Chapter 13
Tourism Differentiation Through Social Media Branding:
A Qualitative Exploration of the Moroccan Case

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ABSTRACT

With a focus on Morocco, this chapter reviews the literature on nation branding and its connection to social media in the context of tourism. The first part gives a foundation for understanding the many tactics used to distinguish one country from another by reviewing the literature on nation branding, social media, and tourism. The use of social media to market travel and to promote cultural and natural assets is examined in the second section. Then, an examination of the significant developments and trends in the Moroccan tourism industry are addressed. A Netnographic study is conducted on six influential media accounts to explore the strategies and tactics utilized to promote Morocco's image internationally.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of nation branding has garnered increased scholarly and practical interest in recent times(Theodoropoulou, 2020). According to Adler, nation branding is not a new phenomenon, since world fairs and international exhibitions were organized in the late nineteenth century and used to attract vast crowds eager to see the presentation of national culture, and heritage, and these events are thought to be the places where nation branding first emerged (Adler-Nissen, 2014). Nation branding has emerged as a key component of international competition as nations work to improve their standing abroad and draw in investment, tourism, and skilled labor. Some authors refer also to it as a form of "Soft Power" (Nye Jr, 2004). Soft power involves influencing people's attitudes and behaviors via culture and economy rather than using physical force or coercive sanctions.

The tourism industry is constantly looking for innovative ways to grow, and nation branding techniques are often at the heart of national strategies for promoting destinations, their heritage, and their culture. Marketing tactics can be realized through classic advertising campaigns called push strategies, or indirect strategies, like creating marketing content through pull strategies on digital platforms (Kotler & Armstrong, 2020). The latter, innovative approach is particularly used in the field of tourism, where online audiences and prospective tourists find such content more authentic and exciting especially if it looks like genuine user-generated content -UGC- instead of classic advertising campaigns instigated by governments. One of the interesting cases to study is the Kingdom of Morocco, a famous tourist destination, but for which there are still few academic works that explore the role of social networks in building a narrative about this country and influencing the perception of future tourists (especially through digital accounts and platforms that seem to be private or semi-official).

This chapter starts by reviewing the nation branding literature, including key definitions, important theories, and tactics used for differentiation purposes. This will provide a strong basis for understanding nation branding and the diverse strategies used to set one country apart from another. The second section of the literature review will focus on social media's function in tourism branding and how it affects the perception of tourists. The third part presents a qualitative online study that was carried out to learn more about how Morocco is promoting itself on the Internet directly through official social networks and indirectly through semi-official or private accounts that allow the spreading of continuous information, photos, and videos concerning Moroccan heritage. Morocco is an interesting case since it has been promoting itself as a tourist destination by utilizing its wealth of cultural heritage and natural beauty while extensively mobilizing social media platforms. Finally, the author examines major trends and future opportunities for the Moroccan tourism sector.

The utilization of Nation Branding theories, the qualitative Netnographic study conducted, and the resulting findings provide a novel theoretical, methodological, and managerial outlook on the online management of Moroccan tourism marketing practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nation Branding: Definitions, Theories, and Some Differentiation Strategies

The origins of branding theory can be traced back to the 1950s, primarily within the context of consumer products and later extended to countries. However, it was not until the 1990s that branding began to receive attention as a concept within tourism destination marketing, capturing the interest of practitioners in the field (Hankinson, 2015). Place-based branding became increasingly common as governments and nonprofits needed to draw more residents, visitors, customers, and businesses to the places they serve. According to Sevin, a place brand can be defined as a network of associations in the minds of individuals about a given place (Sevin, 2021; Zenker et al., 2017). These associations 'are constructed from various contributory elements including what a place has to offer (e.g., its landscape, architecture, goods, services), what it communicates with the outside world (e.g. its promotional campaigns), and what others communicate about the place (e.g. word of mouth on social media, reviews on websites and conversations among friends) (Sevin, 2021).

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