
Eftstathios Velissariou

University of Thessaly, Greece

Theocharis GkougkoulitsasUniversity of EAP Patra, Greece

Tourism marketing strategy, a case study for the City of Thessaloniki, including tourists and tourism professionals

This study aims to explore the potential of city tourism development in Thessaloniki (Greece) by analyzing the destination and proposing a strategic marketing plan to promote the city as an all year round tourism destination.

This paper firstly examines some recent literature and discusses both the theoretical concept of destination experience and its measurement. Then, it describes the sample and measures employed in the empirical study. It is followed by the reporting of the empirical research results. Finally, it concludes by identifying certain implications.

Results lead to the proposition of a marketing plan for the development of city tourism in Thessaloniki, that highlights the need of reinforcing and promoting particular cultural routes, cruise, and gastronomy tourism and health tourism experiences at the destination.

Keywords: Tourism destinations, Destination experience, Marketing, City Marketing, City Branding, Greek tourism, Thessaloniki

Eftstathios Velissariou

Professor in Tourism Economics,

University Of Thessaly

G. Ritsou street 10 Postal code: GR 41335 Larissa
Greece,

Phone: +302410684243

Email: belissar@teilar.gr**Theocharis G. Gkougkoulitsas**

MA Tourism Marketing in Travel, Tourism and Leisure

MSc at the Hellenic Open University

Bachelor Studies in European Civilization at the Hellenic Open University,

Address: Klitou 12 54642 Thessaloniki Greece,

Phone: +306977463220

E-mail: gougoulitsas@yahoo.gr

Introduction

In the new century, destination development emerges as a critical issue in local and regional development in Europe as well as in other regions around the world. The competition between touristic destinations is very intense globally, as new destinations emerge the development of new technologies, and fluctuating economic situations worldwide.

Cities throughout Europe are increasingly importing the concept and techniques of product branding for use within place marketing, in pursuit of broader urban management goals, especially within the new conditions created by European integration. The city branding research domain has been the subject of constant debate between several different academic disciplines which have studied the phenomena of city branding with different methods, conceptual tools, and empirical explanations. In this vein, regional tourism marketing strategies aim to develop destinations that can compete globally by capitalizing on regional identities, authenticity, and local distinctiveness. A place marketing framework assists in understanding connections between the satisfaction of users of tourism products and the development of these products.

The touristic market of the southeastern Mediterranean geographic region, in which Greece belongs, is continuously evolving while the consumer preferences change all the time. These changes in the international tourism landscape coupled with the economic crisis and the new economic situation in Greece have led to a necessity of new proposals in the tourism sector.

Through these proposals, we aim to offer new touristic products and to show the advantages of each area, region or city separately. The development of urban tourism, in particular, city branding and city marketing, is of particular importance, aiming at gaining a more competitive position in the urban system and creating competitive advantages over other similar cities. In the context of these trends and developments, an attempt has been made in recent years to develop urban tourism in Greece by developing relevant marketing plans, such as Attica-Athens (Koutoulas, 2015), Heraklion (Chalkiadakiet al., 2013), Larissa (ETOUSEP, 2014), Kozani (ETOUSEP, 2016), but also other cities. These proposals include strategic planning to show the comparative advantage of each region or city separately.

1. Place branding and city branding

City tourism or Urban tourism is a new kind of tourism and is the result of internationalization and new trends in tourism. Tourists choose to visit capitals but also other cities, large or small for short-stay (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). During their stay, tourists combine city tourism with other forms of tourism (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011). According to a survey conducted by the EU, city tourism is the first choice for 20% of the travelers; while another 40% states that "Sun and Sea" is their first choice. City tourism, according to this survey, tends to increase since it was 12% in 2010 and 16% in 2011. This kind of tourism has great economic and social benefits, and this is the reason for being promoted by the central governments and local actors (Krassimira 2007). Such benefits are the reduction of unemployment, the upgrading of the area, the rise in the quality of life of the inhabitants, and

the cultural development (Kokkosis, 2011). According to a study by the European Network of Cities Tourism, low-cost airlines are an important factor of this type of tourism. The main target markets for tourists visiting the cities are business visitors, exhibition and conference representatives, weekend and day-trip tourists, guests hosted by relatives and friends, long-stay holidaymakers who have made one stop (Lagos, 2005).

For the Euromonitor's ranking, they use information from the National Statistical Service, from airports, hotels, and other sources of the tourism industry (Neild, 2016).

