has gained fame among young people for its nightlife and good ambience. Given the long history of Hungary, the city is perceived as historically and culturally rich. There is a lack of affective image at the pre-visit stage. However, this is created and enhanced during the visit.

The post-visit cognitive image is different to the pre-visit cognitive image. The stereotypes disappear when visitors face a different reality on the destination. In addition, the scenic beauty along the river and the affordable prices surprise them in a positive way.

Regarding the affective image, Budapest after the visit is perceived as an inclusive, inspiring and authentic place. The post-visit image was markedly more emotional. Indeed, participants expressed some interesting insights about the “convenience” and how this functional attribute impacts their overall experience in an emotional way. In the case of young students they found “convenience” as a very stimulating fact to explore the city. In the case of professional adults this feature allowed them to get quality services/products. In both cases the final outcome was feeling comfortable, relaxed and happy. In other words, “convenience” is a very important factor to enhance the experience.

The main competitor of Budapest is Prague because of some similarities and closeness. However, participants who had visited both destinations expressed their preference for Budapest in terms of weather, ambience, authenticity and people, which may become its competitive advantage.

Recommendations

Certainly, the study of the brand image of Budapest serves as the basement for the planning and development of suitable and effective destination brand strategies.

Budapest is doing well in generating a positive image on the visitors who will consequently replicate it (word-of mouth). However, this positive image should be built before the visit in order to attract the maximum of desired visitors. In this context, DMOs should focus on developing promotional campaigns aimed to breakdown negative stereotypes about Hungary and about Eastern European countries. In addition, it is necessary to change the image of Budapest as a cheap party destination. Instead, Budapest could be promoted as a destination of opportunities for Generation Y -given the convenience and diversity of attractions- and emphasizing the main and distinctive emotional characteristics of Budapest, seen as an inclusive, welcoming and open city. In short, as one participant mentioned: “a city of bridges”.

Limitations

Given the nature of the qualitative research, some bias may have been present during the focus group sessions due to the participant’s mood or level of engagement in the activity, moderator influence and ability to conduct the discussion, as well as posterior research analysis and interpretations of the data.

Additionally, the fact of having reached the participants during their visit to the destination may have affected the impartiality of their answers at trying to be polite and expressing positive opinions.

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Appendix

Focus group 1



Focus group 2



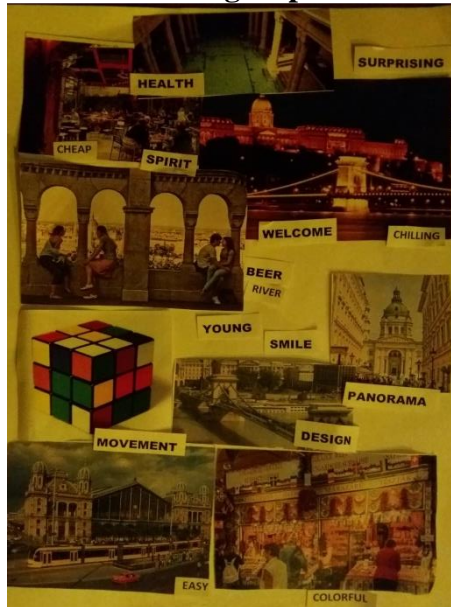
Focus group 3



Focus group 4



Focus group 5



Participant's Demographic information

	Participant Code	Nationality	ccomodation	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Occupation
Focus group 1	F1P1	Chilean	Airbnb	Male	26	Single	Student
	F1P2	French		Female	21	Single	Student
	F1P3	Italian		Male	21	Single	Student
	F1P4	French		Female	21	Single	Student
	F1P5	New Zealand		Female	22	Single	Student
	F1P6	New Zealand		Male	28	Single	Student
	F1P7	Swiss		Female	23	Single	Student
	F1P8	Chilean		Male	21	Single	Student
Focus group 2	F2P1	Russian	Flat & University Dormitories	Male	22	Single	Student /mobile app developer
	F2P2	British (North Irland)		Female	21	Single	Student
	F2P3	British (North Irland)		Female	21	Single	Student
	F2P4	South Korean		Male	25	Single	Student
	F2P5	British		Male	21	Single	Student
	F2P6	Republic of China (Taiwan)		Male	22	Single	Student
Focus group 3	F3P1	Russian	Hostel	Female	21	Single	Student
	F3P2	French		Male	24	Single	Student
	F3P3	Peruvian		Male	20	Single	Student
	F3P4	Brazilian		Male	21	Single	Student
	F3P5	Norwegian		Female	21	Single	Student
	F3P6	Belgian		Female	22	Single	Student
	F3P7	Belgian		Female	21	Single	Student
Focus group 4	F4P1	USA	Hotel	Female	32	Single	Human Resources
	F4P2	USA		Male	37	Single	Social Work
	F4P3	USA		Female	38	In a relationship	Scientific Research
	F4P4	Greek		Female	25	In a relationship	Pharmacist
	F4P5	Greek		Male	24	In a relationship	Musician
Focus group 5	F5P1	Turkish	Hotel	Female	38	Married	Banker
	F5P2	Venezuelan		Female	28	In a relationship	Technical Designer
	F5P3	British		Male	29	In a relationship	English Language Teacher
	F5P4	Turkish		Male	40	Married	Division Manager Pharmaceutical
	F5P5	Turkish		Male	40	Married	Sales