

BRANDING REGIONAL DESTINATIONS: AN INTEGRATED STAKEHOLDERS PERSPECTIVE

Elisa Piva

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DOCTORAL THESIS

BRANDING REGIONAL DESTINATIONS:
AN INTEGRATED STAKEHOLDERS PERSPECTIVE

Elisa Piva

2019



DOCTORAL THESIS
**BRANDING REGIONAL DESTINATIONS:
An Integrated Stakeholders Perspective**

Compendium of publications

Elisa Piva

2019

DOCTORAL PROGRAM IN TOURISM

Supervised by:

Dr. Lluís Prats Planagumà

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elisa Piva".

Doctoral thesis submitted to obtain the title of doctor by the
University of Girona

Girona, 20 de Maig de 2019

El Dr. Lluís Prats Planagumà, de la Universitat de Girona,

DECLARO:

Que el treball titulat *BRANDING REGIONAL DESTINATION : An Integrated Stakeholders Perspectives*, que presenta Elisa Piva per a l'obtenció del títol de doctora, ha estat realitzat sota la meua direcció i que compleix els requisits per poder optar a Menció Internacional.

I, perquè així consti i tingui els efectes oportuns, signo aquest document.

Signatura



Dr. Lluís Prats Planagumà

List of publications resulting from the doctoral thesis

This doctoral thesis, entitled "BRANDING REGIONAL DESTINATIONS: An Integrated Stakeholders Perspective", is a compendium of publications composed of three articles following the same line of research. These publications have been previously published, accepted or sent to the following journals.

Article 1: Accepted

Title: Regional Destinations, Brand Identity and Tourism Development: the case of Piedmont, Italy.

Authors: Elisa Piva, Lluís Prats & Stefania Cerutti

Journal: Scienze Regionali. Italian Journal of Regional Science.

SCOPUS (2016): Impact Factor: **1.060**. Quartile: **Q1** Geography, Planning and Development (Ranking 70/697); **Q1** Urban Studies (Ranking 64/173). H Index: 9.

Article 2: Sent

Title: Determining the effects of the accommodation industry for homogeneous place identity.

Authors: Elisa Piva & Lluís Prats

Journal: International Journal of Hospitality Management

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Title: Residents' perception as a key factor for brand development.

Authors: Elisa Piva, Lluís Prats & Lluís Coromina

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List of other publications

Piva, E., Cerutti, S., & Raj, R. (2019). Managing the Sacred: a Governance Perspective for Religious Tourism Destinations. In Griffiths M., Wiltshier P. (eds), *Managing Religious Tourism*, pp. 10-21. Wallingford: CABI international.

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Cerutti, S. & Piva, E. (2016). The Role of Tourists' Feedback in the Enhancement of Religious Tourism Destinations. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 4(3), Article 4, pp. 5-16.

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Participant and member of the scientific committee.

Cerutti, S., Piva, E., Emanuel, C., & Pioletti, A.M. (2017) "Il superamento delle barriere amministrative attraverso la creazione di marchi turistici. il caso Alto Piemonte". VII Giornata di Studio "Oltre la Globalizzazione" (Barriere/Barriers), Società di Studi Geografici, Pescara, Italy, 1 December 2017.

Piva, E., Pioletti, A.M., & Cerutti, S. (2017) "Destination Branding e Comunicazione dell'Identità Turistica Regionale: il caso Valle d'Aosta", IX Riunione Scientifica SISTUR "Società Italiana di Scienze del Turismo", Pistoia, Italy, 16-17 november 2017.

Cerutti, S., & Piva, E. (2017) "Processi di governance delle destinazioni turistiche religiose. Metodi e casi", XVI Giornate del Turismo "Patrimonio culturale e turismo", 23-24 october 2017, Novara, Armeno, Italy.

Piva, E. & Cerutti, S. (2017) "The increasing value of Cultural Routes and Religious Itineraries for potential tourism destinations", 9th Annual International Religious

Tourism and Pilgrimage Conference (IRTP), Armeno, Novara, Italy, 28 June- 1 July 2017.
Participant and member of the organizing and scientific committee.

Piva, E. & Prats, L. (2017) "Destination Management and Destination Branding: strategies for the development of tourist destinations", 7th Tourism PhD Research Colloquium, Girona, Spain, 30-31 May 2017.

Piva, E., Prats, L. & Cerutti S. (2016) "Regional Destination and Brand Identity: the Case of Piedmont Region, Italy", Global Management Perspectives International 2nd Annual Conference 2016: GLOBAL ISSUES IN LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT, Malta, 19–22 October 2016.

Participant and member of the organizing and scientific committee.

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Research Stay

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ABSTRACT

This doctoral thesis explores in depth the brand development process of regional destinations, focusing on the supply-side perspective and on the concept of brand identity, as well as on the perceptions of the different stakeholders that may be involved in the governance of tourist destinations. Research on destination branding has often focused on the demand-side of tourism, while fewer studies have looked at the supply-side perspective. Additionally, many studies have focused on either entire countries or individual cities, paying little attention to place branding at the regional and sub-regional levels. In order to fill these gaps, this thesis adopts an integrated perspective that examines the different stakeholders who are able to influence the process of destination brand development in regional destinations.

In particular, this doctoral thesis firstly examines the role that Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and Local Tourism Agencies (LTAs) play in regional branding and their perceptions of the regional brand. The thesis also tackles the relationship between regional and sub-regional brands, by analysing the views of both the government and the public sector, and the public sub-regional, local tourism organisations. Public stakeholders are particularly relevant to be considered due to the fact that the public bodies' views are undoubtedly critical as they have the responsibility to manage and coordinate the entire branding process, providing a comprehensive view of the regional destination.

Along with the public bodies' view, of no less importance for a successful branding process is the opinion of private operators. More specifically, the thesis investigates the accommodation establishments, another important group of stakeholders that may exert an influential power in the place branding process of regional destinations. In fact, accommodation establishments have direct contact with the visitors and they represent their main point of reference for their whole period of stay in the destination. Therefore, the purpose of this analysis is to verify how the accommodation establishments are projecting the identity of a place during the tourist stay. Moreover, this section of the thesis sheds light on the characteristics and factors that are able to foster a more homogeneous projection of the place identity in regional destinations, also in accordance with the messages projected by the main public actors who are leading the place branding process.

Thirdly, the thesis addresses the perceptions of residents, a further key stakeholder group that has started to receive attention during the past decade, and on which there is still much to investigate. The thesis focuses on their involvement in the co-creation of brand identity in regional destinations, by providing a conceptual framework that serves to investigate residents' perception of their own destination identity from the

initial stage of the branding process. The thesis suggests that brand creation should be achieved through a participative decision-making process that includes the numerous stakeholders that may be involved in the governance of a destination, including its residents. As argued in the thesis, considering the stance of residents is essential, seeing that this group of stakeholders can play a very significant role that can affect the whole brand development process. The thesis also shows that incorporating residents' perceptions can minimize the risk of negative impacts that might be generated by residents in disagreement with the identity conveyed in the brand.

In the light of these considerations, this doctoral thesis contributes to the lack of theoretical and empirical studies on brand identity from a supply-side perspective, by focusing on regions, a geographical scale that has long been neglected in the branding literature, in favour of nations and cities. Secondly, this thesis also contributes to the still open debate regarding the definition and delimitation of regional destinations, by offering an in-depth analysis of the dynamics and characteristics that are able to influence the brand development process and identities both in conventional administrative Regions and in new, less artificial sub-regional destinations. The thesis also contributes to exploring place branding issues both in already established destinations, as well as in newly developing areas. Lastly, this doctoral thesis adds further knowledge on the supply-side perspective on tourism destination branding, which has long been addressed and examined largely from a demand-side perspective with a consumer-perceived-image approach.

RESUM

Aquesta tesi doctoral explora en profunditat el procés de desenvolupament de marca de les destinacions regionals, posant el focus en la perspectiva de la oferta i en el concepte de identitat de marca, així com també en les percepcions dels diferents agents involucrats en la governança de les destinacions turístiques. La investigació sobre la marca de les destinacions, sovint s'ha centrat en la demanda, i menys estudis han analitzat la perspectiva de la oferta. A més, nombrosos estudis s'han focalitzat en països o en ciutats, posant poca atenció en la marca a nivell regional i sub-regional. Per cobrir aquestes mancances, la tesi adopta la perspectiva integrada que examina els diferents agents que poden tenir influència en el procés de desenvolupament de la marca en destinacions regionals.

En concret, aquesta tesi examina en primer lloc el paper que duen a terme les Organitzacions de gestió de destinacions (DMO) i les Agències locals de turisme (LTA) sobre la marca regional. La tesi també aborda la relació entre les marques regionals i sub-regionals mitjançant l'anàlisi de les opinions del sector públic, i les organitzacions públiques de turisme local i sub-regional. Aquests ens són sens dubte importants ja que tenen la responsabilitat de gestionar i coordinar tot el procés de creació de marca.

Juntament amb la opinió dels organismes públics, la dels operadors privats també és important per a un procés de marca exitós. Més específicament, la tesi investiga els establiments d'allotjament, un altre grup d'agents important, que pot exercir un poder influent en el procés de marca. De fet, els establiments tenen contacte directe amb els visitants i representen el seu principal punt de referència durant tota la seva estada a la destinació. Per tant, el propòsit d'aquest anàlisi és el de verificar com els establiments d'allotjament projecten la identitat del lloc durant l'estada dels visitants. A més, aquesta secció de la tesi aporta llum sobre les característiques i factors que poden fomentar una projecció més homogènia de la identitat del lloc en les destinacions regionals, en acord amb els missatges projectats pels principals actors públics que lideren el procés de marca.

En tercer lloc, la tesi aborda les percepcions dels residents, un altre agent clau, que ha començat a rebre atenció durant la última dècada, i sobre el qual encara hi ha molt per investigar. La tesi es centra en la seva participació en la creació conjunta de la identitat de marca de destinacions regionals, al proporcionar un marc conceptual que serveix per investigar la percepció dels residents sobre la seva pròpia identitat. La tesi suggereix que la creació de la marca ha d'aconseguir-se mitjançant un procés participatiu de presa de decisions que inclogui a tots els agents involucrats en la governança de la destinació, inclosos els seus residents. Com s'argumenta a la tesi,

considerar la postura dels residents és essencial, doncs poden desenvolupar un paper molt important que pot afectar a tot el procés de creació de marca. La tesi també mostra que la incorporació de les percepcions dels residents pot minimitzar el risc d'impactes negatius que podrien generar els residents que no estan d'acord amb la identitat transmesa en la marca.

Amb aquestes consideracions, aquesta tesi doctoral contribueix a la manca d'estudis teòrics i empírics sobre la identitat de marca des de la perspectiva de la oferta al centrar-se en les regions, una escala geogràfica que ha estat desatesa a la literatura, a favor de nacions i ciutats. En segon lloc, aquesta tesi també contribueix al debat encara obert sobre la definició i delimitació de les destinacions regionals, al oferir un anàlisi en profunditat de les dinàmiques i característiques que poden influir en el procés de marca i identitat tant en les regions administratives convencionals com en les noves, destinacions sub-regionals menys artificials. La tesi també contribueix a explorar els problemes de marca, tant en les destinacions ja establertes com en àrees de recent desenvolupament. Per últim, aquesta tesi doctoral agrega un major coneixement a la perspectiva de la oferta en la marca d'una destinació turística, doncs durant molt de temps s'ha focalitzat i examinat en gran mesura des d'una perspectiva de la demanda, amb l'enfocament de la imatge percebuda pel consumidor.

RESUMEN

Esta tesis doctoral explora en profundidad el proceso de desarrollo de marca de los destinos regionales, centrándose en la perspectiva de la oferta y en el concepto de identidad de marca, así como en las percepciones de los distintos agentes involucrados en la gobernanza de los destinos turísticos. La investigación sobre marcas de destino a menudo se ha centrado en la demanda, mientras que menos estudios han analizado la perspectiva de la oferta. Además, numerosos estudios se han basado en países enteros o en ciudades individuales, prestando poca atención a la marca a nivel regional y subregional. Para llenar estas carencias, esta tesis adopta una perspectiva integrada que examina diferentes agentes con poder para influir en el proceso de desarrollo de la marca en los destinos regionales.

En particular, esta tesis doctoral examina en primer lugar el papel que desempeñan las Organizaciones de gestión de destinos (DMO) y las Agencias de turismo locales (LTA) en la marca regional y sus percepciones acerca de ésta. La tesis también aborda la relación entre las marcas regionales y subregionales mediante el análisis de las opiniones del sector público, a nivel local y subregional. Los organismos públicos son particularmente relevantes para ser considerados, ya que sus puntos de vista son sin duda cruciales al tener la responsabilidad de gestionar y coordinar todo el proceso de creación de marca, proporcionando una visión integral del destino regional.

Junto con la opinión de los organismos públicos, la de los operadores privados no es menos importante para un exitoso proceso de marca. Más específicamente, la tesis investiga los establecimientos de alojamiento, otro grupo importante de agentes que pueden ejercer un poder influyente en el proceso de marca de los destinos regionales. De hecho, los establecimientos tienen contacto directo con los visitantes y representan su principal punto de referencia durante todo el período de estancia en el destino. Así pues, el propósito de este análisis es verificar cómo los establecimientos de alojamiento proyectan la identidad de un lugar durante la estancia turística. Además, esta sección de la tesis arroja luz sobre las características y los factores que pueden fomentar una proyección más homogénea de la identidad del lugar en los destinos regionales, también de acuerdo con los mensajes proyectados por los principales actores públicos que están liderando el proceso de marca del lugar.

En tercer lugar, la tesis aborda las percepciones de los residentes, otro grupo de agentes clave, que ha comenzado a recibir atención en la literatura durante la última década, y sobre el cual todavía hay mucho que investigar. La tesis se centra en su participación en la creación conjunta de la identidad de marca en destinos regionales, al proporcionar un marco conceptual que sirve para investigar la percepción de los residentes sobre su propia identidad de destino, poniendo énfasis en la etapa inicial

del proceso de creación de la marca. La tesis sugiere que la creación de la marca debe lograrse a través de un proceso participativo de toma de decisiones que incluya a los numerosos agentes involucrados en la gobernanza de un destino, incluidos sus residentes. Considerar entonces la postura de los residentes es esencial, ya que pueden desempeñar un papel muy importante que puede afectar a todo el proceso de creación de la marca. La tesis también muestra que la incorporación de las percepciones de los residentes puede minimizar el riesgo de impactos negativos que podrían generar los residentes en desacuerdo con la identidad transmitida en la marca.

A la luz de estas consideraciones, esta tesis doctoral contribuye a la falta de estudios teóricos y empíricos sobre la identidad de la marca desde una perspectiva de la oferta al centrarse en las regiones, una escala geográfica que ha sido descuidada en la literatura, a favor de naciones y ciudades. En segundo lugar, esta tesis también contribuye al debate aún abierto sobre la definición y delimitación de los destinos regionales, al ofrecer un análisis en profundidad de las dinámicas y características que pueden influir en el proceso de marca e identidades tanto en las regiones administrativas convencionales como en las nuevas, destinos subregionales menos artificiales. La tesis también contribuye a explorar los problemas de marca, tanto en destinos ya establecidos como en áreas de reciente desarrollo. Por último, esta tesis doctoral agrega un mayor conocimiento sobre la perspectiva de la oferta en la marca del destino turístico, que durante mucho tiempo se ha abordado y examinado en gran medida desde una perspectiva de la demanda con un enfoque en la imagen percibida por el consumidor.

RIASSUNTO

Questa tesi di dottorato esplora in modo approfondito il processo di sviluppo di marchi turistici delle destinazioni regionali, concentrandosi sulla prospettiva dell'offerta e sul concetto di identità di marca, nonché sulle percezioni dei diversi stakeholder che possono essere coinvolti nella governance delle destinazioni turistiche. La letteratura sui temi del *destination branding* si è concentrata in modo prevalente o esclusivo sulla prospettiva della domanda turistica e dei visitatori, mentre risultano tuttora esigui studi che prendano in esame la prospettiva dell'offerta e dei principali stakeholder. Inoltre, numerose ricerche hanno focalizzato la loro attenzione sull'analisi di marchi turistici a scala nazionale oppure a livello di singole città, mentre risulta ancora minima l'evidenza empirica sul *destination branding* a scala regionale e sub-regionale. Al fine di colmare queste lacune, questa tesi adotta una prospettiva integrata al fine di indagare i diversi soggetti in grado di influenzare il processo di sviluppo di marchi turistici nelle destinazioni regionali e il ruolo da essi rivestito in tali contesti.

In particolare, questa tesi di dottorato prende in primo luogo in esame le funzioni che le *Destination Management Organizations* (DMO) e le Agenzie Turistiche Locali (ATL) svolgono nei processi di *branding* regionale, nonché le loro percezioni del marchio regionale stesso. Il lavoro di ricerca approfondisce, altresì, il rapporto tra marchi regionali e sub-regionali, analizzando le opinioni sia delle istituzioni pubbliche regionali, sia delle organizzazioni sub-regionali e locali che allestiscono l'offerta turistica a diversa scala. È infatti importante considerare gli stakeholder pubblici, le cui opinioni risultano indubbiamente critiche in quanto tali soggetti hanno la responsabilità di gestire e coordinare l'intero processo di *branding*, fornendo una visione globale e complessiva della destinazione regionale.

Unitamente al punto di vista degli enti pubblici, risulta rilevante per un processo di *branding* di successo anche l'opinione degli operatori privati. Sotto questo profilo, la tesi analizza più specificamente le strutture ricettive, considerate un importante gruppo di soggetti in grado di esercitare un potere influente nel processo di *branding* delle destinazioni regionali. Grazie al loro contatto diretto e costante con i visitatori, esse rappresentano il principale punto di riferimento per tutto il loro periodo di permanenza in una destinazione. Pertanto, lo scopo di questa analisi è verificare in che modo le strutture ricettive stiano proiettando l'identità di un luogo durante il periodo di permanenza dei visitatori. Inoltre, questa sezione della tesi mette in luce le caratteristiche e i fattori in grado di favorire una proiezione più omogenea della *place identity* nelle destinazioni regionali, anche in virtù dei valori promossi dai principali attori pubblici che stanno guidando il processo di *place branding*.

In terzo luogo, la tesi analizza le percezioni dei residenti, ulteriore gruppo cruciale di stakeholder che ha iniziato a ricevere attenzione nell'ultimo decennio e su cui vi è ancora la necessità di ulteriori approfondimenti. La tesi si concentra sul loro coinvolgimento nella co-creazione dell'identità di marca nelle destinazioni regionali, mirando a fornire un quadro concettuale che serva ad indagare la percezione dei residenti circa la propria identità di destinazione, sin dalle prime fasi del processo di *branding*. La tesi suggerisce che la creazione dei marchi turistici dovrebbe essere perseguita attraverso un processo decisionale partecipativo, che includa i numerosi soggetti che a vario titolo possono essere coinvolti nella governance di una destinazione, tra cui i residenti. Come argomentato nella tesi, considerare la prospettiva dei residenti è essenziale, poiché tale gruppo di stakeholder può svolgere un ruolo molto significativo in grado di influenzare l'intero processo di *branding* di una destinazione. La tesi mostra, altresì, come incorporare le percezioni dei residenti permetta di minimizzare il rischio di impatti negativi che potrebbero essere generati dai residenti in disaccordo con l'identità trasmessa nel marchio turistico.

Alla luce di queste considerazioni, questa tesi di dottorato offre un contributo per colmare la carenza di studi teorici ed empirici sull'identità del marchio dal punto di vista dell'offerta, concentrandosi sulle regioni, in quanto scala geografica a lungo trascurata nella letteratura relativa al *destination branding*, sbilanciata a favore di intere nazioni e singole città. In secondo luogo, questa tesi si inserisce fattivamente nel dibattito ancora aperto riguardante la definizione e la delimitazione delle destinazioni regionali, offrendo un'analisi approfondita delle dinamiche e delle caratteristiche che sono in grado di influenzare il processo di *branding* e la *brand identity*, sia nelle regioni amministrative convenzionali, sia nelle nuove e meno artificiali destinazioni sub-regionali. La tesi concorre, inoltre, ad esaminare le tematiche relative al *place branding* in destinazioni già consolidate, così come anche in aree di più recente sviluppo. Infine, questa tesi di dottorato offre ulteriore conoscenza circa la prospettiva dell'offerta nei processi di *destination branding*, a lungo esaminati in larga misura dal punto di vista della domanda con un approccio legato all'immagine percepita dal visitatore.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette thèse de doctorat explore de manière approfondie le procédé de développement des marques touristiques des destinations régionales, se concentrant sur la perspective de l'offre et sur le concept d'identité de la marque, ainsi que sur les perceptions des différents acteurs pouvant être impliqués dans la gouvernance des destinations touristiques. La recherche portant sur le *destination branding* a souvent été concentrée sur le tourisme du point de vue de la demande et des visiteurs, alors que moins d'études ont eu pour sujet la perspective de l'offre et donc des principaux acteurs du tourisme. De plus, un grand nombre d'études se sont concentrées sur des pays entiers ou des villes de manière individuelle, n'accordant ainsi que peu d'attention au *place branding* au niveau régional et sub-régional. Afin de combler ces lacunes, cette thèse adopte une perspective intégrée capable d'examiner les différents acteurs touristiques capables d'influencer le procédé de *destination branding* des destinations régionales.

En particulier, cette thèse de doctorat examine le rôle que les *Destination Management Organizations* (DMOs) et les *Local Tourist Agencies* (LTAs) jouent à l'intérieur du *regional branding* et leurs perceptions de la marque régionale. Cette thèse souligne également les relations existantes entre les marques régionales et sub-régionales, en analysant les points de vue du gouvernement et des institutions publiques régionales, mais aussi des organisations touristiques publiques locales et sub-régionales. Les acteurs publics sont particulièrement adaptés à une telle analyse, leur perspective étant sans aucun doute critique, du fait qu'ils aient la responsabilité de gérer et de coordonner le procédé de *branding* tout entier, ainsi que de fournir une vision globale de la destination régionale.

En parallèle à la perspective des organismes publics, l'opinion des opérateurs privés doit être traitée avec une importance similaire afin d'obtenir un procédé de *branding* fructueux. Plus spécifiquement, la thèse examine les établissements d'hébergement, un autre groupe d'acteurs touristiques important pouvant exercer un pouvoir majeur à l'intérieur du procédé de *place branding* des destinations régionales. En effet, ces établissements disposent d'un contact direct avec les visiteurs et représentent donc la principale référence de ces derniers pendant toute la durée du séjour. Ainsi, l'objectif de cette analyse est d'étudier de quelle manière les établissements d'hébergement projettent l'identité d'un lieu pendant le séjour touristique. De plus, cette section de la thèse met en lumière les facteurs et caractéristiques capables de favoriser une projection plus homogène de la *place identity* dans les destinations touristiques, tout cela en accord avec les messages projetés par les principaux acteurs publics conduisant le procédé de *place branding*.