An urban tourist destination consists of mainly four dimensions (Krassimira, 2007): a) Physical characteristics of the city, b) Urban community c) Management (supply oriented) and d) Marketing. "Urban tourism products are multi-functional and multi-used, and their development usefully can be guided by surveys among different user groups of the benefits they seek from them, of their specific expectations, and their ultimate satisfaction with the products" (Bramwell, 1998).

Jansen-Verbeke (1986) classifies different products within the overall urban 'leisure product' according to their likely importance in decisions to visit a city, and this may help explain the relative importance of different urban tourism products for visitors' overall satisfaction. She distinguishes between primary, secondary, and additional products. Primary products are most likely to make the city worth visiting, with these further divided into cultural, sport and amusement facilities in the 'activity place,' and physical and socio-cultural features in the 'leisure setting.' Secondary products are less likely to prompt visits to the city, but they help shape the overall visitor experience. Additional products comprise the infrastructure used by visitors, such as public transport and tourist information services. While these categories are useful, they also have shortcomings, notably that such secondary products as shopping, in fact, may prompt many visits. place branding and city branding.

City Marketing is not something new to international and European reality, simply it's research has gained more interest in international literature in recent years (Bailey, 1989· Ashworth & Voogd, 1990· Kotler, 1999· Duffy, 1995· Bramwell & Rawding, 1996· Selby & Morgan, 1996· Hope & Klemm: Urban: 2002, etc.), where cities and regions tend to have a more competitive position in the hierarchy of urban systems and to create competitive advantages over other similar cities (Lever, 1999). *In the US, the practice of city marketing has been linked primarily to local economic development, the promotion of place, and the encouragement of public-private partnerships to achieve regeneration (Paddison, 1993). In Europe, the term City marketing became popular in the Literature in the 80s (Van den Berget et al., 1990).*

By the beginning of the 1990s, there was a serious attempt to create a distinctive place marketing approach (e.g., Ashworth & Voogd, 1990· Berg et al., 1990· Kotler et al., 1993). The transition from city marketing to city branding is facilitated not only by the extensive use and success of product branding but also by the recently but rapidly developed concept of corporate branding (e.g., Balmer 2001· Balmer & Greyser, 2003). After 2000, we have moved from place marketing to place branding. The transition from city marketing to city branding is facilitated not only by the extensive use and success of product branding but also by the recently but rapidly developed concept of corporate branding (e.g., Balmer, 2001· Balmer & Greyser, 2003). Place branding is the implementation of brand strategy and other marketing

techniques and industries in the economic, political, and cultural development of cities, regions, and countries.

Place marketing has gained greater prominence in the last few years. Conferences are organized, and there are many publications in specialized journals such as the "Journal of Place Management and Development" and "Place Branding and Public Diplomacy." The site marketing research methodology receives data from scientific approaches such as spatial planning, spatial development, investment assessment, and socio-economic geography (Deffner, Karahal, 2012: 17-18). A typical example of branding is New York's "I Love NY," which was designed in 1977 and is still in place today (Deffner, Karahal, 2012: 418). This old logo, created by Milton Glaser in 1977, was little changed as "I LOVE NY more than ever" and helped the city recover after the September 11 terrorist hit and get back to the top.

2. Tourism marketing strategy and city branding

City marketing/branding strategies refer to image and identity designs approaches and draw on data from different scientific fields such as spatial planning, social and economic geography, cultural planning, communication, web tools management, Tourist destination management, etc. They are generally associated with culture and led regeneration. According to Krassimira (2007), an urban tourist destination consists of mainly four dimensions (Physical characteristics of the city. Urban community elements/Management (supply oriented) and Marketing. *"A place marketing framework assists in understanding connections between the satisfaction of users of tourism products and the development of these products. Urban tourism products are multi-functional and multi-used, and their development usefully can be guided by surveys among different user groups of the benefits they seek from them, of their specific expectations, and their ultimate satisfaction with the products"* (Bramwell, 1998).

Strategies aim to achieve marketing goals, while tactics aim to implement strategies (Christou, 2000). The most prominent of the high/general strategies that can be used by any organization are the three high/generic alternative strategies formulated by Porter (1980): 1) The cost strategy 2) The differentiation of product characteristics in relation to other products of competition and 3) Focus on small market segments. An interesting technique for developing objective alternative strategies is offered by the growth model and market share model called Boston Consulting Group (BCG) (Middleton et al., 2009). According to the BCG model, there are four different types of products that are the following (Middleton et al., 2009): The 'star,' the 'dollar,' the 'failed' and the 'question mark.' Concerning the intensity of competition and the forces that inspire it, Michael Porter (1980) argues that every business is particularly interested in the intensity of competition in the industry in which it operates. The degree of this intensity depends on five fundamental forces that determine the profitability of the industry, which are: 1) The threat of new entrants and their potential. 2) The consumer power of buyers, 3) The threat of substitutes, 4) The intensity of competition that exists, and 5) The power of suppliers.