Troisièmement, la thèse analyse la perception des résidents, un groupe d'acteurs-clé supplémentaire ayant commencé à recevoir une attention plus adéquate durant la dernière décennie, et dont les aspects n'ont pas encore été étudiés à la hauteur de leur potentiel. La thèse se concentre sur la co-crédation de l'identitéd de marque à l'intérieur des destinations régionales, en fournissant un cadre conceptuel capable d'explorer la perception des résidents par rapport à leur propre *destination identity* dès le ddbut du procédé de d'dveloppement du *branding*. La thèse suggère que la crédation d'une marque touristique devrait être r'alisée gr'ace à un procédé de prise de d'cision participative incluant les nombreux acteurs pouvant être impliqués dans la gouvernance d'une destination, et comprenant donc ses r'ésidents. Comme d'fendu dans la thèse, considérer la position des r'ésidents est essentiel, ceci étant du au fait que ce groupe d'acteurs peut jouer un r'ole tr'ès significatif pouvant affecter le procédé de *destination branding* tout entier. La thèse montre également qu'incorporer la perception des r'ésidents peut permettre de minimiser le risque d'impacts n'égatifs pouvant être g'nérés par des r'ésidents en d'saccord avec l'identitéd évoquée par la marque.

A la lumière de ces considérations, cette thèse de doctorat contribue à combler le manque d'études th'oriques et empiriques sur l'identitéd de la marque du point de vue de l'offre, se concentrant sur les r'égions, une échelle g'ographique ayant longtemps été ignorée à l'intérieur de la litt'érature du *branding*, favorisant davantage des nations entières ou des villes singulières. De m'eme, cette thèse contribue au d'bat encore ouvert concernant la d'finition et la d'limitation des destinations r'égionales, en offrant une analyse approfondie des dynamiques et des caractéristiques capables d'influencer le procédé de *branding* et les identitéd, que ce soit dans des R'égions administratives conventionnelles mais aussi dans de nouvelles et moins artificielles destinations sub-r'égionales. La thèse contribue également à examiner les th'ematiques relative au *place branding* dans des destinations d'jà établies, mais aussi dans de nouvelles zones touristique en d'dveloppement. Enfin, cette thèse de doctorat ajoute une pierre à l'édifice du *destination branding* touristique, longtemps étudiée en grande partie du point de vue de la demande avec une approche liée à l'image perçue par les visiteurs.

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is witnessing an outstanding rise in international tourist arrivals, showing an uninterrupted growth in the past nine years. International tourist arrivals reached 1,323 million in 2017, around 393 million more people than in the last decade (WTO, 2018). Tourism has therefore developed into an actual global industry that represents one of the major economic contributors to many countries (Mohajerani, & Miremadi, 2012). Over the last few decades, many authors have pointed out how tourist destinations express the need to define adequate branding policies and strategies in order to secure a competitive edge in these increasingly global consumer markets (Ritchie, & Crouch, 2000; Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2011; Almeyda-Ibáñez, & George, 2017).

Despite the fact that the concept of branding has long been applied extensively to products and services, it is only in the past fifteen years that studies on tourism destination brands have increasingly gained momentum among researchers and practitioners (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005; Franch, Martini, & Buffa, 2008; Hernandez, Talavera, & Parra López, 2016). As a result, there is still the need for further theoretical and empirical analysis in destination branding. In general terms, there are still serious difficulties in defining destination branding, as multiple and diversified definitions are given (Louro, & Cunha, 2001; Balmer, & Greyser, 2003; Brown et al., 2006). Moreover, the destination branding literature still presents major issues and challenges compared to the generic product and services marketing literature, mostly because of the complexity of the connotations that come with the term destination (Gnoth et al., 2007). Lastly, a commonly accepted framework for Destination Branding theory still needs to be fully developed (Ritchie, & Ritchie, 1998; Konecnik, & Gartner, 2007).

With these premises in mind, the purpose of this thesis is to increase the still limited empirical knowledge on destination branding. In particular, the thesis examines in depth the brand development process of regional destinations, focusing on the supply-side perspective that is based on the concept of identity and the stakeholder's views. This focus stems from four main gaps identified in the literature, which are addressed

in the three articles of the compendium: (1) The need to further investigate destination branding through the concept of brand identity from the supply-side perspective; (2) The need to define and focus more on regional and sub-regional destinations, instead of just countries and cities; (3) The need to address destination branding by adopting a supply-side internal stakeholder perspective, rather than a consumer-perceived-image approach; and (4) the need to further discuss the dichotomy between established and new destinations, considering that, in both cases, cooperation among all stakeholders is more successful when their perceptions are taken into consideration since the very beginning of the branding process.

The following sections of this doctoral thesis explain these gaps in details, while also identifying the main contributions offered to the body of knowledge on destination branding.

1. Brand Identity

Although the topic of destination branding has been partially covered under the alternative label of destination image studies for decades, less attention has focused on the identity of tourism destinations from a supply-side perspective (Konecnik, & Go, 2008; Bregoli, 2012).

Several studies have supported the idea that brand identity and brand image are both key to obtaining a popular destination brand (Cai Liping, 2002; Nandan, 2005; Martins, 2015). However, authors frequently conflate or confuse these two concepts (Wagner, & Peters, 2009; Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011). While brand image focuses on tourists' perceptions of destination-brand differentiation, brand identity tends to be more concerned with how actors in the destination's network make a particular brand unique (Harris, & de Chernatony, 2001). Furthermore, brand identity characterizes the self-image and desired image of the market, whereas the brand image signifies the actual image retained by (potential) tourists (Pike, 2002). In other words, "identity is created by the sender whereas the image is perceived by the receiver" (Kapferer, 1997, p. 32). In summary, a destination brand should be considered from the senders'

perspective as the projection of destination identity; and from the receivers' perspective as the image of a place (Florek, Insch, & Gnoth, 2006).

Within the field of marketing, some authors have claimed that brand identity is even more important than image, especially from a strategic point of view (Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2002; Cai Liping, 2002; Hankinson, 2004). According to Hankinson (2004), this emerges from the view that positioning and communicating the destination brand needs to be rooted in reality, which then helps fulfil the experience promised to visitors (Saraniemi, 2009). Brand identity is created by private organisations or public administrations in relation to how they want their brand to be perceived (Kapferer, 1998). According to Konecnik and Go (2008, p. 179), "Brand identity clearly specifies what the brand aspires to stand for and has multiple roles". As stated by Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000), brand identity is a set of positive associations with a particular destination that destination management organisations strive to build and maintain.

Destination branding can be therefore defined as "a way to communicate a destination's unique identity by differentiating a destination from its competitors (Qu et al., 2011, p. 466). Moreover, a place brand must embody something unique and different for a destination (Campelo, Aitken, Thyne, & Gnoth, 2013).

Although the importance of brand identity has been recognized in the literature, there is still a lack of empirical studies on brand identity from a supply-side perspective. Moreover, this paucity of empirical studies is even more evident for regional and sub-regional destinations. This leads to the identification of a further gap which will be analysed in the following section.

2. Developing Regional and Sub-Regional Destinations

As underlined in the first article of this compendium, many studies on destination branding have so far focused on either entire countries or individual cities, while regions and sub-regions have long been neglected in the literature. Accordingly,

empirical studies on regional destination branding are still insufficient and there is a theoretical and practical need for further examination (Wheeler, Frost, & Weiler, 2011; Nghiem-Phu, 2018). Additionally, the empirical studies examined so far have mostly focused on branding in big, already famous destinations, while those in small, less known destinations have only been briefly explored (Nghiem-Phu, 2018).

Regions and regional identities are starting to be considered increasingly important in academic research, regional planning schemes, development ideologies and marketing strategies pursued by regional, national and supranational stakeholders (Paasi, & Zimmerbauer, 2011). The analysis of regional destinations is proven to be significant since most of the European countries are divided into regions for management purposes. Moreover, the rise of short breaks has generated more visits on a smaller geographical scale than before, making regional destinations ever more significant.

Other studies have underlined the lack of a clear and widely accepted vision for the concept of "region". This unclear concept, which encapsulates the vast mixture of history, lifestyle, residents and stakeholders' perceptions and tourism products, has led to much disagreement about marketing priorities, regional branding strategies and priorities, and appropriate roles for government and local tourism agencies (Dredge, & Jenkins, 2003, p. 394).

Within the literature, defining and delimiting regional destinations is still challenging. For example, Leiper (1995) attempted to define the concept of "tourist destination region (TDR)", arguing that "the concept of a tourist destination region is useful in research and analysis on geographical issues of tourism", being, in one sense, "as small or as large as anyone wants to regard them" (p. 97). He also claimed that TDRs can vary in shapes (e.g. they may be roughly circular or long and narrow) and states (Leiper 1995, p. 87): "the boundary of a TDR can be regarded as the feasible day-tripping range around a tourist's accommodation, encompassing the area that tourists visit on day trips. Going further than that range requires shifting to new accommodation, so the itinerary moves to what is, in effect, another TDR. In theory and practice, each spot where a tourist might stop for the night is the centre of a TDR, but to simplify

discussions, the more popular centres – such as towns and the middle of cities – can be regarded as the centres of TDRs of each country”.

This clearly means that the boundaries of a regional destination do not necessarily correspond with conventional administrative or politic boundaries (Dredge, & Jamal, 2013; Blasco, Guia, & Prats, 2014a). However, the concept of “region” is often conceived in terms of “divisions of space” and its application to tourism is widely accepted but rarely questioned (Dredge, & Jenkins, 2003). While geographical space is still an important element of New regionalism, territorial identity must be understood more broadly (Dredge, & Jenkins, 2003, p.387). According to Keating (1998, p. 8), “Territories as places, are more than mere lines on the map. They are constituted by function, by culture and shared identity, by political mobilization and leadership, and by institutions. The resulting functional, cultural, political and institutional meanings of territory do not always coincide”.

Recent studies have therefore suggested that destinations should be delimited on the basis of tourists’ consumption patterns (Blasco, Guia, & Prats, 2014a; Dredge, & Jamal, 2013; Paulino, & Prats, 2013), rather than on conventional administrative boundaries (Dredge, 1999; Zillinger, 2007). According to Blasco, Guia, and Prats (2014b), this is particularly relevant in places where local destinations lie on the border of their countries, where there is easy mobility to and from the cross-border neighbouring destinations, and there is added value in the cross-border experience for visitors. They argue that, in such cases, an integrated governance of the cross-border destination as a whole would be highly beneficial (Blasco et al., 2014b).

Within this scenario, it is clear that the literature on tourism destination still offers wide space for an open debate regarding the concept of region and its dynamics. The literature, in fact, still present some issues that will be addressed in this doctoral thesis. In summary, many studies have focused on branding nations or cities, paying little attention to place branding at the regional and sub-regional level, outside of regions that are already well-known brands. Furthermore, there is still the need to further defining and delimiting regional destinations.

This thesis will, therefore, contribute to filling another gap, by exploring in-depth which dynamics and characteristics are able to influence the branding process and identities in Regions and Sub-Regions. The thesis analyses and discusses theoretically and empirically both conventional administrative Regions (publication 1 and 2), and new, less artificial sub-regional destinations (publication 3). This thesis addresses this lack of research by focusing on brand identity and the internal perspective of relevant stakeholders in regional destinations. The following section will explore the gaps related to the supply-side stakeholders, highlighting the main contribution of this doctoral thesis in this regard.

3. Supply-Side Stakeholders

According to Konecnik and Go (2008), the vast majority of tourism destination studies have long addressed and examined the brand concept primarily from a demand-side perspective, adopting a consumer-perceived-image approach (e.g. Echtner, & Ritchie, 1993; Baloglu, & McCleary, 1999; Anholt, 2005). In contrast, it is only from the beginning of the millennium that researchers have started to stress the importance of a supply-side managerial perspective on tourism destination branding (e.g. Cai Liping, 2002; Konecnik, & Go, 2008; Bregoli, 2012).

The great significance of a supply-side perspective is confirmed by the fact that several authors have argued that destination branding can be seen as a collective phenomenon in which the involvement of all the stakeholders is a critical condition to deliver a coherent place identity from the supply perspective (Bregoli, 2012; Campelo et al., 2013; Choo, Park, & Petrick, 2011; Konecnik, & Go, 2008; Yusof, & Ismail, 2014; Hereźniak, 2017). This means that successful destination branding needs to be achieved through a participative decision-making process that includes the numerous stakeholders that may be involved in a particular destination (Braun, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013; Easterling, 2004; Ribeiro, Pinto, Silva, & Woosnam 2017).

The different messages and values emitted by the different stakeholders may lead to the communication of a fragmented image that does not reflect the real identity of a

destination (Moilanen, & Rainisto, 2009; Camprubí, 2015). In other words, these messages and values emitted by the different stakeholders need to be consistent, coordinated and homogeneously projected in order to be effective (Fyall, & Leask 2007; Bregoli, 2012).

According to Saito and Ruhanen (2017), a tourism destination is made up by different categories of stakeholders: the government and the public sector; international, national, regional and local tourism organisations; private tourism developers and entrepreneurs, tourism industry operators; non-tourism business practitioners, residents, the local community.

This thesis adopts an integrated perspective that focuses on the different stakeholders who are able to influence the brand development process in regional destinations.

The different publications concentrate on the above mentioned main categories of actors. In particular, the first publication examines the role that Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and Local Tourism Agencies (LTAs) play in regional branding and their perceptions of the regional brand. This article also tackles the relationship between regional and sub-regional brands, explained through the concept of brand architecture, intended as “an organizing structure of the brand portfolio that specifies the brand roles and the relationships among brands and different product-market brand context” (Aaker, & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 102). Thus, the views of government and the public sector, and the sub-regional, local tourism organisations are considered. The public bodies’ views are undoubtedly critical as they have the responsibility to manage and coordinate the emitted identity, providing a comprehensive view of the destination (Camprubí, 2015).

The second publication investigates another important group of stakeholders that may exert an influential power in the place branding process: the private operators. Specifically, this section of the thesis focuses on the accommodation industry, one of the most relevant private sectors of the whole tourism industry (Lahap et al., 2016). The purpose of this article is to verify how the accommodation establishments who are in direct contact with the tourists are projecting the identity of a place during the

tourist stay. This article also explores which characteristics and factors are able to foster a more homogeneous projection of the place identity, also in accordance with the messages projected by the main public actors who are leading the place branding process.

The third publication focuses on the residents, a key stakeholder group that has started to receive attention during the past decade and on which there is still much to investigate. Since then, several authors have agreed on the idea that looking into the perceptions of residents is critical, as they play a very significant role that can affect the whole destination branding process (e.g. Kavaratzis, 2012; Braun et al., 2013; Sharpley, 2014; Zenker, & Erfgen, 2014; Woosnam, Maruyama, & Boley, 2016; Ribeiro et al., 2017). For example, Braun et al. (2013) argue that residents are able to positively or negatively influence tourists' perceptions of a place. Their relationship with visitors is crucial to the tourist experience and destination image formation in the minds of tourists. Residents' attitudes and perspectives are directly related to the success of tourism destinations, and therefore they should be considered as essential when it comes to building destination brands and development strategies (Martín, de los Salmones Sánchez, & Herrero, 2018; Sharpley, 2014).

In summary, the thesis addresses these gaps in the tourism stakeholders literature, by offering an integrated approach that includes the most influential subjects who emit the identity of tourism destinations. The complex nature of tourist destinations as amalgams of tourism products, services and stakeholders (Buhalis, 2000) causes high fragmentation, which is one of the factors that make destinations one of the most difficult entities to manage (Fyall, & Leask, 2007). In this light, acknowledging how the different stakeholder's group are emitting place identity is vital for overcoming fragmentation and to foster collaboration and coordination in place branding of regional destinations. The next section highlights the need to assess the opinions and views of internal stakeholders to enhance collaboration both in already established destinations and in new destinations under development.

4. Branding Regional Destinations: delimitating destinations

One of the major challenges in destination branding is including the above-mentioned stakeholders in both the building process and its subsequent development (Konecnik, 2011). Many authors have stressed that successful brands are those where the internal stakeholder groups have knowledge about the brand's identity and its main competitive advantages (de Chernatony, 1999; Morgan, & Pritchard, 2002; Konecnik, & Petek, 2012). Therefore, destination managers should engage representatives from diverse internal stakeholder groups already in the brand development process and also later in the brand implementation and maintenance process (Konecnik, & Petek, 2012). This plethora of actors carries their own set of interests, beliefs, benefits, and responsibilities regarding the destination. Taking into account these perceptions enable to minimize possible negative impacts both in already established destinations and in new destinations under development.

This doctoral thesis explores place branding issues both in already established destinations (publication 1 and 2), as well as in newly developing areas (publication 3). The thesis discusses this dichotomy between established and new destinations, by arguing that cooperation among all stakeholders is more successful when their perceptions are taken into consideration since the very beginning of the branding process.

As already mentioned above, the notion of a tourist destination is often ambiguous and not easy to define. Up to a few decades ago, tourist destinations have been - and in part continue to be - recognized and managed on the basis of their administrative boundaries (Blasco, Guia, Prats, 2014a; 2014b). Hence, also the policies of destination branding have been applied to places where the administrative boundaries of local government units do not match the boundaries of tourist destinations as perceived by tourists (Krajnovic, Bosna, & Jašic, 2013). Hankinson (2001) highlights that a place defined by legal boundaries is not always a unique and meaningful product and that sometimes there is a need to cross administrative boundaries "to combine two or more places together in order to provide a more attractive offer" (Hankinson, 2001, p.

130). Frequently tourism promotion capitalizes on imagined geographies crossing administrative boundaries because of identity elements that, inherited from history and cultural heritage, build a shared imaginary for a variety of towns and cities. Accordingly, inter-territorial brand management is sometimes needed in order to exploit an already existing opportunity in the tourism market rather than being *a priori* chosen and designed as a collaborative strategy (Pasquinelli, 2012).

These concepts are explored in the third publication of this thesis through the use of an Italian case study, a sub-regional destination that is currently planning to redevelop and reorganize its tourist offer along the lines of an integrated marketing system. The idea is to cross the administrative boundaries of artificial provinces and to promote territories with similar characteristics and values. The outcome of this process is to create a new, unique brand for this region on the basis of a coordinated perceived identity that is supported by all stakeholders, including residents.

Several authors have claimed that stakeholder coordination is vital for the development of successful destination brands (Ooi, 2004; Konecnik, & Go, 2008; Bregoli, 2012). The direct relationship among stakeholder coordination and successful branding has been highlighted by Scott, Parfitt and Laws (2001, p. 202), who claimed that “the difficulties of coordination and control have the potential to undermine a strategic approach to marketing based on destination branding because campaigns can be undertaken by a variety of tourist businesses with no consultation or coordination on the prevailing message or the destination values being promoted.” According to different studies, place branding is, in fact, a process that needs to be coordinated rather than simply managed (Hankinson, 2004; Ooi, 2004; Fyall, & Leask 2007; Bregoli, 2012).

In the light of these considerations, stakeholders’ collaboration and coordination can contribute to a successful place branding in regional and sub-regional destinations. Hence, it becomes vital to examine the perspective of the different stakeholders that can influence the regional brand development process.

Therefore, this doctoral thesis is conceived to tackle the above-mentioned four gaps, contributing to the literature by: (1) adding empirical evidence to the paucity of studies on brand identity from a supply-side perspective; (2) exploring in-depth which dynamics and characteristics are able to influence the brand development process and identities in regional and sub-regional destinations (both administrative and non-conventional regions); (3) offering an integrated approach that includes the most influential stakeholders who emit the identity of tourism destinations; and (4) examining place branding issues both in already established destinations and in newly developing areas, with a focus on cooperation and coordination among stakeholders.

To further summarize, this thesis addresses the identified gaps by contributing to the growing need to investigate the stakeholder's internal perceptions and brand identity within regional tourism destinations. The following section presents the overall objectives of this doctoral thesis and the specific research aim of each publication. This is followed by three chapters corresponding to the three articles in this study encompassed under the topic "BRANDING REGIONAL DESTINATIONS: AN INTEGRATED STAKEHOLDERS PERSPECTIVE." Lastly, the general conclusions detail the outcome of each research objective, the main contributions made, the main limitations of this doctoral thesis, and possible future lines of research.

OBJECTIVES OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

This section outlines the general purpose of this doctoral thesis and the specific research objectives of each of the publications contained in this compendium. The title of the thesis is “Branding Regional Destinations: An Integrated Stakeholders Perspective” and the ultimate purpose is:

- To examine the role of the most relevant groups of stakeholders in the brand development process of different types of regional and sub-regional destinations, by using an integrated supply-side perspective based on the identity of places.

Each article focuses on achieving a specific aim derived from this general objective. The specific research objectives of each publication are indicated below with an introductory explanation summarising the research gaps.

The first article, entitled “Regional Destinations, Brand Identity and Tourism Development: the Case of Piedmont, Italy.” focuses on place branding processes in regional destinations. In the literature, few empirical studies on regional destination branding have been undertaken, and even fewer have questioned the applicability of the regional branding concept or fully explored the contextual factors and processes which influence its implementation. Thus, the main objectives of this article are:

1. To examine the effects of destination branding at a regional level.
2. To determine which factors are able to influence the process of developing a brand identity in regional destinations.
3. To deepen our understanding of the role Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and Local Tourism Agencies (LTAs) play in regional branding.

The research setting for this project is Piedmont, an administrative Region in northern Italy that is increasingly developing in terms of tourists flows. This article focuses on

how institutional tourism stakeholders perceive the regional brand and the destination management process in Piedmont.

The second article examines the communication of place identity in small emerging regional destinations, by focusing on private operators as a key stakeholder. In particular, this article entitled “Determining the effects of the accommodation industry for homogeneous place identity” explores the role of the accommodation industry in the delivery of place identity in these destinations.

The need for this research stems from the fact that issues related to destination branding have often been studied in the context of the big destinations while neglecting the setting of small emerging regions. Furthermore, although the accommodation establishments exert a major influence in the delivery of place identity, they have been analysed in previous studies almost entirely in terms in of accommodation image. Therefore, the aims of the second article are:

1. To investigate the role of the accommodation industry in the communication of the place identity in small, emerging, not mature destinations.
2. To verify how the main stakeholders who are constantly in contact with the tourists are projecting the identity of a place.
3. To detect which characteristics and factors are able to foster a more homogeneous projection of the place identity, also in accordance with the messages projected by the main public actors who are leading the place branding process.

The research was conducted in Aosta Valley, a small administrative mountain Region in northern Italy where the accommodation industry plays a very important role in the regional economy and where the accommodation establishments represent the main, and sometimes exclusive, identity builder for the incoming tourists.

In the third article, “Residents Perception as a key factor for Regional Brand Development”, the focus shifts to another central stakeholder in place branding: the residents. Investigating the perceptions of residents’ is considered critical, as they play

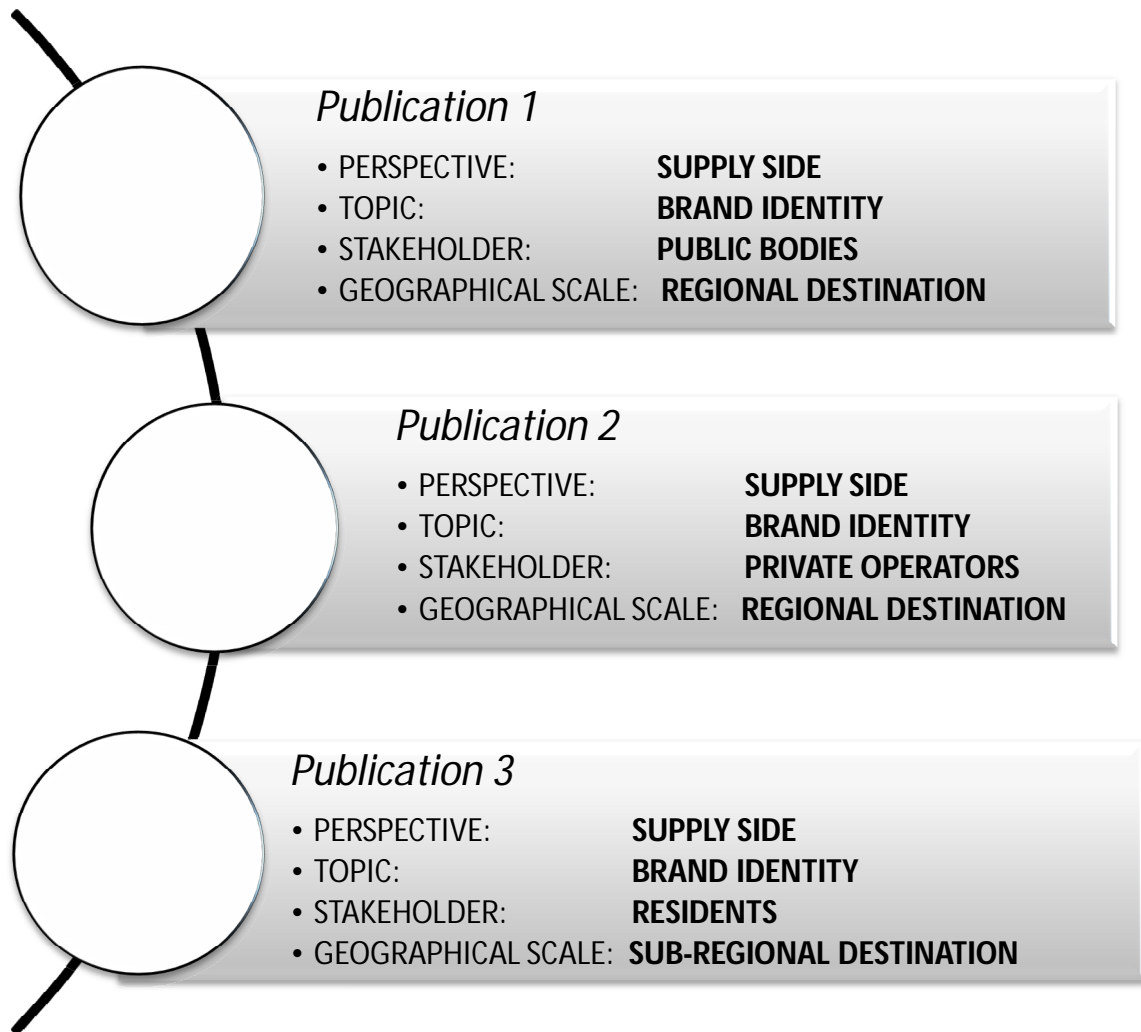
different and significant roles that can affect the brand development process. However, so far, residents have been merely studied in terms of destination image, attitudes toward tourism, or perceptions of pre-existing brands. Much less attention has been given to researching their role in the brand creation process or their perceptions of elements of brand identity, which should be taken into account by brand developers from the very beginning. The article argues that incorporating residents' opinions in the branding process is proving essential in order to build successful brands based on a destination's real identity. In this light, the main aims of this study are:

1. To expand theoretical development within the literature of residents' involvement, by focusing on brand identity in the initial stage of brand creation.
2. To develop a conceptual framework that will serve to examine residents' opinions on their destination brand identity.
3. To identify differences between socio-demographic groups of residents toward the brand development process.

The case study was carried out in Alto Piemonte, a non-administrative territory located in the Piedmont region of north-west Italy. Aiming to create a new brand, Alto Piemonte is a non-artificial destination that is adopting an inclusive approach that takes into account residents' opinions and what they want to transmit with the new brand. The study discloses these opinions, as well as the underlying features of the destination's brand identity.

Altogether, this doctoral thesis ultimately contributes to the existing body of tourism literature by providing an integrated supply-side perspective on destination branding that simultaneously explores the role of three main stakeholders in branding regional and sub-regional destinations. Figure 1 illustrates the outline of this doctoral thesis, which includes the three required articles to conduct a thesis by a compendium of publications.

Figure 1. Thesis outline



PUBLICATION 1

**REGIONAL DESTINATIONS, BRAND IDENTITY AND TOURISM
DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF PIEDMONT, ITALY.**

**Reproduction of the paper accepted in
Scienze Regionali. Italian Journal of Regional Science**

**REGIONAL DESTINATIONS, BRAND IDENTITY AND TOURISM DEVELOPMENT:
THE CASE OF PIEDMONT, ITALY.**

Destinazioni regionali, identità turistica e sviluppo territoriale: il caso del Piemonte.

Elisa Piva, Lluís Prats, Stefania Cerutti¹

Abstract

Research on destination branding has often focused on the demand-side of tourism, while few studies have looked at the supply-side perspective. Additionally, many studies have focused on either entire countries or individual cities, paying little attention to place branding at the regional and sub-regional level. Through in-depth interviews of key stakeholders in Piedmont, this paper addresses this lack of research and focuses on the supply-side of destination branding, and on the perceptions of stakeholders in the region. Results show that the process of developing a brand identity in the region is influenced by issues related to fragmentation, cooperation and coordination.

Keywords: regional destinations, tourism development, brand identity

JEL: L83, O2, R5

INTRODUCTION

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Within the literature on products, brands have always been considered the marketer's key tool for creating product differentiation (Gilmore, 2002). However, it is only in recent years that studies on tourism destination brands have increasingly gained momentum among researchers and practitioners (Franch *et al.*, 2008; Hernández *et al.*, 2016).

According to Konecnik and Go (2008), although the topic of destination branding has been partially covered under the alternative label of destination image studies for decades, less attention has focused on the identity of tourist destinations from a supply-side perspective.

Furthermore, few empirical studies on regional destination branding have been undertaken. Indeed, Wheeler *et al.* (2009) note there are only a handful of studies on Australian rural destination regions (e.g. Prideaux and Cooper, 2002; Dredge and Jenkins, 2003). While these studies are useful in identifying the challenges of regional tourism marketing, few have questioned the applicability of the regional branding concept or fully explored the contextual factors and processes which influence its implementation (Wheeler, 2007).

Thus, the main aim of this study is to examine the effects of branding at a regional level. Since short breaks are constantly on the increase (ITB, 2016), regional destinations are becoming increasingly important. Hence, one of the main contributions to this study is to explore brand development issues related to regions in depth.

The study also addresses the theme of brand identity in regional destinations and deepens our understanding of the role Destination Management Organizations (DMO) plays in regional branding and their perceptions of the regional brand.

The research setting for this project is the Piedmont region in northern Italy. Although tourism has not been important, historically, Piedmont is attracting an increasing number of tourists. This paper aims to deepen the understanding of how institutional tourism stakeholders perceive the regional brand and the destination management process in Piedmont. We conclude that the Piedmont Brand deals with several issues that have prevented successful brand development. The paper will also highlight the limitations of this project and suggestions for future research.

DESTINATION BRANDING AND BRAND IDENTITY

Even though the concept of branding has been applied extensively to products and services, the study of tourism destination branding is a relatively recent phenomenon (Pollice and

Spagnuolo, 2009; Hernández *et al.*, 2016), and has only come to our attention since the late 1990s.

Clearly, branding a company is different from branding a destination, but corporate business tools and concepts can also be used in destinations to build strong, appealing brands (Anholt, 2007; Larsen, 2015).

Branding strategies are becoming increasingly important as destinations need to compete more effectively, establish a decision-making framework and increase accountability to their stakeholders (Morgan *et al.*, 2011; Almeyda-Ibáñez and Babu, 2017).

Given this, destination branding has emerged “as a technique to create and develop the positioning of places at different geographical scales” (Mosca *et al.*, 2016, p.34). Many authors have stated that a destination brand is recognizable and successful when it meets tourists’ expectations of a given destination (Blain *et al.*, 2005; Anholt, 2010; Martins, 2015). According to Ritchie and Ritchie (1998, p.103), “a destination brand also serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience”. Various authors have defined destination branding over the years (see for example Gnoth, 1998; Cai Liping, 2002; Kerr, 2006). However, most of these definitions in the literature are focused on destination image and the demand side.

Several studies have supported the idea that brand identity and brand image are key to obtaining a popular destination brand (Cai Liping, 2002; Nandan, 2005; Martins, 2015). However, authors frequently conflate or confuse these two concepts (Wagner and Peters, 2009; Qu *et al.*, 2011). For instance, brand image focuses on tourists’ perceptions of destination-brand differentiation, whereas identity tends to be more concerned with how actors in the destination’s network make a particular brand unique (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001). Furthermore, brand identity characterizes the self-image and desired image of the market, whereas the brand image signifies the actual image retained by (potential) tourists (Pike, 2002). In other words, “identity is created by the sender whereas the image is perceived by the receiver” (Kapferer, 1997, p.32).

A destination brand should, therefore, be considered from the senders’ perspective as the projection of destination identity; and from the receivers’ perspective as the image of a place (Florek *et al.*, 2006). Within the field of marketing, some authors (Morgan *et al.*, 2002; Cai Liping, 2002; Hankinson, 2004) have claimed that destination brand identity is even more

important than image, especially from a strategic point of view. According to Hankinson (2004), this emerges from the view that positioning and communicating the destination brand needs to be rooted in reality, which then helps fulfil the experience promised to visitors (Saraniemi, 2009). Brand identity is created by private organisations or public administrations in relation to how they want their brand to be perceived (Kapferer, 1998). According to Konecnik and Go (2008, p.179), "Brand identity clearly specifies what the brand aspires to stand for and has multiple roles". As stated by Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000), brand identity is a set of positive associations with a particular destination that DMOs strive to build and maintain.

Brand identity also embodies the idea of how tourists should perceive a destination brand. Alternatively, the brand could be seen instead as a cluster of values emanating from different actors in a network (Lemmetyinen and Go, 2010). In this context, achieving a brand identity requires enlisting members who will commit to, and participate in, delivering a coherent set of values (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1999). Effective leaders know how to connect each key player's goals and actions within a network to everyone's benefit by understanding and meeting their needs, and motivating and inspiring them (Macrae, 1999). An integrative and inclusive approach to destination branding is a prerequisite when exploiting a destination's marketing potential and crafting a strong identity for it (Crockett and Wood, 1999). According to Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013), the success of place branding is affected by stakeholders for the ways in which place brands stem from the place's identity, which is understood as an interactive process of identity construction through a dialogue between stakeholders. Moilanen and Rainisto (2009) also support the idea that destination branding is a collective phenomenon where several actors should uphold the same brand and work together to deliver a coherent image. For Hankinson (2004), it is actually the direction taken by stakeholders that forms the basis for the whole process (Kavaratzis, 2012).

This discussion addresses a growing need to investigate the stakeholder's perception and the supply-side perspective of branding within regional tourist destinations. This case study explores this perspective and encapsulates the views of the main stakeholders responsible for managing and promoting tourism in the Piedmont region, Italy. In particular, this

research provides further insights into the characteristics of the regional branding process and its relationships with sub-regional stakeholders.

BRANDING THE PIEDMONT REGION

Strategically located between Central Europe and the Mediterranean, in the heart of one of Europe's most developed areas, Piedmont is the second-largest region in Italy (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Map of Piedmont region



Source: www.regione.piemonte.it

As shown by the trend of tourist flows and the resulting economic impact assessment (Regione Piemonte, 2012), Piedmont is today considered an emerging tourist destination. It has four sub-regional tourist areas: 1) the City of Turin and its metropolitan area, which offers a high level of cultural and museum tourism; 2) the mountains, which have both summer and winter tourism (Olympic Mountains, Upper Valsesia and Cuneo Mountains), and constitute about one-third of Piedmont's territory; 3) the Hills of Piedmont, an area characterized by a large and diverse tourism offer, including cultural, green, sport and increasingly food and wine tourism (area of Langhe, Monferrato and Roero); 4) Lakes

Maggiore, Orta and Mergozzo. These are famous tourism landmarks and contribute most to the tourist image of Piedmont in both the domestic and international market.

To market Piedmont as a tourist destination, the Region designed a multiyear communication strategy and began to diffuse its institutional identity. Another objective within the strategy was to create an institutional brand. The most recent institutional communication campaign of 2009 aims to spread the mission and the positioning of the region with the logo *Piemonte nuovo da sempre* (Piedmont, always new) (Figure 2). It merges tradition and innovation, design know-how, creativity and the dynamic character of the region.

Figure 2. Logo and payoff of Piedmont brand



Source: www.regione.piemonte.it

The aim of the 2015 regional plan of activities was to create an attractive brand image and then adopt an online communication strategy (web 2.0) to market it. In brief, the overall strategy of the region is to raise brand awareness of Piedmont institutional brand. Currently, the Piedmont region is reorganising its promotional activities, and hospitality and tourist information. In July 2016, new Regional Tourism Law 11/07/2016, no. 14, called "New provisions concerning the organization of promotional activities, hospitality and tourist information in Piedmont" was approved. The most significant change and focus point is the constitution of the Regional Agency for the development and promotion of tourism and quality food products in Piedmont, referred to as "DMO Turismo Piemonte". The DMO's mission is to boost Piedmont's tourist resources and products by competitively positioning them on domestic and international tourism markets through public and private partnerships. The DMO is responsible for developing the organisational and operational strategies to position the Piedmont brand on the international tourist scene.

METHODOLOGY

Due to the nature and aims of the research, the case study method was chosen as the most suitable method. Case study methods are widely recognised in social science studies, especially when seeking in-depth explanations of social behaviour (Zainal, 2007). Using this method, a researcher can better understand the behavioural conditions from the actor's perspective (Tellis, 1997). Furthermore, through case studies, researchers can analyse data meticulously in a specific context (Yin, 2014). According to Zainal (2007), in most cases, this method selects a small geographical area or a very limited number of individuals. For this project, the case study is on the geographical and administrative area known as Piedmont, located in the northwest of Italy.

In the Piedmont region, multiple local authorities have been established to manage and promote tourism. In particular, local tourist agencies, called *Agenzie Turistiche Locali* (ATLs), are organizations undertaking activities related to hospitality and providing information and tourist assistance at the sub-regional level.

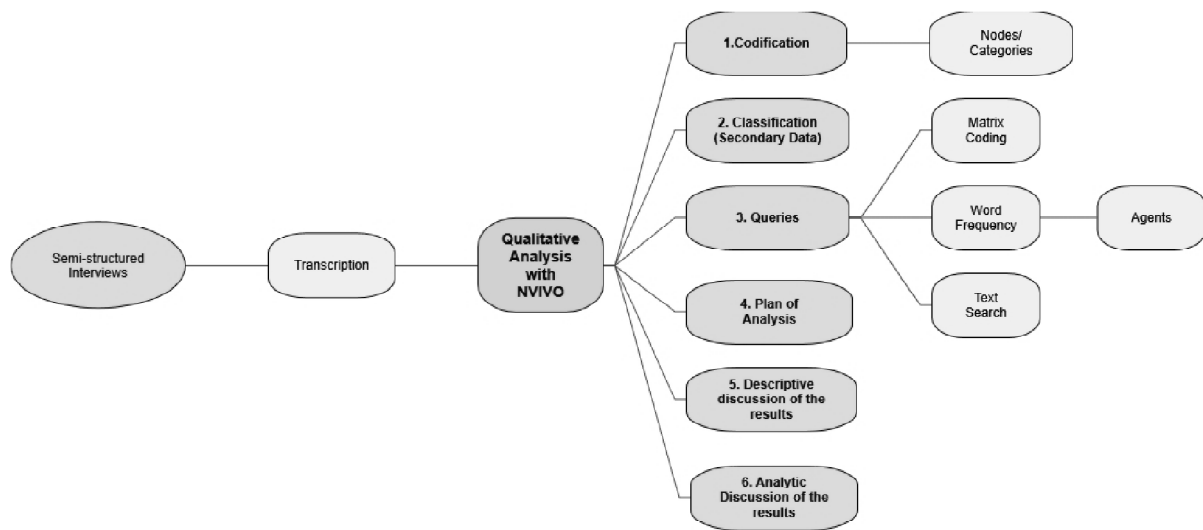
ATLs play a fundamental role in implementing the regional tourism strategies, overseeing activities, and coordinating local bodies and resources in the area.

At present, Piedmont is divided into nine ATLs: Turismo Torino e Provincia; Biella; Valsesia e Vercelli; Distretto turistico dei Laghi (Lake District); Novara; Langhe e Roero; Cuneo; Alexala; and Asti.

Taking the above into consideration, the purpose of the paper was to collect the views of the nine directors Piedmont ATLs, as they are key players within Piedmont's tourism organisation at a sub-regional level.

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which were then analysed in order to better understand the multifaceted nature of tourism in Piedmont (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Research Method: mind map



Source: author's own

Semi-structured interviews are structured sufficiently to address specific topics, while also giving participants the opportunity to offer new meanings to the focus of the study (Galletta, 2013). According to Konecnik and Go (2008, p.183), even though nine representatives may seem relatively small, “this represents a convenient sample regarding the criterion chosen for the sample selection”.

The semi-structured interview questions were based on the main topics relating to destination branding in the literature analysis.

Secondary data, and direct observation of current dynamics characterising the region helped identify relevant topics. For this research, we used a triangulation process (Bekhet and Zauszniewski, 2012; Yin, 2014), where data was gathered and analysed combining different methods, such as case study, semi-structured interviews and secondary data.

All interviews were conducted in Italian between May and June 2016. They were audio-recorded and subsequently fully transcribed. The interviews varied in length from half an hour to one hour. Secondary data was obtained from the institutional website of the Region, official documents and statistics (Sviluppo Piemonte Turismo, 2012, 2013, 2016).

Qualitative analysis was carried out using NVivo 11 software.

For the data analysis (Table 1), every full transcription was first coded by the three authors in order to provide reliable data and then classified in nodes and/or categories. Subsequently, the plan of analysis was completed by running different types of queries (e.g. matrix coding,

word frequency, text search) in order to find the relationships between categories, classifications and agents.

Table 1. Plan of Analysis

PLAN OF ANALYSIS		
CLASSIFICATIONS	CATEGORIES	AGENTS
Provinces	1. Brand message	Models of Reference
Tourism Development Level	1.1 Tourist Products	Trentino Alto Adige
Territorial attributes	1.2 Brand Description	Sicilia
Territorial connection/transports	1.3 Brand Meaning	Toscana
Political Orientation/Party	1.4 Destination Characteristics	Emilia Romagna
Borders	2. Brand Targets	Venezia
Presence of tourist plans	3. Strategies	Roma
Accommodation capacity - bed places	3.1 Process of Brand Creation	Firenze
Accommodation capacity - no of structures	3.1.1 Top Down	Torino
Tourism Growth - no of presences)	3.1.2 Bottom Up	Novara
Origin of tourists (foreign vs domestic)	3.2 Actions for Brand Development	Means of Communication
Number of Projects	3.2.1 Strategies in line with the Region	Radio
Investments in Tourism	3.2.2 Strategies NOT in line with the Region	TV
Regional contribution	3.2.3 Neutral opinion on regional strategies	Newspapers
Proximity to Turin	4. Brand Identity of Piedmont	Internet
	4.1 Clarity of Brand identity	Social Media
	4.1.1 Piedmont has a clear Brand Identity	Subjects
	4.1.2 Piedmont does NOT have a clear BI	Tourist Entrepreneurs/Enterprises
	4.1.3 Neutral opinion on BI	Tourist Operators
	4.2 Piedmont Destination	Politicians
	4.2.1 Piedmont as an Overall Destination	
	4.2.2 Piedmont as the sum of its sub-areas	
	4.2.3 Neutral opinion on Piedmont Destination	
	4.3 Piedmont Strategies	
	4.3.1 Adequate regional strategies	
	4.3.2 Inadequate regional strategies	
	4.3.3 Neutral opinion on Regional strategies	
	4.4 Management of the Region	
	4.4.1 Adequate management of the Region	
	4.4.2 Inadequate direction of the Region	

	4.4.3 Neutral opinion on regional management	
	5 Brand Awareness	
	FREE NODES	
	Collaboration Strategies	
	Strategies and Management	

Source: author's own

The following section presents a descriptive analysis of the results, while the conclusions include a more detailed analytical discussion of the findings.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings regarding the key elements contributing to brand identity in the Piedmont region. A qualitative analysis of the interviews highlighted three main themes which are presented and discussed below:

Fragmentation and Brand Identity

According to respondents, the higher the level of tourist development in an area, the more inadequate the regional strategies. As shown in Table 2, the ATLS with a medium or high level of development are those who complain that the regional strategies are unsuitable. Those areas with a low level of tourist development remain neutral. No one stated that the Regional strategies were adequate.

Table 2. Level of development and regional strategies

Tourism level (no. of tourists, in millions)	development	Adequate regional strategies	Inadequate regional strategies	Neutral	Not defined
High Level	> 1	0	1	0	2
Medium Level	0.5-1	0	1	0	1
Low level	< 0.5	0	0	2	2

Source: author's own

The destinations deeming regional strategies inappropriate are those that claim strong, internationally recognised local brands, which are perhaps even better known than the regional brand.

From a network perspective, a lack of adequate regional tourism strategies raised the issue of excessive fragmentation within local management of the many uncoordinated entities. Consequently, there is a significant dispersion of economic funds.

For example, respondent no.6 stated *"at the strategic level maybe we have not yet reached the top as a region, because the tourist power is divided into many actors [...] Unfortunately, there are the mountain communities, the municipalities, the provinces, the chambers of commerce, etc. [...] since we are also in a period where resources are not what they were in the past, as they are spread over so many areas"*.