3. The Study - Thessaloniki Tourism Data analysis

Thessaloniki (Source: Gbr Consulting, 2016) had 2,309,617 overnight stays in 2016, whereas three years before, in 2013, they were 1,763,543 and in 2005 the overnight stays were only 1,2 million, a fact that indicates an increased potential of the touristic flow the last years. The city has a total of 138 hotels that have a capacity of 7,712 rooms. The average occupancy of the 5-4 and 3-star hotels in 2016 was 69,9%, while September is the month with the highest occupancy rate. Greek visitors represent 53% of the overnight stays and foreign visitors the remaining 47%. Concerning the foreign visitors, they originate mainly for Cyprus 13%, Turkey 8%, US 7%, Germany 6% and then follows Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro and Italia with 5% and the UK with 4%. As regards to the means of transport used 46% came to the city by plane and 33% by car. Tourists spent, on average 71 Euros per day. Thessaloniki international airport, with 1,7 million international arrivals is the main entry point for the city as well as for Chal Kidiki, that is a very important destination for a vacation. Germany is by far the primary market, accounting for 35% of international passengers, Cyprus 11%, Great Britain 10% and Russia 9% in 2016. The cruise ships that made a stop in Thessaloniki in 2015 were 34, carrying 25.963 passengers according to the Thessaloniki Port Authority data.

According to the above study, the reasons for visiting Thessaloniki were 48% for recreation, 25% for Business, 17% for Visiting of Friends and Relative, 10% for Conferences and Exhibitions, 1% for other reasons. The main sights of Thessaloniki were (2015) Thessaloniki's promenade, the White Tower, the Upper Town /Castle, the Church of Agios Dimitrios, the Archaeological Museum, the Byzantine Museum, Rotonda, the State Museum of Contemporary Art, the Ataturk Museum and the Jewish Museum. Leisure travelers visit an average of 3.5 attractions. Considering the above, it can be concluded that Thessaloniki as a touristic destination includes many forms of special interest tourism, such as Congress tourism, exhibition, cultural tourism, religious (Pilgrimage), cruise, shopping, health (medical), and gastronomic tourism.

4. Research Methodology

As part of the tourism development plan of Thessaloniki, primary research was conducted in Thessaloniki using questionnaires which were distributed to tourism operators and tourists. The visitors' questionnaires were distributed to six hotels in Thessaloniki, belonging to different categories, all members of the Hotel Association of Thessaloniki. Questionnaires were also distributed at the intercity bus station (KTEL), at the train station (OSE), at the airport (Macedonia Airport) and the Thessaloniki Port Authority passengers' station. People who filled in the guest questionnaire were Greek and foreign tourists that chose to visit Thessaloniki. Three hundred thirty-one persons replied to the questionnaire. The distribution of the questionnaire was done in Thessaloniki in two phases (periods). The first distribution phase was during 1-15 February 2016 and the second one during 15- 31 July 2016.

The questionnaire includes 28 questions on personal perceptions and demographics of respondents. The questions were open, restricted with multiple choices or assessment

questions (Likert method). The questionnaire includes several sections. Section one contains questions on the traveling details. Section two includes questions on the access mode to the destination. Section three has questions regarding the evaluation of the touristic product. Section four contains questions regarding the development of tourism in Thessaloniki. Section five includes questions relating to promotion matters and circulation. Section six includes questions on demographics. The analysis of the data was done with the statistical program SPSS 21. The questionnaire for professionals was targeted to bodies and organizations involved in the tourism sector of Thessaloniki - directly or indirectly, and its objective was to find out more about their views on tourism and the growth of Thessaloniki in general. The questionnaire was filled in by 25 representatives known to their searcher thanks to his professional activity. The professionals' questionnaire was filled in June 2016.

5. Results for the Tourists Sample

According to the results of the survey, 64% of tourists in the Thessaloniki sample were Greeks and 36% foreigners (Fig.1). Among the foreign visitors, 16% of the foreign visitors were Cypriots, 12% Turks, 9.5% from the USA 9.5%, 9% from Serbia, Germany 8%, Russia from Romania 7% % of Israel, while 52% were women and 48% (Fig.2).