This fragmentation also leads to inefficient, non-integrated management of communicational and promotional activities. In particular, respondent no.2 argued *"we have thought there could be more web activities better coordinated by the Region for a long time. Everyone has a regional web portal [...] but if Piedmont is ranked 8th among the top Italian regional destinations, we can't understand why it is then ranked 20th when it comes to web activities"*.

Signs of institutional and operational fragmentation in the Region are also demonstrated by the data relating to the clarity of Piedmont's brand identity (Table 3).

Table 3. Level of development and clarity of brand identity

Tourism development level (no. of tourists, in millions)		Clear regional brand identity	Unclear regional brand identity	Neutral
High Level	> 1	0	2	1
Medium Level	0.5-1	0	2	0
Low level	< 0.5	2	2	0

Source: author's own

6 out of 9 ATLS suggested there is limited awareness of the regional brand. According to Keller (2003, p.76), brand awareness is "the customers' ability to recall and recognize the brand as reflected by their ability to identify the brand under different conditions and to link the brand name, logo, symbol, and so forth to certain associations in memory". A high and positive destination brand awareness reduces the need for a detailed information search and contributes towards that destination ultimately becoming the destination of choice for the visitor (Seddighi and Theocharous, 2002).

Currently, Piedmont brand lacks consistency. In particular, the ATLS with a medium-high level of development are those who complain that the Region does not have a recognizable brand. Respondent no.6 emphasized that *“the Lake Maggiore brand is much better known abroad than the Piedmont brand”*. Respondent no.9 also reiterates that *“Piedmont has not managed to create a brand. Piedmont has seen an increase in tourist numbers in recent years, however, there isn’t a regional brand yet. There is something at the national level at least, but if we go abroad it is very difficult to talk about Piedmont”*. Respondent no.2 stressed that *“Piedmont brand has certainly grown in recent years, but some local brands remain strong because they are very specialized in certain products, and it is normal that consumers identify their travel motivations with that product more than with the regional destination as a whole”*.

The only ATLS who argued that the Region has a clear brand identity were those with a low level of tourist development and little known sub-regional brands. This is probably due to the fact that these ATLS have not developed their own branding strategies and they believe that the Region is responsible for communicating the regional identity.

An analysis of the interviews highlights how Piedmont is not yet perceived as an overall tourist destination, but rather the sum of its nine sub-regional areas, as stated by the ATLS with a medium-high level of development (Table 4).

Table 4. Level of development and Piedmont tourist destination

Tourism level (no. of tourists, in millions)	development	Piedmont as an overall destination	Piedmont as the sum of the 9 provinces	Neutral
High Level	> 1	0	2	1
Medium Level	0.5-1	0	2	0
Low level	< 0.5	1	1	2

Source: author’s own

Respondent no.9 specified these sub-regional areas and their related tourism products: *“there is the northern area that has the lake, a very strong tourism product; there is the area of the Langhe which has the attraction of wine, which promotes the brand; there is the metropolitan City of Turin, which has taken huge steps forward in obtaining and giving itself a tourist brand image. There is skiing in winter and other outdoor activities in summer thanks to the mountains. But Piedmont, as a product, does not exist”*.

Respondent no.1 confirmed this opinion arguing that *“in Piedmont, there are areas that have independently and consciously branded themselves. Then there are other realities, such as the Lake District and Turin, that are very strong destinations; so, it’s hard to think that Piedmont brand could come first when compared to these other areas that have been working on their products for a very long time”*.

The research shows that these well-known, sub-regional brands are the outcome of a brand creation process involving a small group of decision-makers aided by professionals (Bottazzi and Mondini, 2006). The result is often top-down planning and promotion that leaves destination communities with little input or control over their own destinations (Murphy, 1985).

As shown in Table 5, ATLS with a high level of development have used the top-down model. However, this approach does not always guarantee high-level development, as other sub-regional destinations using this model have shown a low level of development.

Table 5. Level of development and brand creation process

Tourism development level (no. of tourism presences, in millions)	Top-down model	Bottom-up model
High Level > 1	3	0
Medium Level 0.5-1	1	1
Low level < 0.5	3	1

Source: author’s own

Data reveals that Piedmont ATLS following the traditional Italian planning methods favour a top-down model (7 out of 9), and only two cases used the bottom-up model.

In the tourism context, the bottom-up approach indicates both challenges and opportunities for destination communities working with the public and private sectors. The concept of participatory tourism planning initially develops at a grassroots level and extends to a global level by incorporating local wisdom, knowledge, culture and needs through alternative future scenarios of global tourism transformation (Theerapappisit, 2012). There is, of course, no one right answer to the dilemma of how to balance top-down and bottom-up forces, either by reference to the criteria of democratic participation or efficiency in planning and management processes (Carley and Christie, 2000) within the practices of destination management and brand creation.

The bottom-up processes activated in Piedmont so far include Biella ATL and Alexala ATL. Both are still at an early stage, as although the tourism industry operators and local institutions are involved, the local communities and the residents remain excluded.

Cooperation and Brand Identity

In recent years, Piedmont has gradually distanced itself from traditional approaches, in which tourism was managed as a social activity, which often led to a fragmented distribution of both funding and initiatives in the area, and a lack of attention to economic return. In the last regional multiannual programme for tourism, investments with a higher impact on the various tourist products and on the creation of a regional tourism brand were prioritised.

By taking an entrepreneurial approach, as in any other economic activity, the Region relies on transparency and tools which measure the return on a single investment, in order to understand the value and the benefits of profits of every individual action (Sviluppo Piemonte Turismo, 2013).

From this perspective, the regional government has identified and subsequently invested in the key markets and product segments that can produce the greatest return in terms of brand recognition and numbers of tourist flows. These investments are aimed specifically at developing and promoting mountain tourism and city tourism, which are considered fundamental to the regional brand identity.

This trend is also highlighted in the analysis of data on individual ATLs (Table 6), which shows how these areas represent the destinations with the highest level of investments. Table 6 shows medium investment in the lakes area and the hills.

Table 6. Investments in tourism and territorial attributes

Investments in tourism (millions of € per year)	Low lands	Mountains	Lakes	Urban	Hills	Mountain and low lands
High > 10	0	1	0	1	0	0
Medium 5-10	0	0	1	0	2	1
Low < 5	1	1	0	0	1	0

Source: author's own

Also in terms of tourism projects, the higher number occurs in these areas, with particular reference to the mountain areas of Cuneo ATL and the urban area of Turin ATL (Table 7).

Table 7. Tourist projects and territorial attributes

Tourist projects (n. of tourist projects per year)	Low lands	Mountains	Lakes	Urban	Hills	Mountain and low lands
High > 200	0	1	0	1	0	0
Medium 100-200	0	0	0	0	3	0
Low < 100	1	1	1	0	0	1

Source: author's own

The resources allocated to Piedmont mountains support investments for the improvement of tourist and recreational infrastructures on a small scale, as well as the enhancement of the related tourist information for the outdoor product, coordinated between the local and regional levels.

The Region's goal is to diversify and deseasonalize the tourist offer, to preserve the landscape, promote local products through direct contact with tourists, and foster job creation in rural areas. On the other hand, today's Turin is a city which is changing, and gradually prioritizing tourism and culture. The city's economy has relied primarily on the industry, but since the 2006 Winter Olympic Games, it has invested substantial financial resources to re-invent itself as a tourist destination, and European cultural capital.

Consistent with the data on investments, the hills area reveals a medium number of projects. The majority are initiatives selling outdoor and gastronomic products aimed at developing this hills area as an emerging tourist destination.

Worth noting, are the results for the lakes area. Despite a relatively high investment in tourism, there are a rather low number of projects. This is due to the stage the Tourist Lakes District project finds itself at present, and only a limited number of tourist projects are being developed in this area. However, there is a large investment commitment with a particular focus on the main nodes of the destination.

In general, the Piedmont region has co-financed ATL projects addressed to different areas of expertise such as, tourist offers, planning and tourism organization, or promoting of tourism and sport.

The ATLs that have benefited the most from the regional contributions are Turin, the Lake District, Novara and Cuneo (Table 8).

Table 8. Regional contribution and territorial attributes

Regional contribution (regional contribution/ total expenditure)	Low lands	Mountains	Lakes	Urban	Hills	Mountain and low lands
High > 60 %	1	1	1	1	0	0
Medium 30 – 60 %	0	0	0	0	0	0
Low < 30 %	0	1	0	0	3	1

Source: author's own

The region has therefore shown willingness to support both high-level development destinations (Lakes, Mountains and Urban), and lesser developed areas (Low Lands). In the hills area, the low regional contributions appear to be compensated by the presence of other sources of funding, which is in part private (e.g. enterprises, banking foundations, etc.).

According to respondents, the ATLS with the largest number of regional contributions are those who claim to have strategies in line with the regional ones. Those with low contributions are mostly neutral or not consistent (Table 9).

Table 9. Regional contribution and actions for brand development

Regional contribution (regional contribution/ total expenditure)	Strategies in line with the Piedmont region	Strategies NOT in line with the Piedmont region	Neutral
High > 60 %	3	0	0
Medium 30 – 60 %	0	0	0
Low < 30 %	2	2	2

Source: author's own

The synergy between ATLS and the regional government is embodied in a partnership for the activity development, which enhances and strengthens the regional and sub-regionals tourist brands (e.g. educational tours, press tours, exhibitions, workshops).

Respondent no.1 stated that *"Although we have implemented and manage the activities, this is shared with our partners: the city of Turin, the Olympic municipalities, the metropolitan area and, of course, the Piedmont region."* Respondent no.5 emphasised, *"actions are first decided by us, then shared with the Piedmont region"*.

Respondent no.6 claimed that they always participated in both Italian and international trade fairs in collaboration with the regional government, but highlighted their lack of management and a strategic tourism plan at a regional level.

This view is also shared by ATLS who claim that their actions are not in line with the regional strategies. Respondent no.2 explained that policies put in place have resulted from their own decision because *“if the Region does not produce anything (strategic plan) for a few years in a row, then they cannot expect to decide the regional policy. Clearly, everyone tries to act as they can and wish to”*.

Respondent no.1 suggested that *“it would be appropriate if the regional government outlined its regional strategy better, and above all, instead of overlapping with work already done by local actors, take it into account [...]. The Region also leaves out the sub-regional areas, which could be integrated as a system”*.

Hence, in the regional scenario, there are different positions arising from the diverse processes of creating and positioning sub-regional brands, which are consistent to a greater or lesser extent with the regional strategies.

Coordination, Peripherality and Brand Identity

By correlating the data on regional strategies (see Table 2), already discussed, with the data on distance from the main city in the Piedmont region (Turin), it emerges that the ATLS who manifest a lack of efficient regional strategies are those with medium-low proximity (Table 10).

Table 10. Regional strategies and proximity to Turin

Proximity to Turin (distance, in km)	adequate regional strategies	NOT adequate regional strategies	neutral	not defined
High < 60	0	0	1	1
Medium 60 – 100	0	1	1	4
Low > 100	0	1	0	0

Source: author's own

This is because collaboration was better between the Region and ATLS regarding specific projects or events affecting areas close to Turin and its metropolitan area. In fact, such

proximity favours establishing coordination networks, searching for agreed solutions, and exchanging relevant information in a much more direct way.

ATLs in The Lake District, which is further away from Turin, criticized the Region's weak coordination: *"we feel rather abandoned by the centre (Turin) [...] because we are considered a peripheral territory compared to Turin, and therefore they do not take us into consideration much"*.

The research also reveals that the limited growth in tourist numbers affects the adequacy of the regional tourism strategies. As shown in Table 11, the ATLs with lower growth in terms of tourism numbers in 2015 are those who complain that the regional strategies are inadequate.

Table 11. Regional strategies and tourism growth

Tourist Growth (% growth in tourist numbers compared to 2014)	Adequate regional strategies	Inadequate regional strategies	Neutral	Not defined
High < 10 %	0	0	0	1
Medium 5 – 10 %	0	0	2	1
Low < 5 %	0	2	0	3

Source: author's own

This dynamic has helped reinforce the negative view of the regional government's role in developing effective tourism policies, adversely affecting even the best-known sub-regional brands. Respondent no.2 stated, *"to say that the Region has developed major regional tourism strategies in recent years would be a bit too generous [...] for there to be more fruitful relations with the Region, which we would all welcome, the latter should work to create more coordinated activities"*.

In brief, the absence of a strategic regional tourism plan, and a clear definition of tourism policies is making it difficult for ATLs and local stakeholders to find a clearly referenced, unique and strong regional brand identity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Since the Winter Olympic Games in 2006, Piedmont has renewed its image, shifting from a predominantly industrial region to a tourist destination of international interest. This trend has grown by 28% over the last decade, enabling Piedmont to consolidate its position on the national and international markets, with more than 13 million visitors in 2014 (Osservatorio Turistico Regionale, 2014).

Even though Piedmont presents this positive scenario, the findings of the study suggest that three main issues need to be tackled in order to enhance its brand identity and further develop tourism.

The first critical issue is fragmentation, where sub-regional brands prevail over the regional brand. This is in line with previous studies on fragmentation which state that fragmentation leads to different tourism destination images being emitted by a large number of agents. It also means that the regional government's capacity to manage and control this situation through a complete image of the destination is limited (Camprubi, 2015). According to Shaw and Williams (2002), fragmentation of the tourism system implies that different players with different values and interests are involved in the branding process, and this is one of the reasons why attempts to develop a regional brand identity has not been successful (Marzano and Scott, 2005).

Morrison *et al.* (1997) pointed out the necessity for a central DMO which serves as an "industry coordinator", providing a clear focus and encouraging less industry fragmentation. Zach and Fesenmaier (2009) argue that a DMO should create a supportive environment to foster innovation, guide stakeholders in the development of innovative products, and enhance local partnership to avoid fragmentation and achieve cohesion.

This idea of cohesion is strongly linked to the second theme: cooperation. Bornhorst *et al.* (2010) affirmed that cooperation among stakeholders increases the success of tourist destinations, while fragmentation decreases it. Furthermore, Buhalis (2000) considers that destination branding is a difficult goal because of the destination's tangible and intangible elements, and the different ideals stakeholders' have. In this respect, he suggests they collaborate, instead of competing for the destination's success (García *et al.*, 2012).

Consistent with these studies, our results also show how the lack of cooperation between the Piedmont region and its sub-regional brands is another reason why the regional brand is poorly positioned in the international tourist market.

In his study on rural communities, Cai Liping (2002) posited that cooperative branding builds a stronger destination identity than an individual community can. Cai Liping also found that both the region and its member communities benefited from cooperative branding by projecting a consistent cognitive image based on shared destination attributes.

The third major issue in this context is that of coordination and geographical peripherality. Results reveal that the Piedmont region, particularly its peripheral areas, lacks coordination from central institutions, which tend to gravitate towards Turin. Since no previous research has been conducted on peripherality and brand management, this result represents a clear contribution of this paper.

As regards coordination, previous studies have argued that coordinators should create a mindset among the different stakeholders in which tourism managers must begin to think laterally, forging partnerships to achieve organizational and collective goals (Selin and Chavez, 1995). Moreover, empirical research has shown that connecting a diverse array of stakeholder groups helped them to finally recognize their common interests and to realize the advantages to be gained from working together, as opposed to competing with each other (Go *et al.*, 2004). The stakeholders gained a greater strategic knowledge of their geographic area and the factors which might affect the long-term sustainability of the regional industries (Williams *et al.*, 1998). However, this is a collaborative process, which up until now does not appear to have been taken into consideration in the Piedmont Region.

Within the destination marketing activities, the need to create and manage a regional brand has only been recently recognized. According to Franch *et al.* (2007), the regional brand should be designed to convey an image and identity of the destination that are shared by its members (internal operators) and perceived as unique from outside the destination (the market). Thus, a regional brand should represent a tool to foster collaboration within the destination, especially between the region that manages the brand and the local operators. Moreover, a regional brand overcomes the individualism of the sub-regional areas by having a shared identity.

The findings make an important contribution to our understanding of the interrelationship between fragmentation, cooperation, coordination and peripherality, and inadequate regional branding strategies. They also have significant practical implications for the destination marketing managers of the Piedmont Region.

The results highlight the need to adopt a regional destination brand for Piedmont, based on the concept of an overarching umbrella brand for a geographic region. To this, we can add the intended benefits for regional tourism planning of a management and marketing strategy which includes a sense of cohesion, and a basis for collaboration between regional destinations and local operators (Wheeler *et al.*, 2011).

The findings also suggest that an umbrella brand would be beneficial to reduce fragmentation and avoid dissimilar destination images being emitted.

The variety of stakeholders shaping the tourism scenario of Piedmont should be coordinated by a stronger regional DMO, whose role is to foster a collaborative and cohesive environment. Furthermore, the region should engage in defining clear tourism policies and the continual creation of annual regional strategic tourism plans.

This would also favour the more peripheral territories, and being in line with regional strategies would reduce their sense of being abandoned by the regional institutions.

This study also has several limitations that need to be addressed. Firstly, it was conducted using only qualitative methodology. Other studies have shown that integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods allow data to be used in a more complete and synergistic way (Creswell *et al.*, 2003; Kelle and Erzberger, 2004).

Another limitation is found within the nature of the respondents: the interviews were conducted only among the best informants, omitting all the other subjects who have an active role in the promotion of tourism in Piedmont at a local level.

Furthermore, the results relate to the dynamics in this particular context and therefore are not yet generalisable.

Thus, future research should address this issue using mixed methods, also taking the demand-side perspective into consideration. In order to generalise these results, further study should also include all the other local institutions, as well as other regions. It would also be very useful for academics to conduct comparison studies between other Italian regions and/or other foreign regions.

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PUBLICATION 2

**Determining the effects of the accommodation industry for
homogeneous place identity.**

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Determining the effects of the accommodation industry for homogeneous place identity.

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Abstract

The accommodation industry in many destinations plays a critical role in projecting place identity. However, previous studies have paid little attention to this, analysing place branding almost entirely in terms of image rather than from a supply-side perspective. In addition, empirical studies on small, regional, emerging or reviving destinations are still lacking in the place branding literature. This paper addresses these gaps by investigating how accommodation establishments are projecting place identity during tourists' visits to these destinations. The aim of this study is to verify the characteristics which may encourage a more homogeneous projection of place identity, and be consistent with messages projected by public actors. Results show that non-hotels are more aligned to the place identity proposed by local authorities, and thus project a more homogeneous place identity. Results also suggest that families are effective communicators of place identity values in small, emerging or reviving destinations.

Keywords: stakeholders' involvement; accommodation industry; place branding; small, emerging destination; place identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism and hospitality has developed into a global industry, and is currently a major economic contributor in many countries. In this global scenario, a diverse variety of

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destinations are increasingly relying on place branding strategies in order to compete more effectively and increase accountability to their stakeholders (Almeyda-Ibáñez, & George, 2017; Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2011). However, although tourism activities have been exhaustively examined in big destinations, those in the smaller ones have only been explored briefly (Tang, 2014; Nghiem-Phu, 2018), and empirical studies on regional destination branding are severely lacking. Until now, many studies on place branding have focused on either entire countries or individual cities, while less attention has been given to place branding at a regional or sub-regional level, outside of regions that are already well-known brands (Wheeler, 2007; Wheeler, Frost, & Weiler, 2011; Nghiem-Phu, 2018). Studying regional destinations is useful as most European countries are divided into regions for management purposes, and the rise of short breaks has generated more visits on a smaller geographical scale than ever before.

Within this scenario, several authors have argued that place branding can be seen as a collective phenomenon in which the involvement of stakeholders is critical to delivering a coherent place identity from the supply perspective (Konecnik, & Go, 2008; Bregoli, 2012; Choo, Park, & Petrick, 2011; Campelo, Aitken, Thyne, & Gnoth, 2013; Yusof, & Ismail, 2014; Hereźniak, 2017). Various authors also claimed that the messages and values issued by stakeholders need to be consistent, coordinated and homogeneously projected in order to be effective (Fyall, & Leask 2007; Bregoli, 2012). In destinations such as rural or mountain areas, delivering a completely homogeneous and coherent place identity is not an easy task, especially due to the limited resources available for investing in marketing and destination management. In fact, small firms and organisations are more likely to experience problems regarding capitalisation and marketing awareness and practice (Mc Cartan-Quinn, & Carson, 2003).

Previous studies have also suggested that the influence stakeholders have on the place branding process, and the power this may exert over the entire place branding process (Wood, & Gray, 1991; Marzano, & Scott, 2009; Saito, & Ruhanen, 2017). The accommodation industry is undoubtedly one of the most important private stakeholders in the entire tourism industry (Lahap et al., 2016). Accommodation is an extremely dynamic and complex industry (González-Díaz, Gómez, & Molina, 2015) that has experienced significant change over the past few decades. In recent years, the number of hotels has decreased in almost all

European countries due to the sharp rise in non-hotel accommodation such as Bed-and-Breakfasts, agro-tourism, or tourist residences. González-Díaz, Gómez, & Molina (2015) demonstrated that the rise of non-hotel accommodation is more evident in inland rural or mountain areas.

Undoubtedly, accommodation establishments can play a key role in place branding, especially in destinations where the accommodation industry acts as a main stakeholder (Beritelli, & Laesser, 2011). Images and perceptions of a destination develop in a visitor's mind through promotion, advertisements, public relations, word-of-mouth and a visitor's encounter with products and services (Lahap et al., 2016). Both hotels and non-hotels have direct contact with visitors and are their main point of reference for the whole period of their stay at the destination. Accommodation establishments are constantly transmitting identity values, and can influence the image formed in the tourists' minds during the trip (Camprubí, & Coromina, 2016). This is especially true in small destinations which are rarely advertised through large promotional campaigns, and where the accommodation establishment is the main, or only, identity builder for incoming tourists.

Although accommodation establishments play a major role in place identity, previous studies have analysed them almost entirely in terms of accommodation image. Place branding from a supply-side perspective has received little attention in the academic literature (Konecnik, & Go, 2008; Bregoli, 2012).

In light of these considerations, the aim of this paper is to determine how the main stakeholders in continual contact with tourists are projecting the identity of a place, and what factors could foster a more homogeneous projection of the place identity in harmony with messages sent out by the main public actors leading the place branding process.

The study was conducted in Aosta Valley, a small, reviving, mountain region in northern Italy where the accommodation industry plays a crucial role in the regional economy.

Results show that there are significant differences between hotel and non-hotel accommodation when communicating and coordinating place identity. The research also argues that there is a need to better coordinate and align the transmitted identity among the most influential stakeholders in order to reach a higher degree of success in the branding process. The study highlights the fact that new types of non-hotel accommodation, which are small, local, family-run businesses, are more aligned to the institutional communication

emitted by the regional authorities. Thus, these characteristics may boost the homogeneity of place identity in mountain regions or other small, emerging or reviving destinations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Various tourism destinations are increasingly using place branding strategies to improve their position as leisure and business tourism destinations, as well as attractive places to study and live (Mosca, Youssef, & Majd, 2016; Almeyda-Ibáñez, & George, 2017).

Qu, Kim, & Im (2011, p. 466) define place branding as “a way to communicate a destination’s unique identity by differentiating a destination from its competitors”. In other words, a place brand must embody something about a destination that is unique and different (Campelo et al., 2013).

However, destinations frequently conceive place branding as being as simple as designing new logos, developing catchy slogans, or launching new promotional campaigns (Kavaratzis, & Hatch, 2013). Tasci, & Gartner (2009) recognise that destinations need to go beyond the usual marketing activities and recognize the real value and identity of a place by delivering a consistent brand message and theme. Many authors agree that this is only possible when stakeholders are involved in the place branding process (Bregoli, 2012; Campelo et al., 2013; Choo, Park, & Petrick, 2011; Konecnik, & Go, 2008; Yusof, & Ismail, 2014; Hereźniak, 2017). Buhalis (2000) identified six main groups of stakeholders that need to be taken into consideration: 1) the public sector and government; 2) tourism enterprises and SME’s; 3) tour operators; 4) residents; 5) tourists; and 6) environmental groups, cultural groups and so on. Within this plethora of actors, the government employs a place branding strategy which engages the public administration in relationships with internal stakeholders to foster citizenship, community participation, and social capital (Hereźniak, 2017).

Klijn, Eshuis, & Braun (2012) found that the complex interdependencies among actors and the complex nature of the decision-making process implies that stakeholders need to be included if governance processes such as place branding are to be successful. This is because “those actors often have different perceptions about the place to be branded, the desirable solutions to problems and different ideas about the desirable image to be communicated. We may expect multiple interpretations of the brand or even contestation if the image contains elements that are up for dispute” (Klijn, Eshuis, & Braun, 2012, p. 504). In fact,

these actors have their own interests, benefits, and responsibilities regarding a place, and often have opposing ideas (Konecnik, & Petek, 2012). It has been posited that place branding strategies which engage local stakeholders are likely to be effective, while those which ignore their viewpoints are highly likely to fail (Houghton, & Stevens, 2011).

Involving stakeholders has long been seen as essential to developing collaboration within the tourism industry (Medeiros de Araujo, & Bramwell, 2002). Tourism planners play a key role in this process, and, under the premises of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) they therefore have a responsibility to ensure that all relevant stakeholders' views are incorporated (Maiden, 2008). Various authors state that place branding is a process which needs to be coordinated rather than simply managed (Ooi, 2004; Fyall, & Leask 2007; Bregoli, 2012), and that stakeholder coordination is vital for the development of a successful destination brand (Ooi, 2004; Konecnik, & Go, 2008; Bregoli, 2012). The direct link between stakeholder coordination and successful branding is highlighted by Scott, Parfitt & Laws (2001, p. 202), who claim that "the difficulties of coordination and control have the potential to undermine a strategic approach to marketing based on destination branding because campaigns can be undertaken by a variety of tourist businesses with no consultation or coordination on the prevailing message or the destination values being promoted."

These messages and values represent the brand identity of a place. Place identity is defined as a set of positive associations with a particular destination that destination management organisations strive to build and maintain (Aaker, & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Brand identity also embodies the idea of how tourists should perceive a destination brand. Since the positioning and communication of a brand needs to be rooted in reality (Saraniemi, 2009), brand identity is essential for the generalisation of desirable characteristics projected from the supplier's perspective (Qu et al., 2011). Place identity can be created by private organisations or public administrations in relation to how they want their brand to be perceived (Kapferer, 2012; Pike, & Page, 2014). Hence, identity tends to be more concerned with how actors in destination networks make a particular brand unique (Harris, & de Chernatony, 2001). A destination brand is seen as a cluster of values emanating from various actors in a network (Lemmetynen, & Go, 2010).

Several authors have stressed the need for a coordinated process which delivers a homogeneous projection of place identity. For example, Moilanen & Rainisto (2009) support

the idea that place branding is a collective phenomenon involving several actors who uphold the same brand and work together to deliver a coherent image.

A destination's identity is only strong and consistent when there is an integrative and inclusive approach to destination branding (Crockett, & Wood, 1999; Bregoli, 2012). When a unique message is missing, tourists perceive fragmented images that are unlikely to reflect the reality of the destination. This happens in destinations where the public sector or the DMO in charge of marketing the destination lacks control and coordination (Camprubí, 2015).

As Hankinson (2001) stresses, place branding is successful only when there is "unity of purpose and commitment by the stakeholders to a common branding strategy" (Hankinson, 2001, p. 137).

Marzano, & Scott (2009) argue that stakeholders' power, in the form of authority and persuasion, may influence the whole destination branding process. Place branding, has focused on categorizing stakeholders in terms of their power, which is defined as the "ability to impose one's will or advance one's own interest" (Reed, 1997; p. 567).

In light of the above, this study focuses on private stakeholders in the accommodation sector who exert the most influence, and examines their relationship with the public administration actor in the regional government with the most influence. The aim is to verify if place identity in this type of region is homogeneously and consistently communicated and identify the factors affecting the branding process within the accommodation industry in this and other similar small emerging or reviving destinations.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Context

Italy has the highest number of rooms in the European Union, and is fifth in the world for international arrivals (over 50 million) (Federalberghi, 2017). The average size of Italian hotels (32.9 rooms per hotel) is higher than the EU mean (22.4). With approximately 4.9 million beds, it is evident that the hotel industry is a strategic sector in the Italian economy. Hotels are the main type of accommodation, and represent around 74 % of the total number of beds (3.7 million). Non-hotels make up the remainder of the accommodation offer, and

this rapidly growing area currently accounts for 26% of the total number of beds. The highest number of hotels are found in coastal areas, followed by destinations with historical and artistic interest. In contrast, rural destinations and mountain areas have registered a slight decrease in the number of hotels in favour of non-hotel accommodation.

Aosta Valley is a very mountainous region surrounded by the highest peaks in Europe. It is the smallest and least populated region in Italy, but has a strong tourism development values thanks to its rich natural, historical, artistic and cultural heritage.

Historically, this is region is where Italy and France meet and fuse together, a peculiarity which led to the official adoption of bilingualism, and the region being granted autonomous status. Since the 1960s, tourism has grown and developed into the driving force of the economy and social organisation of the region (Janin, 1976). The public administration, and in particular the regional authorities, has increasingly invested in the accommodation industry, which has also taken on the function of centralizing and coordinating the service sector. Recent data confirm that the hotel industry is a very important sector in the Aosta Valley economy (Table 1). Although the total number of operating businesses has decreased over the years, accommodation establishments continue to increase. Data show a slight decrease in hotels in favour of non-hotel accommodation, which currently make up about 64% of the total establishments. In more general terms, the hospitality industry accounted for more than 11% of all operating businesses in 2017.

Table 1. Capacity of tourist accommodation establishments in Aosta Valley (2014-2017)

TYPE OF TOURIST ACCOMMODATION ESTABLISHMENT	2014		2015		2016		2017	
	no. of		no. of		no. of		no. of	
	accommodation establishments	no. of beds	accommodation establishments	no. of beds	accommodation establishments	no. of beds	accommodation establishments	no. of beds
Hotels	461	22,851	452	22,593	453	22,582	450	22,500
Non-hotels	658	30,656	713	31,626	752	31,896	796	32,907
TOTAL	1,119	53,507	1,165	54,219	1,205	54,478	1,246	55,407
Total number of operating businesses	11,650		11,357		11,285		11,033	

Source: own elaboration based on data from official statistics (*Assessorato Turismo, sport, commercio e trasporti - Dipartimento turismo, sport e commercio and Regione Valle d'Aosta*)

3.2 Instrument, sample and data analysis

Research began in September 2017 in collaboration with the Association of Hoteliers and Tourist Enterprises of Aosta Valley (ADAVA Federalberghi Valle D'Aosta), the Aosta Valley Chambers of Commerce (Chambre Valdôtaine), the Regional Ministry of Tourism, Sport, Trade and Transport (Assessorato Turismo, sport, commercio e trasporti), and the Ski Instructors Association (Associazione Maestri di Sci).

In order to determine how accommodation establishments are projecting Aosta Valley's place identity during the tourist stay, the research takes a qualitative approach based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Interviews are the most widely employed method in qualitative research (Bryman, 2012), and semi-structured interviews are considered particularly flexible and useful as they are sufficiently structured to address specific topics, while also giving participants the opportunity to offer new meanings and insights into the focus of the study (Galletta, 2013). The interview sample consists of 33 accommodation establishments in the region, all of which were elected and appointed representatives of the ADAVA board of directors. This sample selection guaranteed a full representation of the different types of accommodation (hotels and non-hotels such as Bed & Breakfasts, apartments, agri-tourism, camp sites, etc.), as well as high heterogeneity in terms of tourism areas.

The semi-structured interview questions were based on the main topics relating to place branding in the literature analysis. Secondary data and direct observation of current dynamics characterising the region helped to identify further relevant topics. We used a triangulation process (Bekhet, & Zauszniewski, 2012; Yin, 2014), where data was gathered and analysed combining different methods, such as case study, semi-structured interviews and secondary data. All interviews were conducted in Italian between March and May 2018. They were audio-recorded and subsequently fully transcribed. Secondary data was obtained from regional official documents and statistics.

Data were analysed using the qualitative software NVivo 11. The use of a qualitative data analysis software adds rigour to qualitative research (Welsh, 2002). For the data analysis (Table 2), every full transcription was first coded in order to provide reliable data, and then classified into nodes/categories and classifications. Matrix coding query was used to compare categories and classifications, and to find possible relationships. Subsequently, the plan of analysis was completed by running other types of queries (e.g., word frequency and text search).

Table 2. Plan of analysis

PLAN OF ANALYSIS	
CLASSIFICATIONS	NODES/CATEGORIES
Type of management	1. Characteristics of the accommodation establishment
Type of accommodation establishment	1.1 Type of accommodation establishment
Number of rooms	1.2 Type of management
Age of manager	1.3 Maximum capacity
Length of time in ownership	2. Profile of the hotel owner/manager
Origin of the employees	2.1 Ownership of the accommodation establishment
Strategies for communicating tourist attractions	2.2 Age
Strategies for promoting the accommodation establishment	2.3 Motivations
Presence of the regional logo on the website	3. Strategies and instruments for promoting the accommodation establishment
Presence of information regarding local and regional attractions on the website	4. Communication of tourist attractions
Presence of references/links to institutional communication on the website	4.1 Main attractions recommended to visitors
Influence of institutional communication in attractions recommended to visitors	4.2 strategies for communicating the tourist attractions
Experience of direct visits to recommended attractions by the hotel owner/manager	4.3 Experience of direct visits to recommended attractions by the hotel owner/manager
	5. Relationship with institutional communication

Source: author's own

4. Results

This section presents the findings concerning how the diverse characteristics of the accommodation establishments can affect how place identity is communicated and its alignment with institutions in order to send a single message. Results show how different types of accommodation establishments and different management styles can influence the outcome of the communication, and can be aligned to a greater or lesser extent with the message promoted by the regional authorities. The main findings are grouped in two topics, discussed below:

4.1 Type of management and how place identity is communicated

Relevant data concerning the type of management adopted to run the accommodation establishments emerged from the interview analysis. A family management style appears to predominate in the Aosta Valley hospitality industry. In particular, most accommodation establishments use a family management model that permanently or periodically employs staff from outside the family (79% of the establishments interviewed). Smaller establishments, on the other hand, prefer a “family members only” type of management (12%), and only 9% of these establishments said they were using a predominantly corporate model with non-family members.

Data analysis reveal that different types of management adopted by the accommodation establishments can affect the way the place identity is communicated. Data analysis show that different types of management can influence the kind of strategies employed by the accommodation establishments to communicate tourist attractions (Tab. 3).

Table 3. Type of management and strategies for communicating tourist attractions

Type of management	Direct communication	Printed materials, brochures	Digital communication, social media	Website, emails, newsletters	Redirection to the local tourist office
Family members only (n=4)	2	1	0	0	1
Family members with other employees (n=26)	20	4	0	2	0
Non-family members/Corporate (n=3)	1	1	0	1	0

Source: author's own

Accommodation establishments without employees prefer to use ready-made materials such as printed materials or brochures provided by the regional authorities, rather than their own means of communication. In other cases, managers prefer to redirect the customer to the local tourist office to get the information requested as they lack staff to deal with communicating information. For example, respondent no.26 stated “*Those who come to us*

seek the mountains, walks, skiing and on-site activities. Then I propose everything, but I always refer to the local tourist office [...] I am not a 5-star hotel, so I direct them (i.e. the customers) to the local tourist office and they will take care of it”.

In general, in both kinds of family-business, direct communication with the customer at the reception is the main and most effective means used (about 70% of the accommodation establishments). Respondent no.2 said *“I tried on my website, I tried sending emails when a customer books explaining what they could do, but it was not very successful. Let's say that the most important time for our guest is the check-in [...] Sometimes the check-in can last up to 40 minutes or 1 hour, because it's really important to transmit the emotions in that moment”.*

Different types of management can also affect the strategies used by the owners/managers to promote their own accommodation establishments (Tab. 4).

Table 4. Type of management and strategies for promoting the accommodation establishment

Type of management	Web strategy	Printed materials	Participation in trade fairs or other events	Word of mouth	Press conferences and Media	Mix of web and traditional promotional tools
Family members only (n=4)	2	0	0	1	0	1
Family members with other employees (n=26)	18	1	0	3	0	4
Non-family members/Corporate (n=3)	1	0	1	0	1	0

Source: author's own

Non-family/corporate businesses use more traditional promotion tools such as participation in trade fairs or press conferences and media. In contrast, family-run establishments mostly prefer using web related tools and word of mouth, which is still considered very important. Respondent no. 17 stated *“Until a few years ago we only used our website. As a restaurant we are in several guides such as Slow Food. And as rooms we are on websites like ‘agriturismo.it’. We have our Facebook page since the beginning of last summer, and we are registered on Booking.com. Most people, however, still get here through word of mouth, we*

have loyal customers". Respondent no. 24 reiterated this, saying "We have many loyal customers, hence many reservations are made directly via email. [...] We mainly use more direct channels with regular customers and the website".

The matrix coding between the type of management and other secondary data such as the presence of references/links to institutional communication on the website provided interesting insights regarding the degree to which the establishments' communication is aligned with institutional communications.

Table 5. Type of management and presence of references/links to institutional communication on the website

Type of management	Yes	No	Not applicable
Family members only (n=4)	4	0	0
Family members with other employees (n=26)	16	9	1
Non-family members/Corporate (n=3)	2	1	0

Source: author's own

The data presented in Table 5 clearly show that accommodation establishments managed by "family members only" are more aligned to the institutional communication provided by the regional authorities. These establishments rely heavily on the promotional material and guidelines proposed by the region. Hence, these are the structures that most convey the message desired by the public institutions and the place identity communicated by the region. The "family members only" are small-scale accommodation establishments (<16 rooms) and non-hotel type facilities. Thus, it is possible to argue that small-scale, non-hotel establishments run by families are more aligned with the institutional communication.

As already mentioned, the Aosta Valley accommodation industry presents a scenario in which most of the facilities are managed by families. Thus, family management involves both hotel and non-hotel accommodation, while only hotels use a corporate-style management system. In Aosta Valley there are no very large establishments exceeding 50 rooms. Non-family businesses are clearly medium (16-25 rooms) or large (26-50) accommodation establishments. This type of corporate management often experience problems when it comes to communicating local attractions as their employees are practically all non-locals.

Staff is normally hired on a seasonal basis and they know little or nothing about the specific local peculiarities and the identity of the place. On the other hand, family businesses usually recruit local employees, especially in areas where accommodation is open all year. Therefore, non-family businesses show less alignment with regional communication.

4.2 Type of accommodation establishment and how place identity is communicated

As previously discussed, how a place communicates its identity and homogeneity is affected by accommodation type. Table 6 shows the matrix coding between types of accommodation establishments and employees' provenance.

Table 6. Type of accommodation establishment and origin of employees

Type of accommodation establishment	All or mostly non-locals	All or mostly locals	mixed	Not applicable
Hotels (n= 23)	9	4	9	1
Non-hotels (n=10)	0	1	1	8

Source: author's own

The data confirm that there is a direct relationship between "family-run businesses" and "non-hotels", and between "corporate management" and "hotels". Non-hotels mostly, or exclusively, employ local staff who have an in-depth knowledge of the characteristics of the place. On the other hand, hotels mainly employ non-locals who have little or no knowledge of the local identity (the non-hotels with no employees are considered "not applicable", as well as one hotel which did not specify the origin of its staff in the interview). Thus, hotels are less able to effectively communicate local attractions, and place identity in general, to tourists than non-hotels. For example, respondent no. 3 stated that *"The employees are not all from Aosta Valley: for the most part, unfortunately they come from other places. We have a rather strange type of employee, in the sense that most are students or newly graduated students [...] they don't have specific expertise. We usually try to train them, but they return to work only for some summer seasons and then, inevitably, they look for more stable annual jobs and so we lose them"*. Finding competent, local professionals seems to be a problem in

mountain areas like Aosta Valley, which has major seasonality issues. The origin and the expertise of professionals greatly influences their ability to communicate the distinctiveness and identity of the area to tourists. Respondent no. 25 argued that *“Finding employees is a big problem, and we also hire some foreigners. It would be more convenient to have someone local who knows more about the place, especially in reception.”*

Hotels and non-hotels also differ in the way they communicate tourist attractions to their customers (Table 7). Regarding “family members only” type of businesses, non-hotels communicate with the customers directly, using readymade institutional materials exclusively. In other cases, they redirect the customer to the closest tourist office for the information they need.

Table 7. Type of accommodation establishment and strategies for communicating tourist attractions

Type of accommodation establishment	Direct communication	Printed materials, brochures	Digital communication, social media	Website, emails, newsletters	Redirection to the local tourist office
Hotels (n= 23)	16	4	0	3	0
Non-hotels (n=10)	7	2	0	0	1

Source: author’s own

Hotels also use of their own materials (e.g. brochures, maps, etc.) to communicate with customers through emails and newsletters, or by redirecting them to their website for more information on tourist attractions. Respondent no.4 said *“What there is to do in the area is communicated via email, we print a poster and display it; we also upload something on the website. During the stay, they ask us for information because maybe on the boards in front of the elevator they see the posters and then maybe they ask us”*. Respondent no.5 added that *“the receptionists have a general training on the area, and then we make our own maps in which we describe the viable paths, so as to actively promote the area.”*

Therefore, hotels use promotional materials provided by the region less than non-hotels, and consequently their message is less aligned. On the other hand, the message spread by small, family run, non-hotel businesses is more aligned to the identity shared by the region.

As already mentioned, even though different means are used to communicate local attractions, direct communication is still essential for both hotels and non-hotels.

Respondent no. 28 (non-hotels) stated *“we communicate directly and then we provide brochures. [...] In our profession it is very important to put the tourists at ease, we must make them feel at home and let them know that they can ask for information at any time. This relationship is fundamental. You have to chat with them, describing the place, and so on.”*

Strategies for promoting their own accommodation establishments also differ between hotels and non-hotels (Tab. 8).

Table 8. Type of accommodation establishment and strategies for promoting the accommodation establishment

Type of accommodation establishment	Web strategy	Printed materials	Participation in trade fairs or other events	Word of mouth	Press conferences and media	Mix of web and traditional promotional tools
Hotels (n= 23)	16	0	1	1	4	4
Non-hotels (n=10)	5	1	0	3	1	1

Source: author's own

Hotels are the accommodation type with the highest budget for promotion and sales, especially the non-family/corporate oriented businesses, which still use more traditional means such as participation in trade fairs or press conferences and media. For example, respondent no. 5 stated that *“We have press offices in Milan and Turin with a budget of around €20,000 a year. Now we are also trying to get more online bookings. We will restructure the website to make it more interactive, especially for mobile-phone use, and more attractive in order to save on commissions.”*. Hence, in most cases there are also web-based strategies, or a mix of web and traditional promotional tools, with full-time staff focused on this. Respondent no. 20 said *“We have a person who deals with promotion exclusively. Facebook, Twitter, and all social networks are updated systematically, and our website is constantly updated”*.

On the other hand, family-run non-hotel businesses mostly prefer to use web related tools, in addition to word of mouth. These types of accommodation are not financially equipped to handle more expensive traditional tools, or have sufficient staff to take care of advertising.

Thus, they rely more on web-strategies, also using social networks in a “home-made” way to attract potential customers. Respondent no. 23 stated *“we mainly use our website. We still have a small ‘artisanal’ activity on social networks like Facebook. We try to follow travel review websites like Tripadvisor or Trivago, and we use Booking.com a lot. So, our advertising is mainly on the web”*. Respondent no. 6 added that *“we have a website, a Facebook page and Instagram [...] Then there are collaborations with Booking.com and Expedia.com. We are on the regional website as well.”*

In general, non-hotel accommodation establishments rely more on the communication proposed by the region than hotels, which are able to manage promotion and communication with certain autonomy. The data confirm that non-hotels show greater alignment to communication of place identity and a more homogenous message sent to tourists.

Data analysis also shows that the general level of influence institutional communication has over recommending attractions to visitors differs between hotels and non-hotels (Table 9). The majority of the hotels stated that the regional influence is medium-low or very low. Respondent no. 25 claimed *“collaboration is zero for me. There are some shortcomings from the Regional communication. There is a lack of training and the information is very disperse. We have to manage communication with customers on our own”*. Respondent no. 1 also said *“we went to conferences set up by the regional government and we were advised about certain types of things and situations, but well...no, for the most part we propose the tourist attractions to the clients on our own”*.

Table 9. Type of accommodation establishment and influence of institutional communication in recommended attractions to visitors

Type of accommodation establishment	Very High influence	High influence	Medium influence	Low influence	Very low or no influence
Hotels (n= 23)	4	4	4	8	3
Non-hotels (n=10)	2	3	2	2	1

Source: author’s own

In contrast, most non-hotels stated that the influence of institutional communication on recommended attractions to visitors is medium-high, to which they expressed some criticism. Respondent no. 2 stated that *“Surely the Regional tourist information has such an affect because they have the power to know everything, they have a more general vision that we cannot have. Perhaps some channels of communication should be reviewed, [...] as certain materials that are made by the region but cannot be used by us or by our guests. Sometimes the regional government makes an effort, but it does not always look at it from the other side, it does not imagine what it is to be a tourist. [...] We go to the tourist office every week and collect all the materials, which we leave in the rooms for our guests”*.

Respondent no. 6 said *“we always send a reference and a link to the Aosta Valley tourism website, in addition to all the links that I send on food and wine, or castles, so that customers have more detailed information. We have an area where we keep the regional brochures. They produce a map called ‘Welcome’ (Benvenuto) which is great, because you can show them the whole Aosta Valley. Customers take ideas from there, and then every day we hand write what additional things they can do. [...] Until now I have only taken material that was available for free, I cannot afford to buy materials. Mine is a small business, so I do what I can”*.

Small, family-run, non-hotel businesses rely on institutional communication more than hotels. They are more aligned with the message sent out by the regional government than hotels, as the latter are more inclined to self-manage the promotion of the tourist attractions of the area.

Data analysis also shows that non-hotels are mainly managed by young entrepreneurs, often in the early years of activity.

Age affects other components such as strategies for communicating tourist attractions. Young entrepreneurs use traditional tools less, for example, printed materials, participation in trade fairs or other events, press conferences and media, preferring to employ web-based strategies and direct communication.

Age also influences direct visits to recommended attractions by hotel owners/managers: young entrepreneurs highly value the experience of direct visits in order to advise customers better. In fact, they have visited almost everything, whereas older entrepreneurs have visited little or nothing.

In general, non-hotel owners have visited almost everything. They are deeply aware of their region and the tourist attractions it offers. They are local people who are very fond of their own region, and who invest a lot of time communicating local attractions to their customers. For example, respondent no. 2 commented that *“we are lucky to have an establishment that began in one of the city’s historic buildings. The house dates back to the 1700s, and has belonged to our family since then. So, here guests also have an enchanting 360° experience, because we are true ‘valdostani’, and so we offer our guests an authentic welcome. Imagine if you go to Sicily and meet a Sicilian, it is very different to meeting someone from Milan who has built a hotel in Sicily. We have a deep love and a strong bond of affection for our region, and when you explain something to a guest this can make all the difference”*.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study determines how accommodation establishments are projecting place identity during tourists’ stays in regional and small emerging or destinations which are re-launching. It identifies characteristics which may encourage a more homogeneous projection of place identity.

Research was carried out in the Aosta Valley mountain region, in northern Italy. The main aim was to examine how the hospitality industry is projecting place identity and to what extent it is aligned with the place branding process promoted by the public, regional authorities. The study has also highlighted which factors and characteristics affect this private-public relationship for a homogeneous projection of place identity.

The research findings suggest that the type of management (family-run or corporate businesses) and the type of accommodation establishments (non-hotels or hotels) are the main factors influencing how place identity is communicated and the extent to which it aligns with the communication local authorities promote.

Regarding types of management (family-run or corporate businesses), the data analysis showed that family-run businesses are more aligned to the place identity communicated by the regional institutions than are corporate businesses. In fact, family-run establishments use of the regional promotional materials more, and also refer to the guidelines and messages promoted by the regional government more. Moreover, families are more rooted in the region and emotionally attached to it, and thus have a deeper knowledge of the

destination. Thus, it is small family-run businesses that best convey the message desired by public institution regarding the region's place identity.

The importance of family-run businesses in place branding is in line with previous studies. For example, Wheeler, Frost, & Weiler (2011) argued that the success of some rural areas of Australia depends on the strong values transmitted by local families. Families foster a sense of authenticity and passion that influences the whole tourism development of a place. They also argued that a family-values based approach is the main reason behind the great success of these kinds of rural and marginal regions.

The findings highlighted that local families and residents are better able to communicate the authentic identity values of a place. This is in line with Carson, & Hardwood (2007), who stated that tourists are attracted to the genuine and authentic nature of the tourism experience offered by real locals. Wheeler, Frost, & Weiler (2011) also claimed that small, family-run businesses deliver a totally different experience, and tourists perceive that local people really want them there. Previous studies also support the idea that these values expressed by families and local people represent a destination's real capital. In summary, tourists seek authentic relationships and experiences with the local community, and small, family-run businesses are better able to fulfil this need.

Another important determinant that may influence the communication of place identity and the degree of alignment with the communication promoted by local authorities is the type of accommodation establishment (non-hotel or hotel).

The research findings showed that non-hotels are more aligned to place identity communicated by regional institutions than hotels. Indeed, non-hotels rely more on direct communication with the customer at reception, and claim that creating and maintaining friendly relationships is fundamental for successful communication. This is in line with previous studies in hospitality literature, in which direct communication with the customer is considered vital (Gallouj, & Winstein, 1997). Orfila-Sintes, Crespí-Cladera, & Martínez-Ros (2005) also highlight the role human resources play as a key competitive factor. They argue that the significance of human interaction in service activities can be associated with the ability to establish the quality and features of the service finally provided.

Data analysis also showed that non-hotels exclusively hire local, or mostly local, employees, ensuring that their staff have an in-depth knowledge of the characteristics of the place. On

the other hand, hotels mainly employ non-local staff, who have little or no knowledge of the local identity. Thus, non-hotels are more able to communicate the authentic identity values of a place than hotels.

The findings suggest that local employees enhance an establishment's ability to communicate place identity, as they are, in fact, part of the local community and they represent a very important internal stakeholder: the residents. This is in line with several previous studies that discuss how the local people's voice is critical since it can positively or negatively influence tourists' perceptions of a place (Ribeiro et al., 2017; Sharpley, 2014; Woosnam, Maruyama, & Boley, 2016). Hence, the relationship locals have with visitors is crucial to the tourist experience and destination image formation tourists' minds (Braun, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013). Moreover, local people can act as brand ambassadors and place brand communicators. A study by Armkvist, & Hellström (2014) found that local people's word of mouth communication can be even more effective than a conventional brand campaign as their opinions are usually considered more authentic and trustworthy.

In light of this, the results highlighted that accommodation establishments which are non-hotels and family-run businesses show the highest level of homogeneity. They communicate local attractions and place identity to tourists more effectively than corporate managed hotels. They also rely more on communication generated by regional government than hotels, which are able to manage the promotion and communication with a certain degree of autonomy.

In summary, small, family-run establishments (which are not hotels) are more aligned to the place identity proposed and communicated by the local authority, and the message sent out to tourists is more homogenous. The results suggest that hotels and corporate businesses are communicating a less homogeneous identity. This leads to a higher risk of disparity in destinations where corporate managed hotels prevail.

Although the accommodation industry is one of the main agents projecting place identity, most studies in the literature have focused on accommodation image, paying little attention to destination branding from a supply-side perspective. Additionally, regional and small emerging or reviving destinations have thus far been neglected in the academic literature related to place branding.

In view of the above, this research contributes to the theoretical development in regional destinations, place identity and hospitality literature. It also provides managerial implications for destination and hospitality managers in their branding process.

This analysis is intended as a first step in examining hotels and non-hotels in depth. Thus, future research should focus on examining differences among different types of non-hotels (e.g. B&Bs, apartments, campsites, etc.) in projecting homogeneous place identity.

This study also has limitations that need to be addressed in future research. Firstly, the interviewees were appointed representatives of the ADAVA board of directors only. Even though this sample selection guaranteed a full representation of different types of accommodation, and all the tourist areas, a relatively small number of establishments were examined in this study compared to the total number of establishments in the area. However, the results can still be considered valid as several authors such as Konecnik, & Go (2008), have already proven that a limited number of individuals is a convenient sample for in-depth analysis using qualitative analysis.

Furthermore, the findings relate to the dynamics of this particular context: a small mountain area where the hospitality industry is very powerful. Further research might explore more mature regions to verify if these results can be applied in other types of destinations.

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PUBLICATION 3
RESIDENTS' PERCEPTION AS A KEY FACTOR
IN REGIONAL BRAND DEVELOPMENT

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RESIDENTS' PERCEPTION AS A KEY FACTOR IN REGIONAL BRAND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Previous studies on residents have focused on image, attitudes, or perceptions of existing brands, forgetting about the role residents' play in developing regional brands.

This study investigates residents' perceptions during the branding development process, showing how incorporating residents' opinions in its initial stage is critical to achieving successful regional brands and genuine brand identities.

The study proposes a framework with four elements to assess residents' perception (elements and feelings of perceptions, self-perception, and perception of tourists), using Alto Piemonte (Italy) as a case study. Results show how these elements need to be considered when building brands. Both theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: regional branding, brand identity, brand creation, local community, residents' perceptions, Alto Piemonte

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INTRODUCTION

Destinations worldwide are opening up to and investing in tourism as they recognize its key contribution to socio-economic progress and territorial development. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2017), the tourism industry is witnessing decades of persistent growth, making it one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors in the world. Although the number of tourists is progressively increasing, in the same way, we are witnessing a tremendous rise of new tourist destinations that want to position themselves in the market. Within this scenario, successful destinations must be able to emerge in an extremely competitive market. For this reason, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) have started to pay particular attention to the creation of territorial brands and to build emotional brand connections with their tourists (Huang, Zhang, & Hu, 2017; Trembath, Romaniuk, & Lockshin, 2011).

Various authors have claimed that brand creation needs to be achieved through a participative decision-making process that includes the numerous stakeholders that may be involved in a particular destination (Braun, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013; Easterling, 2004; Ribeiro, Pinto, Silva, & Woosnam, 2017). Among the array of stakeholders, this paper focuses on residents of a destination, as they are amongst the main actors in tourism planning (Morrison, 2013; Yigitcanlar, 2009). Residents' attitudes and perspectives are directly related to the success of tourism destinations, and therefore they should be considered as essential when it comes to building destination brands and development strategies (Martín, de los Salmones Sánchez, & Herrero, 2018; Sharpley, 2014).

Braun et al. (2013), point out that residents are frequently targeted by destination marketing and place branding efforts, but merely studied in terms of destination image, attitudes toward tourism, or perceptions of pre-existing brands (Almeida, Peláez, Balbuena, & Cortés, 2016; Stylidis, Biran, Sit, & Szivas 2014; Vargas-Sánchez, do Valle, da Costa Mendes, & Silva, 2015; Wang, & Xu, 2015). Much less attention has been given to researching their role in the brand creation process or their perceptions of brand identity's attributes, which should be taken into account by brand developers.

In this light, one of the main aims of this study is to contribute to the literature on residents by focusing on brand identity and brand creation. According to Konecnik (2011), one of the major challenges in destination branding is including these influential stakeholders in both

the building process and its subsequent development. Incorporating residents' opinions in the branding process is proving essential in order to build successful brands based on a destination's real identity. This study proposes taking these opinions into account from the initial stage of brand development, thus contributing to the literature on residents' involvement in the branding process, which is lacking. The study recognizes residents' opinions as critical to achieving a shared brand, and thus takes a bottom-up approach.

This study develops a conceptual framework with four scales (elements of perceptions, feelings of perceptions, resident's self-perception, and perception of tourists) that are necessary to examine residents' opinions on their destination brand identity. For each of these four scales, we have used an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) in order to identify the most relevant factors for brand creation according to residents' perceptions. Afterwards, for each of the factors, we have used analysis of variance (ANOVA) to detect socio-demographic differences among the residents' characteristics.

In order to provide empirical evidence and testing this conceptual framework, the analysis is made through the use of an illustrative case study. The case study was carried out in Alto Piemonte, a sub-regional territory located in the Piedmont region of north-west Italy. Aiming to create a new brand, Alto Piemonte is adopting an inclusive approach that seeks for residents' opinions and what they want to transmit with the new brand. The study discloses these opinions, as well as the underlying features of the destination's brand identity. A structured online questionnaire was designed to gather the data for the study.

Finally, this research contributes to expanding theoretical development within the literature of residents' involvement and offers valuable insights for destination managers and practitioners in the branding process.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Residents and brand development

Branding strategies are becoming increasingly important as destinations need to compete more effectively and increase accountability to their stakeholders (Almeyda-Ibáñez, & Babu, 2017; Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2011). Destination branding has emerged over the past few decades "as a technique to create and develop the positioning of places at different geographical scales" (Mosca, Youssef, & Majd, 2016, p.34). Kaplan, Yurt, Guneri, and

Kurtulus (2010, p. 1289) also stated that "place branding today refers to the practice of applying appropriate marketing strategies in order to differentiate cities, regions, and countries from the competition".

According to Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013), place brands stem from a place's identity, and place branding is an interactive process of identity construction involving a dialogue between stakeholders. Therefore, successful branding relies on stakeholders. Moilanen and Rainisto (2009) have also highlighted that destination branding is a collective phenomenon in which all the stakeholders should commit to the same brand and work together to deliver a coherent image. They also pointed out that this complexity and diversity of actors may lead to communicating a fragmented image.

Over the past decade, several authors have agreed on the idea that investigating the perceptions of residents is critical, as they play different and significant roles that can affect the destination brand (e.g. Easterling, 2004; Kavaratzis, 2012; Olsson, & Berglund, 2009; Ribeiro et al., 2017; Sharpley, 2014; Woosnam, Maruyama, & Boley, 2016; Zenker, & Erfgen, 2014).

Braun et al. (2013) reveal that firstly, residents are able to positively or negatively influence tourists' perceptions of a place. Hence, their relationship with visitors is crucial to the tourist experience and destination image formation in the minds of tourists.

Secondly, if the local community identifies itself with the image conveyed in the brand, then residents can act as brand ambassadors and place brand communicators. According to Armkvist and Hellström (2014), residents' word-of-mouth communication can be even more effective than a conventional brand campaign, as residents' opinions are usually considered more authentic and trustworthy. They argue that this aspect is critical because if the local community does not approve of the image communicated, "not only might they not function as good brand ambassadors, they might even actively resist the campaign and in worst case launch counter-campaigns" (Armkvist, & Hellström, 2014, p. 9). Hence, dealing with the creation of a new brand means to acknowledge the stance of the residents.

Consequently, Braun et al. (2013) stated that residents have another important role, namely their power to approve or disapprove of the whole place branding process. Hence, the perceptions that residents have of their region as a destination is a fundamental issue when

it comes to building a positive brand image from the visitors' perspective (Agapito, da Costa Mendes, & do Valle, 2010; Bornhorst, Ritchie, & Sheehan, 2009).

The literature has always considered residents to be a homogenous entity, where everyone lives in harmony and shares the same perspective on tourism development, rather than a heterogeneous group comprising different expectations, needs, and perceptions (Andereck, & Vogt, 2000; Blackstock, 2005; Woosnam et al., 2016). Addressing place-based views and the different perceptions of residents is crucial in maintaining public support for tourism (Andereck, & Vogt, 2000). The academic literature has started to focus its attention on the issue of place identity by understanding residents' attitudes towards tourism. In particular, different authors have underlined the need to investigate the residents' views in terms of self-identity and self-perception (Gu, & Ryan, 2008; Nunkoo, & Gursoy, 2012; Palmer, Koenig-Lewis, & Jones 2013; Wang, & Xu, 2015).

Gu and Ryan (2008) suggested that the resident's attitude toward tourism can be explained in terms of personal value systems. In their study, they highlight that self-esteem (i.e. the positive evaluation of oneself or the group with which one identifies) and self-efficacy (i.e. an individual's belief in his or her capabilities to meet situational demands) can act as a contributor to self-image and to their attitudes towards tourism development. These place identity principles have been borrowed in our study in order to analyze the self-perception of residents, their personal evaluation and identification.

Within a brand creation process, it is also known that studying residents' behaviours and attitudes towards tourists is key to understanding their commitment to the regional brand and their potential influence. Indeed, residents can exert a major influence on tourists' interpretations of the destination brand (Chen, & Dwyer, 2010), hence it is crucial to find out how residents recognize, understand, and identify the destination, as well as their attitudes towards tourists (Choo, Park, & Petrick, 2011). It is important to maintain residents' positive attitudes toward tourists and tourism development, as friendly interactions between residents and tourists can strongly influence the visitor satisfaction with the destination (Pizam, Uriely, & Reichel, 2000). Wang and Chen (2015) claimed that the nature and strength of residents' place identity, and attachment to community and surrounding landscape, may be important determinants of successful coexistence among residents and tourists. Based on this view, they also highlight how researching feelings and attitudes of residents should be

able to assist tourism planners in selecting the types of developments, maximizing positive impacts and minimizing negative impacts on the host community (Wang, & Chen, 2015).

In this light, our study will also focus on the residents' perception of tourists visiting a destination, in order to investigate the residents' attitudes towards tourists.

In brief, two elements will be analysed to investigate the dynamics of the residents in brand development: (1) the perception that residents have of themselves (resident's self-perception) and (2) the perception that residents have of tourists (perception of tourists).

Residents' perception and brand identity

According to Qu, Kim, and Im (2011), destination branding is also defined as a way to communicate a destination's unique identity and differentiate it from its competitors. They underline that a destination brand has two critical functions: differentiation and identification (Qu et al., 2011). Identification in place branding is not an easy task, as places are not physical products, but rather an amalgam of material (e.g. monuments, landscapes, museums, etc.) and non-material elements (culture, traditions, history, etc.) (Florek, 2005).

Brand identity characterizes the self-image and desired image of the market (Pike, 2002), and is created by private organizations or public administrations in accordance with how they want their brand to be perceived by tourists (Kapferer, 1998; Pike, & Page, 2014). A destination brand should, therefore, be considered from the senders' perspective as the projection of destination identity; and from the receivers' perspective as the image of a place (Florek, Insch, & Gnoth, 2006).

Since the positioning and communication of a brand need to be rooted in reality (Saraniemi, 2009), brand identity is essential for the generalization of desirable characteristics projected from the supplier's perspective (Qu et al., 2011). Thus, it is clear that investigating residents' perceptions is fundamental in order to build successful and meaningful brands.

According to Wang and Xu (2015), place identity theories tend to suggest that the primary dynamism in influencing a resident's attitudes toward tourism may originate from his or her self-concept of the place. In other words, a destination's place identity is able to satisfy the residents only if its identity attributes are consistent with their personal values and views. Hence, for destination planners and managers, one key to enhance tourism development "should be to allow residents to incorporate the place identity attributes into their own self-

concepts so that residents' self-concept-related motives can provide a simple engine for their support for tourism development" (Wang, & Xu 2015, p. 241). Since the delivery of the brand promise stems from the local tourism community, the latter should feel that the destination brand is representing their "sense of place", which links to the concepts of values and identity (Wheeler, Frost, & Weiler, 2011). The concept of identity has been described by Stets and Biga (2003, p. 401) as "a set of meanings attached to the self that serves as a standard or reference that guides behaviour in situations". Bott, Cantril, and Myers (2003) specify that place identity is constituted not only by the physical components but also by the meaning and association developed between people and place. In this perspective, the study investigates the residents' opinion in the branding process regarding: (1) the physical attributes or elements of perception of a brand identity (cognitive components); (2) the meaning and association or feelings of perception that residents relate to a destination (affective components).

The cognitive and affective components have been borrowed from the destination image literature. Since identity and image are two strongly linked concepts, the destination image literature provides reflections that can also be applied to research on identity.

Destination image is the perception that a certain person or a group of people have about a place. This perception is formed by one's sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions about a destination. Moreover, the overall image of a place can be seen as a multidimensional construct of two main dimensions: cognitive and affective evaluation (Baloglu, Henthorne, & Sahin, 2014; Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006).

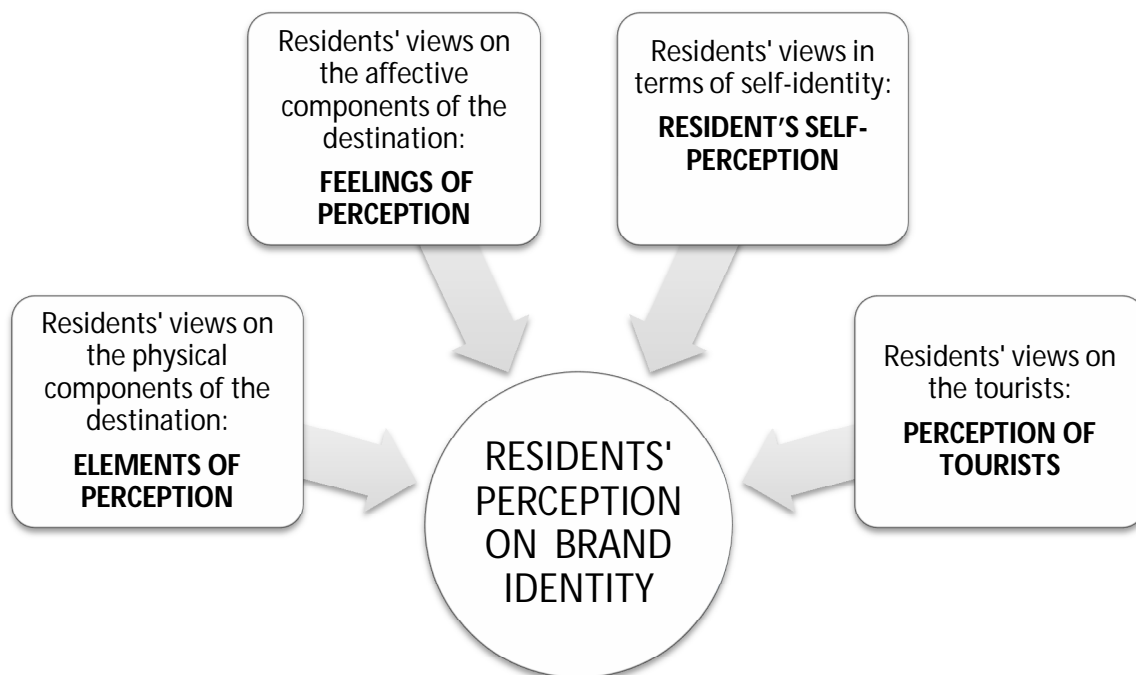
According to Baloglu and McCleary (1999), cognitive evaluation is related to beliefs and knowledge about a place, whereas affective evaluation is related to feelings towards the destination. In cognitive evaluation, a destination is evaluated for the objective elements and attributes it offers, such as physical resources, natural environments, cultural heritage, activities and other resources and traditions (Folgado-Fernández, Hernández-Mogollón, & Duarte, 2017).

In affective evaluation, a destination is evaluated by the feelings or affective qualities associated with it (Hosany et al., 2006). These two components have been widely accepted as influential indicators of destination image (Baloglu, & McCleary, 1999; Pike, 2009; Qu et

al., 2011), and can also be used to investigate the residents' perceived image of their own destination.

In summary, the study proposes a framework that serves to investigate residents' perception of their own destination identity during the branding development process, by using four scales (Fig.1): (1) physical attributes and cognitive components that residents relate to the destination (elements of perception); (2) meaning, association and affective components (feelings of perception) that residents relate to the destination; (3) the perception that residents have of themselves (residents' self-perception); and (4) the perception that residents have of tourists (residents' perception of tourists).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework: four scales to assess residents' perception on destination brand identity



Source: Authors' own

This framework can be used to examine the perceptions of residents in tourism destinations that are developing a brand. The study suggests taking these residents' perceptions into account from the very beginning of the brand development process. An inclusive process would, in fact, allow destination managers and planners to get the ultimate acceptance of residents, as well as their active commitment to tourism development (Easterling, 2004).

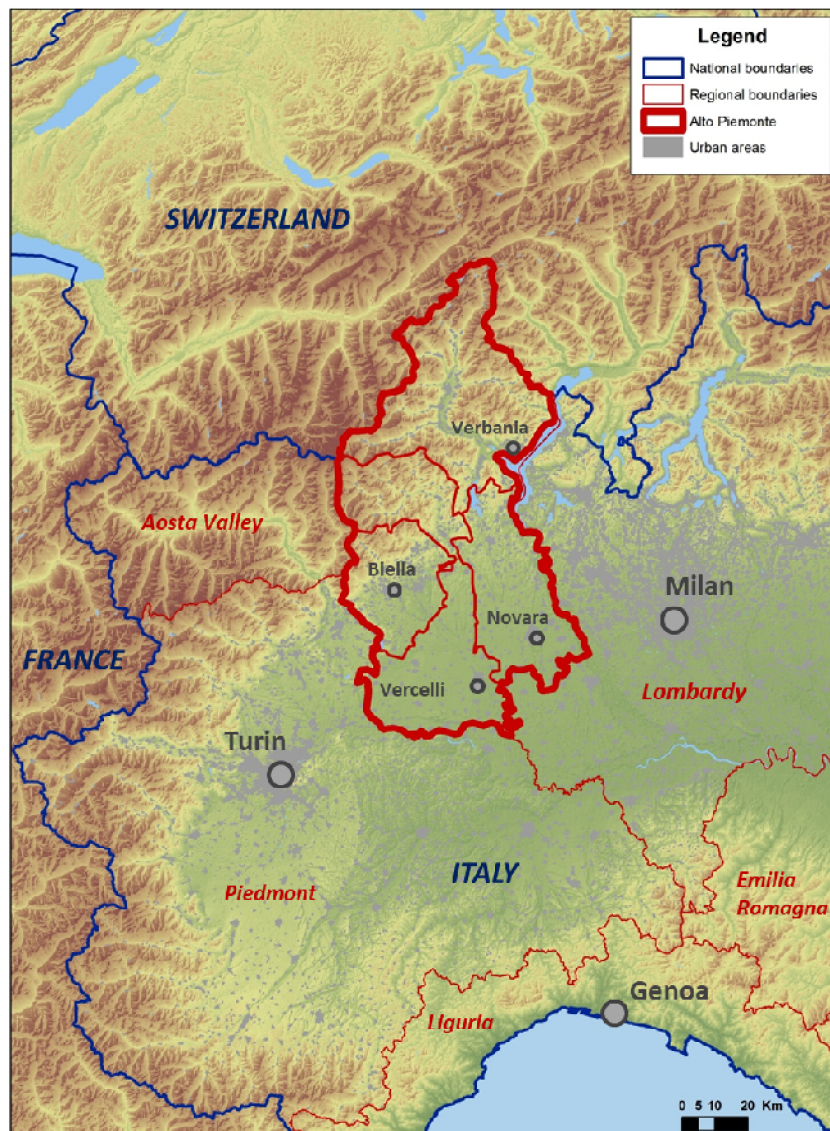
METHODOLOGY

Study context

In order to test the theoretical framework proposed in this paper, we used Alto Piemonte, Italy as an illustrative case study.

Alto Piemonte is located in Piedmont, the second-largest region in Italy, in the north-west of the peninsula. Alto Piemonte is divided into four administrative areas: Biella, Novara, Verbania and Vercelli provinces (Fig. 2). It has around 900,000 inhabitants in total (around 20% of the total population of Piedmont), distributed over 6.600 square kilometres of land area (around 25% of the total land area of Piedmont). According to regional statistics (Osservatorio Turistico Regionale, 2017), the four provinces attract approximately 4.9 million visitors in total (around 32% of the visitors of the entire Region).

Figure 2. Map of Alto Piemonte, Italy



Source: Authors' own (ArcGIS 9.3)

Currently, Alto Piemonte is planning to redevelop and reorganize its tourist offer along the lines of an integrated marketing system. The idea is to cross the administrative boundaries of individual provinces and promote territories with similar characteristics and values. The outcome of this process is to create a new, unique brand for Alto Piemonte on the basis of the perceived identity recognized by all stakeholders, including residents.

Instrument and sample

The target population of this research is the residents of Alto Piemonte, Italy, and a structured, self-administered online questionnaire was designed to gather the data for the study. The online questionnaire was distributed and promoted through private and public mailing lists, social networks, as well as advertising in local newspapers over a four-month period, from August to November 2016. This period included both low and high season, thus avoiding any possible bias related to seasonality. The questionnaire was anonymous and required approximately 10 minutes to complete. A total of 675 residents completed the survey.

The questionnaire was prepared in accordance with previous similar studies (Aaker, 1997; Agapito et al., 2010; Armkvist, & Hellström, 2014; Baloglu et al., 2014; Braun et al., 2013; Kim, Uysal, & Sirgy, 2013; Konecnik, & Petek, 2012; Zenker, & Beckman, 2013).

In addition to other questions, the questionnaire included the above-mentioned four scales: (1) the cognitive elements that residents associate with Alto Piemonte being a tourist destination (namely, elements of perception) (Baloglu et al., 2014; Chen, & Hsu, 2000; Gartner, & Hunt, 1987; Hosany et al., 2006; Oppermann, 1996); (2) the affective elements, feelings or emotions that residents associate with Alto Piemonte being a tourist destination (namely, feelings of perception) (Baloglu, & McCleary, 1999; Baloglu et al., 2014; Beerli, & Martín, 2004); (3) the perception Alto Piemonte residents have of themselves (resident's self-perception) (Gu, & Ryan, 2008; Nunkoo, & Gursoy, 2012; Palmer et al., 2013; Wang, & Xu, 2015); and (4) the perception that Alto Piemonte residents have of tourists (perception of tourists) (Pizam et al., 2000; Chen, & Dwyer, 2010; Choo et al., 2011; Wang, & Chen, 2011; Martín et al., 2018). Each scale is composed of individual items measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree).

Questions on socio-demographic data (e.g. age, gender, education, work status, length of residence, etc.) were also asked in the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

The data were processed by using the statistical software SPSS 23. Firstly, sample descriptive and frequency statistics were analyzed. Then, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with varimax rotation was undertaken in order to ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis and to extract the factors for each scale. Subsequently, a series of one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to search for differences between socio-demographic variables (age, level of education, type of work, place of work) and the different factors obtained for each scale. Finally, Bonferroni Post-hoc tests for ANOVA were performed to obtain multiple comparisons of group means. A 5% significance level (p-value <0.05) was adopted.

RESULTS

Profile of respondents

The detailed respondents' profile is shown in Table 1. Approximately 58% of the respondents were female, and the majority were between 18 and 35 years old. Over 85 % held a high school diploma or above. About 27 % of the working population in the sample were employed in the tourism industry and 80% were working in Alto Piemonte. In comparison with the regional data provided by PiSta – Piemonte STATistica (<http://www.ruparpiemonte.it/infostat>) this sample is representative of the regional population for the socio-demographic variables (gender, age, education, professional status). Hence, the findings from the sample can be generalized to the whole population (Gravetter, & Wallnau, 2016).

Table 1. Profile of respondents.

Variable	Sample (N=675)	Percentage (%=100)	Regional data
Gender			
Male	287	42.5	48.5
Female	388	57.5	51.5
Age			
18-35	259	38.6	46.12 (median age)
36-50	196	29.2	
51+	216	32.2	

Education			
Basic studies	97	14.4	12.6
Secondary school	281	41.6	61.4
University	297	44.0	24.0
Professional Status			
Employed	411	60.9	64.4
Unemployed	32	4.7	6.8
Student	110	16.3	28.8 (inactive)
Retired	51	7.6	
Other	71	10.5	
Type of work			
Related to tourism	146	26.7	
Not related to tourism	401	73.3	
Place of work			
In Alto Piemonte	438	80.1	
Not in Alto Piemonte	109	19.9	

Factors measurement estimation

An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to find out the main characteristics of Alto Piemonte brand identity from the residents' perspective.

The Kyser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and total variance explained measurements are shown for each scale (elements of perception, feelings of perception, residents' self-perception, and perception of tourists). The Cronbach's alpha reliability test and eigen-value are computed for each factor obtained. The cut-off point for factor loading inclusion was above the recommended value of 0.32 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). All communalities are also above 0.4 (Costello & Osborne, 2005).

Table 2 shows the results of the "elements of perception" scale. The KMO is 0.874, indicating that sufficient items were predicted by each factor. The total cumulative variance explained by these factors was 69.31%. The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the factors ranges from 0.64 to 0.84.

From the initial 15 items, five factors were identified: (1) gastronomy, (2) summer activities, (3) winter activities, (4) culture and religion, and (5) lake.

Although Cronbach's alpha for factors 3 (winter activities) and 4 (culture and religion) is slightly below the recommended 0.7 (Taber, 2016), these were included in the scale as they are considered essential in defining the brand identity of the area, as was factor 5 (lake), which is only one item.

Table 2. Results of exploratory factor analysis (N = 675) Elements of perception

	Mean	Standard deviation	Factor loading	Communalities	Eigen-value	Cronbach's alpha	KMO	Total variance explained
Elements of perception							0.874	69.31%
<i>Factor 1: Gastronomy</i>					5.731	0.838		
Gastronomy	3.73	0.941	0.562	0.586				
Wine	3.58	1.05	0.841	0.769				
Rice	3.51	1.126	0.871	0.771				
Local products	3.66	0.919	0.676	0.706				
Industrial production	2.95	1.106	0.645	0.468				
<i>Factor 2: Summer activities</i>					1.765	0.799		
Relax and wellness	3.46	0.898	0.696	0.580				
Events and exhibitions	3.28	0.895	0.776	0.684				
Traditional handicrafts	3.20	0.921	0.705	0.690				
Summer sports	3.24	0.953	0.626	0.580				
Landscape and environment	4.25	0.737	0.543	0.575				
<i>Factor 3: Winter activities</i>					1.408	0.676		
Mountains	4.25	0.766	0.774	0.756				
Winter sports	3.73	0.938	0.826	0.809				
<i>Factor 4: Culture and religion</i>					0.948	0.636		
Art and culture	3.43	0.906	0.568	0.665				
Devotion and religion	3.19	1.009	0.879	0.838				
<i>Factor 5: Lake</i>					0.904	-		
Lake	4.36	0.764	0.938	0.918				

Table 3 shows the results of the “feelings of perception” scale. The KMO is 0.908, indicating that sufficient items were also predicted by each factor for this scale. The total cumulative variance explained by these factors was 62.83%. Cronbach’s alpha value for each factor was above the recommended value of 0.7, assuring the reliability of the three dimensions. From the initial 14 items, three factors were identified: (1) charming and relaxing, (2) fun and exciting, and (3) safe and cosy.

Table 3. Results of exploratory factor analysis (N = 675) Feelings of perception

Construct	Mean	Standard deviation	Factor loading	Communalities	Eigen value	Cronbach's alpha	KMO	Total variance explained
Feelings of perception							0.908	62.83%
<i>Factor 1: Charming and relaxing</i>					5.96	0.858		
Beautiful	4.03	0.788	0.828	0.699				

Charming	3.82	0.948	0.817	0.726		
Pleasant	3.86	0.746	0.725	0.633		
Relaxing	3.85	0.788	0.696	0.527		
Emotional	3.49	0.967	0.64	0.642		
Elegant	3.3	0.887	0.538	0.439		
<i>Factor 2: Fun and exciting</i>					1.628	0.809
Vibrant	2.71	0.892	0.736	0.696		
Young	2.51	0.872	0.732	0.659		
Eccentric	2.24	0.872	0.722	0.544		
Fun	2.83	0.83	0.702	0.638		
<i>Factor 3: Safe and cosy</i>					1.205	0.757
Accessible	3.14	0.928	0.793	0.666		
Organised	2.84	0.885	0.786	0.724		
Welcoming	3.25	0.958	0.608	0.61		
Safe	3.71	0.837	0.563	0.551		

Results of the “residents’ self-perception” scales are presented in Table 4. The KMO value was satisfactory (0.914). The total cumulative variance explained by these factors was 69.09%. Cronbach’s alpha value for each factor in this scale was also above the recommended value of 0.7. From the initial 14 items, three factors were identified: (1) friendly and welcoming, (2) organised and professional, and (3) ambitious and creative.

Table 4. Results of exploratory factor analysis (N = 675) Residents’ self-perception

Construct	Mean	Standard deviation	Factor loading	Communalities	Eigen value	Cronbach’s alpha	KMO	Total variance explained
Resident’s self-perception							0.914	69.09%
<i>Factor 1: Friendly and welcoming</i>					7.069	0.922		
Nice	2.93	0.734	0.775	0.696				
Friendly	2.77	0.821	0.849	0.780				
Joyful	2.72	0.747	0.785	0.697				
Open-minded	2.57	0.830	0.815	0.726				
Hospitable	2.96	0.832	0.818	0.733				
Available	3.07	0.844	0.774	0.710				
<i>Factor 2: Organised and professional</i>					1.949	0.875		
Polite	3.46	0.795	0.653	0.636				
Professional	3.43	0.793	0.763	0.709				
Organised	3.05	0.846	0.691	0.642				
Neat	3.24	0.776	0.848	0.794				
Punctual	3.32	0.776	0.833	0.740				
<i>Factor 3: Ambitious and creative</i>					1.108	0.779		

Resourceful	2.96	0.878	0.773	0.786
Ambitious	3.02	0.872	0.849	0.792
Creative	2.95	0.877	0.671	0.684

Lastly, results concerning the scale “perception of tourists” are shown in table 5. The KMO value was satisfactory (0.796). The total cumulative variance explained by these factors was 63.01%. Cronbach's alpha value for each factor in this scale was also above the recommended value of 0.7. From the initial 12 items, three factors were identified: (1) rich and educated, (2) friendly and open-minded, and (3) intrusive and noisy.

Table 5. Results of exploratory factor analysis (N = 675) Perception on tourists

Construct	Mean	Standard deviation	Factor loading	Communalities	Eigen value	Cronbach's alpha	KMO	Total variance explained
Perception on tourists							0.796	63.01%
<i>Factor 1: Rich and educated</i>					4.31	0.729		
Rich	3.21	0.698	0.725	0.562				
Well-educated	3.41	0.639	0.779	0.643				
Neat	3.24	0.632	0.711	0.588				
Informed	3.25	0.841	0.635	0.490				
Organised	3.39	0.769	0.610	0.524				
<i>Factor 2: Friendly and open-minded</i>					1.992	0.719		
Friendly	3.35	0.661	0.829	0.715				
Open-minded	3.40	0.694	0.836	0.730				
Polite	3.29	0.749	0.506	0.630				
Young	2.58	0.832	0.604	0.439				
<i>Factor 3: Intrusive and noisy</i>					1.259	0.837		
Noisy	2.68	0.854	0.876	0.787				
Intrusive	2.45	0.898	0.878	0.776				
Disrespectful	3.30	0.750	0.545	0.677				

Scale difference between socio-demographic groups

One way-ANOVA test was performed to identify the significance of socio-demographical variables on the obtained factors. These independent variables are age, level of education,

type of work, and place of work (see Table 1). The factors obtained in the four scales (see Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5) were used as dependent variables for each test.

Table 6 shows the results of the ANOVA test for the different factors of each scale. For the first scale, "elements of perception", age is significant for factors 1 (gastronomy) and 2 (summer activities). The group aged 18-35 has the highest perception of gastronomy and the lowest perception of summer activities. Level of education is only significant for factor 2 (summer activities), where residents with basic education have the highest perception of summer activities. The type of work and place of work are relevant only for factor 4 (culture and religion). Those working in tourism and those who work in the region of analysis perceive culture and religion as being more representative than those who do not work in tourism and do not work in the region. None of the socio-demographical variables is significant for factor 3 (winter activities) and 5 (lake).

As regards the second scale "feelings of perception", age is significant for factor 1 (charming and relaxing) and factor 3 (safe and cosy). The age group 36-50 perceives the destination as charming and relaxing more than any other age group, while the 18-35 age group is more inclined to relate their destination to safety and cosiness. The level of education is only significant for factor 2 (fun and exciting). Residents with basic or secondary education have the highest perception of their destination being fun and exciting. The type of work only shows differences for factor 1 (charming and relaxing). Those who work in the tourism industry consider the destination more charming and relaxing than those who do not work in the industry. The place of work is only significant for factor 3 (safe and cosy). Those who do not work in the area feel that their workplace is safe and cosy more than those who work in the area.

Within the third scale, "resident's self-perception", age is not significant for any factor. Level of education is significant for factor 2 (organized and professional) and factor 3 (ambitious and creative). Residents with university studies perceive themselves as better organized and more professional, while those with a basic or secondary education describe themselves as more ambitious and creative. Type of work is only significant for factor 2 (organized and professional). Those who do not work in tourism perceive the other residents as being better organized and more professional than those who work in the tourism industry. Place of work is significant only for factor 1 (friendly and welcoming). Those who do not work in the

destination see their residents as friendly and welcoming more than those who work in the area.

In the fourth and last scale, residents' "perception of tourists", age is only significant for factor 1 (rich and educated). Younger adults (18-35) and older adults (36-50) have a higher perception of tourists as being rich and educated than seniors (51+). The level of education only shows differences for factor 2 (friendly and open-minded). Residents with a basic or secondary education perceive tourists as being friendly and open-minded more than residents with university studies.

Type of work is significant for factor 2 (friendly and open-minded) and factor 3 (intrusive and noisy). Residents who work in the tourism industry are more inclined to perceive tourists as being friendly and open-minded, while residents who work in other sectors are more inclined to feel that tourists are intrusive and noisy. The place of work is not significant for any of the factors.

Table 6. Results of ANOVA test

Variables	F	P value		Variables	F	P value	
Elements of perception				Feelings of perception			
<i>Factor 1: Gastronomy</i>				<i>Factor 1: Charming and relaxing</i>			
Age	6.107	0.002	**	Age	4.913	0.008	**
Level of education	1.969	0.140	ns	Level of education	0.596	0.551	ns
Type of work	0.307	0.580	ns	Type of work	17.426	0.000	**
Place of work	2.690	0.102	ns	Place of work	2.839	0.093	ns
 <i>Factor 2: Summer activities</i>				 <i>Factor 2: Fun and exciting</i>			
Age	7.069	0.001	**	Age	0.748	0.474	ns
Level of education	3.076	0.047	*	Level of education	7.573	0.001	**
Type of work	0.900	0.343	ns	Type of work	1.157	0.282	ns
Place of work	3.471	0.063	ns	Place of work	1.438	0.231	ns
 <i>Factor 3: Winter activities</i>				 <i>Factor 3: Safe and cosy</i>			
Age	2.581	0.076	ns	Age	6.740	0.001	**
Level of education	1.532	0.217	ns	Level of education	0.516	0.597	ns
Type of work	0.048	0.827	ns	Type of work	0.491	0.484	ns
Place of work	1.431	0.232	ns	Place of work	5.791	0.016	*
 <i>Factor 4: Culture and religion</i>							
Age	0.164	0.849	ns				
Level of education	2.572	0.077	ns				
Type of work	18.446	0.000	**				
Place of work	5.949	0.015	*				
 <i>Factor 5: Lake</i>							
Age	1.133	0.323	ns				

Level of education	2.009	0.135	ns
Type of work	3.296	0.070	ns
Place of work	1.411	0.235	ns

Resident's self-perception

Factor 1: Friendly and welcoming

Age	2.491	0.084	ns
Level of education	2.033	0.132	ns
Type of work	3.074	0.080	ns
Place of work	4.312	0.038	*

Factor 2: Organised and professionals

Age	3.352	0.360	ns
Level of education	6.651	0.001	**
Type of work	9.715	0.003	**
Place of work	0.298	0.585	ns

Factor 3: Ambitious and creative

Age	0.654	0.521	ns
Level of education	16.518	0.000	**
Type of work	0.675	0.412	ns
Place of work	0.125	0.724	ns

Perception on tourists

Factor 1: Rich and educated

Age	5.231	0.006	**
Level of education	1.325	0.267	ns
Type of work	0.050	0.823	ns
Place of work	0.168	0.682	ns

Factor 2: Friendly and open-minded

Age	1.152	0.317	ns
Level of education	3.490	0.031	*
Type of work	11.554	0.001	**
Place of work	0.403	0.526	ns

Factor 3: Intrusive and noisy

Age	0.492	0.611	ns
Level of education	0.929	0.395	ns
Type of work	9.672	0.002	**
Place of work	1.579	0.209	ns

**p < 0.01; * p < 0.05; not significant (ns) p > 0.05

CONCLUSIONS

Theoretical implications

This study has examined residents' perceptions of their own destination and is aimed at identifying factors that influence the regional destination branding process. These factors have been discussed theoretically in previous studies to some extent, but they have rarely been applied empirically, particularly within the realm of brand identity and brand creation. Thus, the main contribution of this study is to provide empirical evidence of pre-existing theories expounded in the destination image literature, using a destination that is creating a new brand as an illustrative case study (i.e. Alto Piemonte destination, Italy).

Four scales have been initially identified to serve the purpose of this study: (1) elements of perception; (2) feelings of perception; (3) residents' self-perception; and (4) residents' perception of tourists.

As regards the first scale (elements of perception), our results have highlighted the physical attributes and cognitive components that residents relate to a regional destination. In the case of Alto Piemonte, the most representative factors of its identity according to the

residents are the lake, winter activities, the gastronomy, summer activities, and its culture and religion. The study posited that acknowledging these cognitive elements is vital to a regional brand development that is consistent with the residents' views.

This is in line with previous studies that have stressed the importance of analysing the cognitive components of a destination to understand its place image (Baloglu et al., 2014; Hosany et al., 2006). As already mentioned, in fact, most of the studies have so far addressed the issue of cognitive components in the literature on destination image and planning studies. For example, various authors have suggested that perceptions of cognitive elements can strongly influence competitiveness between destinations (Mazanec, Wober, & Zins 2007), the strategic planning process (Formica, & Kothari, 2008), and the effective promotion of a destination (Wang, & Xiang, 2007). On the other hand, few studies have questioned the significance of applying these concepts to the brand identity literature. Our results support the idea that perceptions of cognitive elements can strongly influence also the regional brand development. Moreover, the results highlight that a brand is successfully endorsed by residents only when its identity attributes are consistent with the personal views of residents. This assumption is consistent with Zenker, Braun, and Petersen's study (2017), which has attempted to analyse the concept of identification, i.e. the creation of a meaningful connection between the residents and the place. They argued that this connection regards the incorporation of the brand attributes into the residents' self-concept and that it should be encouraged. In other words, a certain level of "identity fit" among the residents and the place brand's core-attributes is necessary (Zenker, Braun, & Petersen, 2017). In this light, our study contributes in providing further empirical evidence to the importance of analysing the residents' views on the cognitive components that should form the basis of the development of a destination brand.

The results of the second scale (feelings of perception) are strongly linked to the first one and they highlight the meaning, association and affective components that residents relate to a destination. In our illustrative case study, the affective components that residents have related to Alto Piemonte destination are synthesized in three factors: charming and relaxing; fun and exciting; and, safe and cosy. These factors represent the feelings and emotions that residents relate to the regional brand. This study argues that, for achieving a comprehensive brand identity perception of the residents, both cognitive and affective components should

be taken into account. Previous studies in the destination image literature have also suggested that both affective and cognitive components together can lead to an overall perception of the destination (Baloglu, & McCleary 1999; Beerli, & Martín, 2004; Agapito et al., 2010; Baloglu et al., 2014). Since these two components have been widely accepted as influential indicators of destination image (Baloglu, & McCleary, 1999; Pike, 2009; Qu et al., 2011), similarly, this paper argues that for an overall perception of the brand identity from the residents' perspective, the analysis should include also the residents' affective evaluation when developing a new regional brand.

Subsequently, within the process of brand creation and development, this research highlights the importance of a third scale: residents' self-perception. Our results show that residents perceive themselves as friendly, welcoming, organized, professional, ambitious and creative. These results are important in order to assess the potential commitment of residents toward the regional brand. This is in line with Choo et al. (2011), who suggest that when residents have a deep sense of belonging and identify themselves with their own destination brand, they are more likely to show a hospitable attitude (e.g. willingness to share local knowledge, being helpful and friendly, etc.). In this light, assessing the behaviours and attitudes of residents towards tourism is crucial for a destination when building a new regional brand, as they have the power to influence the whole process. However, to the best of our knowledge, to date, no previous research has examined residents' self-perception in relation to brand creation and development. A destination that seeks a positive brand perception from its residents needs residents to have a positive perception of themselves as ambassadors of the destination. Researching residents' self-perceptions also contributes to the literature on brand creation, as residents' attitudes and behaviours are an integral part of the identity of a place, giving them the power to strongly influence the image that tourists have of the destination brand (Chen, & Dwyer, 2010).

The fourth and final scale highlighted by the study is the residents' perception of tourists. Our results show that residents perceive tourists as rich, educated, friendly, open-minded, and to a minor extent, also intrusive and noisy. These results underlined how investigating residents' attitudes towards tourists – along with the other above-mentioned factors – is crucial in order to form a comprehensive picture of residents' perceptions in regional brand creation. This research posits that assessing residents' positive and negative attitudes is, in

fact, necessary to know their propensity to develop tourism and the destination brand. This is in line with previous studies, that showed a direct relationship between positive residents' attitudes and feelings towards tourists, and their propensity to support tourism development (Martín et al., 2018; Palmer, Koenig-Lewis, & Jones, 2013). Ribeiro et al. (2017) further emphasized the fact that residents can demonstrate a behaviour that either supports or does not support tourism, on the basis on their positive or negative perceptions of the impacts of tourism on their communities. In this respect, the study also contributes to providing deeper insight and empirical evidence in the examination of residents' attitudes and feelings toward tourists in brand development.

From these considerations regarding the four main results and contributions, more generally this study clearly contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence for residents' overall perception, taking both cognitive and affective components into account, as well as resident's self-perception and their perception of tourists.

This research also provides other important theoretical implications, linked to the socio-demographic variables. Our results showed how variables such as age, level of education, type of work and place of work can give a deeper understanding of the differences between socio-demographic groups. For example, the research showed how people who work in tourism have different perceptions of the cognitive and affective elements that should represent the destination from those who are not working in the tourism industry. Residents who work in tourism also perceive themselves and tourists differently than those who do not work in tourism. Since the branding process affects not only those who work in tourism but all the residents, the results highlight the need to take all views into account and acknowledge possible differences in perception. Empirical evidence from the research shows, in fact, that residents are a heterogeneous group (Woosnam et al., 2016). Therefore, when it comes to creating a brand rooted in reality, we need to consider their different socio-demographic profiles.

In conclusion, the study has shed light on factors of destination brand identity relating to residents' views. The main contribution of this research is the theoretical implications presented in this study, and which can be generalized for use in other destinations. Results also suggest that analyzing residents' opinions in the early stage of the branding process can help understand differences in diverse socio-demographic groups, and if necessary, take

corrective action during the process which reflects residents' opinions. Thus, the research also shows that incorporating residents' perceptions can minimize the risk of negative impacts that might be generated by residents in disagreement.

Managerial implications

This study contributes in a practical way to understanding residents' opinions and perceptions in creating a new regional destination brand. Firstly, it confirms the need for an inclusive bottom-up approach to brand creation which takes into account the views of stakeholders, particularly residents. Tourist destinations should aim to build brands stemming from a common, shared identity in a particular area. According to Konecnik (2011), the residents' role in brand development is extremely important, as the brand success depends highly on the local community actively participating in the brand, and identifying with it. Primarily, this is an internal interest group, but it can also be considered external. Authors researching Slovenia's identity (Konecnik, 2011), also include residents' opinions, since only a brand that is fully accepted among the inhabitants has the potential to become a strong, successful brand that will increase the destination's value and competitiveness.

Moreover, Kotler and Gertner (2002) have stated that one of the fundamental steps in building successful brands is to define the characteristics and elements forming its unique basis. This study also contributes significantly in this respect, as it has unravelled the key factors that shape brand identities, using Alto Piemonte as an illustrative case study. The key feelings residents associate with Alto Piemonte destination have also been found. As a result, Alto Piemonte DMO has the necessary information to build its brand proposition and market its new brand. Findings from this study on residents' self-perception and residents' perception on tourists are also essential for DMOs in order to ascertain residents' attitudes and feelings. In this way, corrective interventions, if necessary, can be carried out to increase the residents' propensity to support tourism development and the destination brand.

Significant differences between socio-demographic groups were found through ANOVA analysis. For example, in Alto Piemonte there are clear differences between age groups, thus the DMO should focus on different strategies segmented by age groups.

In conclusion, Alto Piemonte DMO can use this research to implement a coherent process of regional brand development through an inclusive bottom-up approach. As also stated by Konecnik (2011), a destination brand will only be successful in the long term if residents believe in it and consistently live it. Several authors also agree that residents have the power to “make or break” the whole branding process (Braun et al., 2013; Ribeiro et al., 2017; Sharpley, 2014). Hence, it is crucial to incorporate residents' opinions in the process of creating a brand with the solid foundations of a shared identity.

Further research

Findings from the empirical research are limited to pre-selected factors that are characteristic of the Alto Piemonte region. Other geographical areas may have distinct factors that would also need to be included when analysing residents' perceptions. Thus, further research can be devoted to analysing this model in different types of destinations. In fact, it would be of interest to replicate this empirical research in other developing Italian or foreign destinations, using the proposed generalized variables in the conceptual framework. Future research could also expand this framework and incorporate additional variables relevant to the specific attributes of the geographical area selected. Additionally, a future line of research can test the applicability of this model not only for developing regional destinations but also for destinations who want to modify or implement their destination brand.

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GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

This doctoral thesis contributes to the understanding of the role of the different groups of stakeholders in the brand development process of regional destinations, by offering an integrated supply-side perspective based on the identity of places, and by analysing the most influential subjects who emit the identity of tourist destinations. In this last part of the thesis, the main conclusions of each article are outlined and, finally, conclusions of the study as a whole are drawn.

First, the specific objectives of the first publication, which focused on the role that Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and Local Tourist Agencies (LTAs) play in regional brand development, were to examine the effects of destination branding at a regional level and to determine which factors are able to influence the process of developing a brand identity in regional destinations. The study showed that fragmentation, cooperation and coordination exert a major influence in the branding process of regional destinations. In particular, the study posited that fragmentation can lead to different tourism destination images being emitted by a large number of agents, undermining the regional branding process. This analysis further validates what stated in previous studies on fragmented destinations, where different players with different values and interests are involved in the branding process and the government's capacity to manage and control the emitted destination image is limited (Shaw, & Williams, 2002; Marzano, & Scott, 2005; Camprubí, 2015). This publication also argued that reducing fragmentation, while increasing cooperation among actors and coordination would enhance a successful and cohesive emission of a regional brand identity. Previous studies have also underlined the necessity of coordination and cooperation, as cooperation among stakeholders is able to increase the success of tourist destinations, while fragmentation decreases it (Buhalis, 2000; Cai Liping, 2002; García, Gómez, & Molina, 2012).

Lastly, results reveal that peripheral areas are more likely to lack coordination from central institutions. Since no previous research on geographical peripherality and brand management has been conducted, this result represents a clear contribution of this paper. Thus, the study makes an important contribution to our understanding of

the interrelationship between fragmentation, cooperation, coordination and peripherality, and inadequate regional branding strategies.

The findings of this first publication also suggest that an umbrella brand coordinated by the regional DMO would be beneficial to reduce fragmentation and avoid dissimilar destination images being emitted. This is in line with Morrison, Bruen and Anderson (1997), who pointed out the necessity for a central DMO which serves as an “industry coordinator”, providing a clear focus and encouraging less fragmentation. Zach and Fesenmaier (2009) also argued that a DMO should create a supportive environment to foster innovation, guide stakeholders in the development of innovative products, and enhance local partnership to avoid fragmentation and achieve cohesion.

In summary, this article addressed a growing need to investigate the stakeholder’s internal perception and the institutional perspective of branding within regional tourism destinations, by providing useful insights into the characteristics of the regional branding process and its relationships with sub-regional stakeholders.

Second, the objectives of the second publication, which examined private operators as a key stakeholder, were to investigate the role of the accommodation industry in the communication of the place identity in small, emerging, not mature destinations; to verify how the main stakeholders who are constantly in contact with the tourists are projecting the identity of a place; and to detect which characteristics and factors are able to foster a more homogeneous projection of the place identity, also in accordance with the messages projected by the main public actors who are leading the place branding process. The study suggested that small-size, non-hotels, family-run establishment presents a greater alignment to the communication of the place identity proposed by the public authority and greater homogeneity of the message sent to the tourists. The study argued that non-hotel, family-run establishments make more use of the regional promotional materials and they refer more to the guidelines and messages promoted by the Region. Moreover, families are more rooted and emotionally attached to the territory and they have a deeper knowledge of the destination. This is in line with previous studies, which claimed that the success of certain destinations depends on the strong values emitted by their local families. Wheeler, Frost, and Weiler (2011) showed that families foster a sense of authenticity

and passion that influence the whole tourist development of a place. They also argued that a family values-based approach has been of the main reason of the great success of small, rural and marginal regions. Also according to Carson and Harwood (2007), this is due to the fact that tourists are attracted to the genuine and authentic nature of the tourist experience offered by real locals. Hence, small, family-run type business deliver a totally different experience and tourists perceive that those people really want them there (Wheeler, Frost, & Weiler, 2011).

The research findings also showed that non-hotel, family-run businesses are those who rely more on direct communication with the customer at the reception, claiming that creating and maintaining friendly relationships is fundamental, accordingly to other related studies (Gallouj, & Winstein, 1997; Orfila-Sintes, Crespí-Cladera, & Martínez-Ros (2005). Moreover, data analysis also showed that non-hotels, family-run businesses are the establishments that recruit exclusively or mostly local employees, ensuring that their staff have an in-depth knowledge of the characteristics of the place. Thus, small-scale, non-hotel, family-run businesses are the accommodation establishments that most convey the message desired by the public institutions and the place identity communicated by the region.

Although the accommodation industry represents one of the main agents who projects place identity, most of the studies in the literature have focused on accommodation image, giving almost no attention to destination branding from a supply-side perspective. Additionally, regional and small emerging destinations have been so far neglected in the academic literature related to place branding. In view of the above, this research tried to fill these gaps, contributing to the theoretical development within the literature of regional and small emerging destinations, place identity and hospitality.

Third, the objective of the third article, which focused on residents as another central stakeholder in place branding, was to expand theoretical development within the literature of residents' involvement, by focusing on brand identity in the initial stage of brand creation; to develop a conceptual framework that will serve to examine residents' opinions on their destination brand identity; and, to identify differences between socio-demographic groups of residents toward the branding process. The

study, therefore, provides a conceptual framework that serves to investigate residents' perception of their own destination identity during the branding development process, by using four factors: (1) elements of perception; (2) feelings of perception; (3) residents' self-perception; and (4) residents' perception of tourists.

Firstly, the study posited that acknowledging the cognitive components (elements of perception) and the affective components (feelings of perception) that residents relate to their destination is vital to a regional brand development that is consistent with the residents' views. The results highlighted that a brand is successfully endorsed by residents only when its identity attributes are consistent with the personal views of residents. This assumption is consistent with Zenker, Braun, and Petersen's study (2017), which stated that the residents should identify themselves with the destination, and this is feasible only when there is an incorporation of the brand attributes into the residents' self-concept. Moreover, previous studies in the destination image literature have also suggested that both affective and cognitive components together can lead to an overall perception of the destination (Baloglu, & McCleary, 1999; Beerli, & Martín, 2004; Agapito, da Costa Mendes, & do Valle, 2010; Baloglu, Henthorne, & Sahin, 2014). Since these two components have been widely accepted as influential indicators of destination image (Baloglu, & McCleary, 1999; Pike, 2009; Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011), similarly, this paper argues that for an overall perception of the brand identity from the residents' perspective, the analysis should include also these two factors when developing a new regional brand. Our results, indeed, supported the idea that cognitive and affective perceptions on the supply-side perspective can strongly influence the regional brand development.

Secondly, our results suggested the importance of examining residents' self-perception, in order to assess the potential commitment of residents toward the regional brand. This is in line with Choo, Park and Petrick (2011), who suggest that when residents have a deep sense of belonging and identify themselves with their own destination brand, they are more likely to show a hospitable attitude (e.g. willingness to share local knowledge, being helpful and friendly, etc.). In this light, assessing the behaviours and attitudes of residents towards tourism is crucial for a destination when building a new regional brand, since residents' attitudes and behaviours are an integral

part of the identity of a place, giving them the power to strongly influence the image that tourists have of the destination brand (Chen, & Dwyer, 2010).

Lastly, the results underlined how investigating residents' attitudes towards tourists – along with the other above-mentioned factors – is crucial in order to form a comprehensive picture of residents' perceptions in regional brand creation. This research posits that assessing residents' positive and negative attitudes is, in fact, necessary to know their propensity to develop tourism and the destination brand. This is in line with previous studies, that showed a direct relationship between positive residents' attitudes and feelings towards tourists, and their propensity to support tourism development (Martín et al., 2018; Palmer, Koenig-Lewis, & Jones, 2013). Ribeiro et al. (2017) further emphasized the fact that residents can demonstrate a behaviour that either supports or does not support tourism, on the basis on their positive or negative perceptions of the impacts of tourism on their communities.

These four factors have been discussed theoretically in previous studies to some extent, but they have rarely been applied empirically, particularly within the realm of brand identity and brand creation. Thus, the main contribution of this study was to provide empirical evidence of pre-existing theories expounded in the destination image literature, using a non-administrative destination that is creating a new brand as an illustrative case study (i.e. Alto Piemonte destination, Italy). With this framework, this research contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence for residents' overall perception, taking both cognitive and affective components into account, as well as resident's self-perception and their perception of tourists.

This research also provided important theoretical implications linked to the socio-demographic variables. Results showed how variables such as age, level of education, type of work and place of work give a deeper understanding of the differences between socio-demographic groups. For example, the research showed how people who work in tourism have different perceptions of the cognitive and affective elements that should represent the destination from those who are not working in the tourism industry. Residents who work in tourism also perceive themselves and tourists differently than those who do not work in tourism. Since the branding process affects not only those who work in tourism but all the residents, the results highlight the need to take all views into account and acknowledge possible differences in perception. This

is in line with previous studies, which highlighted how residents are a heterogeneous group and, therefore, we need to consider their different socio-demographic profiles in order to create a brand rooted in reality (Woosnam et al., 2016).

In general, this study has shed light on factors of destination brand identity relating to residents' views. Results also suggested that analysing residents' opinions in the early stage of the branding process can help understand differences in diverse socio-demographic groups, and if necessary, take corrective action during the process which reflects residents' opinions. Thus, the research also showed that incorporating residents' perceptions can minimize the risk of negative impacts that might be generated by residents in disagreement. Accordingly, the main general contribution of this research is the theoretical implications presented in this study, and which can be generalized for use in other destinations. The research also offers managerial implications for DMOs and other practitioners, that can use these findings to implement a coherent process of brand development through an inclusive bottom-up approach that takes resident's opinions into account.

As a whole, this doctoral thesis contributes to the existing body of tourism literature by providing an integrated supply-side perspective on destination branding that simultaneously explores the role of the most relevant groups of stakeholders in the brand development process of different types of regional and sub-regional destinations.

In general, the thesis contributed to addressing different gaps in the tourism stakeholders literature. Firstly, it contributed to the lack of theoretical and empirical studies on brand identity from a supply-side perspective, by focusing on regions, a geographical scale that has long been neglected in the branding literature, in favour of nations and cities.

Secondly, the thesis offers an in-depth analysis of the dynamics and characteristics that are able to influence the branding process and identities in Regions and Sub-Regions. Within the literature, defining and delimiting regional destinations is still difficult, and there is still a lack of a clear and widely accepted vision for the concept of

region. The thesis address this lack by analysing theoretically and empirically both conventional administrative Regions, and new, less artificial sub-regional destinations. Thirdly, this doctoral thesis adds further knowledge on the supply-side managerial perspective on tourism destination branding, that has long been addressed and examined largely from a demand-side perspective, adopting a consumer-perceived-image approach. The thesis contributes to filling this gap by offering an integrated approach that includes the most influential subjects who emit the identity of tourism destinations.

Lastly, the thesis contributed to exploring place branding issues both in already established destinations, as well as in newly developing areas. The thesis argued that that cooperation among all stakeholders is more successful when their perceptions are taken into consideration since the very beginning of the branding process. Since the notion of a tourist destination is often ambiguous and not easy to define, the thesis can help in the discussion of this dichotomy between established and new destinations.

Essentially, the main contribution of this doctoral thesis to the existing body of tourism literature can be summarized as follows: (1) it adds empirical evidence to the paucity of studies on brand identity from a supply-side perspective; (2) it provides in-depth analysis on the dynamics and characteristics that are able to influence the brand development process and identities in regional and sub-regional destinations (both administrative and non-conventional regions); (3) it offers an integrated approach that includes the most influential stakeholders who emit the identity of tourism destinations; and (4) it provides further knowledge and empirical evidence to place branding issues both in already established destinations and in newly developing areas, with a focus on cooperation and coordination among stakeholders.

Overall, this thesis provides an innovative understanding of the role and influence of the different groups of stakeholders in the place branding process of regional destinations, by using an integrated supply-side perspective based on the identity of places.

Ultimately, this doctoral thesis presents some possible limitations that could serve as the basis for future research.

Firstly, convenience samples were used in publication 1 and 2, which may limit the representativeness of the findings. In publication 1, the interviews were conducted only among the best informants, omitting all the other subjects who have an active role in the promotion of tourism in the selected case study. In publication 2, data collection was limited to a preselected sample, in which all the respondents were elected and appointed representatives of the ADAVA board of directors. Even though this sample selection guaranteed a full representation of the different types of accommodation facilities and all the different tourist areas, a relatively small number of structures were considered in this study compared to the total number of establishments. Even though the results can still be considered valid as, in qualitative analysis, several authors find a limited number of individuals a convenient sample for in-depth analysis as this one (Zainal, 2007; Konecnik, & Go, 2008), this may limit the generalizability of the findings. In this light, future research should focus on a more representative sample, by including a wider range of actors and organisations, in order to improve the generalizability of the results.

Secondly, the findings of this thesis are related to the dynamics of specific geographical contexts. With the aim to strengthen the generalizability of these results, further study should also examine other Italian or foreign regions. It would also be very useful for academics to conduct comparison studies between other Italian regions and/or other foreign regions, to verify if these results can be applied also in different types of destinations.

Thirdly, in publication 3, findings are limited to pre-selected factors that are characteristic of the Alto Piemonte region. Other geographical areas may have distinct factors that would also need to be included when analysing residents' perceptions. Hence, it would be of interest to replicate this empirical research in other developing destinations in Italy or other foreign destinations using the proposed generalised variables in the conceptual framework. Future research could expand this framework and incorporate additional variables relevant to the specific attributes of the selected geographical area.

Lastly, in order to meet the aim of offering an integrated stakeholders perspective in the branding of regional destinations, the supply-side perspective should be examined without overlooking the demand side. Incorporating the tourists' perspective will contribute to a more informed understanding of what destination branding might involve and how it might be carried out effectively. As already mentioned in the introduction, brand identity and brand image are two much-related concepts. If internal stakeholders (e.g. public bodies, private operators, residents) are emitting place identity, external stakeholders like tourists act as the receivers. Images and perceptions are, in fact, developed in the visitor's mind as a result of the emitted place identity. Additionally, visitors' perceptions are important because, as the tourism industry becomes increasingly competitive, tourist destinations should differentiate themselves to be more attractive for potential visitors and tourists.

These reflections have given the impetus to simultaneously conduct a further investigation on destination branding in regional and sub-regional destinations from the demand-side perspective.

This further publication, entitled "Enhancing Brand Image through Events and Cultural Festivals: the Perspective of the Stresa Festival's Visitors", is focused on understanding tourists' behaviours, attitudes, expectations, and perceptions within a destination. In particular, this article explores the role of cultural events in fostering a positive brand image for local destinations. Cultural events have, in fact, become a noteworthy resource within the strategies of destination branding of place at different geographical scale. Territories are increasingly using events and cultural festivals to enhance their image and boost tourism development. Countless are the destinations worldwide who have built events portfolios as a strategic initiative to attract visitors and to develop their own brand. With these premises, this additional publication aimed to investigate how the visitors assess the impact of cultural events and festivals in enhancing the image of a tourist destination.

The case study approach was chosen as a qualitative methodology for an in-depth understanding of this issue. The analysis was conducted on "Stresa Festival", one of the best-known European classical music events, that takes place every summer in Stresa, a small town by Lake Maggiore in Northwest Italy.

Since the research presented in the additional publication was conducted on a small-scale festival, some problems were faced in obtaining a sufficient number of responses. Accordingly, the research doesn't rely on a wide sample. It is assumed that if a study is made over a wider sample, the generalization level of the research results may increase and give better results (Bertan, & Altıntaş, 2013). Moreover, in order to guarantee the validity and the reliability of the findings, this study needs further exploration to assess the perception of Stresa Festival visitors on a more extended time frame than a single edition. To this extent, a further future direction would be to replicate this study in other locations and in other types of cultural festivals. The current findings can be assessed in future research, by focusing on the correlation among cultural events and destination image, in order to confirm these results and explain in more depth the factors which determine the image of a place.

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