Figure 1. Greeks and Foreigners Visitors

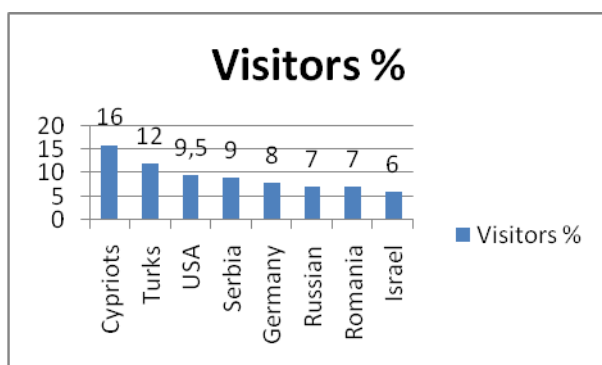


Figure 2. Visitors data %

42% of them had an income of 700-1200 euro's, 21% under 700 euro's, 20% had an income of 1200-2000 euro's, 9% from 2000 to 3000 and 8% over 3000. 67% of the visitors had visited Thessaloniki in the past, while 45% believe they will revisit Thessaloniki. 14% visited the city for one day, 42% stayed in Thessaloniki 1-2 days, 37% stayed 3 to 7 days, and

only 7% stayed more than seven days. 3% of the visitors spend up to €20, 16% from €20 to €30, 27% from €30 to €50, 33% from €50 to €100, 12% from €100 to €200 and 9% over €200. According to the data above, the average expenditure per visitor is approximately €80. 40% of the visitors that came to Thessaloniki arrived by plane, 39% by train, 7% by bus, 6% by boat or on a cruise ship and the rest 2% by other means. 69% searched for information online or used other information sources before their visit to Thessaloniki. Moreover, when asked if there was a relationship between the perceived image of Thessaloniki, created through the internet, and their experience, 83% answered positively.

In more detail, with regard to the visitors' satisfaction, the answers given by the respondents granted an extremely high score of an average total of 80,5%. The evaluation was based on accommodation (location, customer service, quality), on gastronomy (variety, quality, and price) and the department stores (prices, service, premises). Finally, 64% of the respondents consider it "highly probable" or "quite probable" to revisit Thessaloniki, while 95% of them recommend it as a tourist destination.

According to the tourists' views: 35% believe that the most crucial element missing from Thessaloniki is the lack of environmental awareness. 21%, the lack of information on available activities in Thessaloniki 10%, the lack of transport links with the islands. 11%, poor variety of activities.

Tourist development in Thessaloniki should aim at the following: Promotion of the cultural heritage of the city (27%) Increased provision of green areas in public spaces (18%) Information on the internet concerning the ongoing activities in Thessaloniki (17%) Creation of activities while encouraging the visitors to participate in them (14%). More frequent flights, linking Thessaloniki with the rest of the world (13%). Namely, in the matter of promotion and information, 23% of the visitors would want a more effective promotion of the city's activities, and 19% of them request a better mapping and information regarding the city's attractions. Moreover, 14% would appreciate explanatory leaflets provided at the airport, train station, bus station, port as well as Information Points (15%).

6. The survey in Professionals

The main problems highlighted by the Professionals of Tourism in Thessaloniki were the following: The dense building of the city / The thick residential environment of the city. The traffic problem and the severe lack of parking spaces. The lack of green spaces. The pollution spotted in various and different corners of the city. The inadequate maintenance of the buildings in general, mainly of the sports facilities, the historical and cultural monuments. The fact that the city has not a special /certain identity/ brand. The extreme promotion of the Greek Islands and the City of Athens. The lack of coastal connection with the Islands. The fact that there are not so many airline connections with other cities abroad. There is a need for more cultural events that can be experienced by foreign tourists and to take advantage of the existence of the hospitals and the health clinics, through the development of health tourism.

7. Tourism strategic marketing plan for Thessaloniki

7.1 Strategic Targets

The enhancement of the brand of the area supported at the competitive advantages through a creative communication policy and strategic enhancement of the existing branding for Thessaloniki. Aim in certain market-targets in order to be established as a unique identity orientation. Augmentation of the arrivals, through the next five years, by 25% and extension to new markets (for example China, India). To address seasonality, the tourism season can be extended through the development of new forms of tourism and the development of new attractions to bring in new visitors. A 20% increase in the daily per visitor expenditure.

7.2 Tactical Targets

1) Formulation of a unique authority of tourism in Thessaloniki to replace the existing 19 public and private individual entities responsible for the promotion of tourism. 2) Creation of a webpage for the Organization of Tourism Promotion and Marketing of Thessaloniki, combined with a more active presence at the Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram). 3) Opening in new Markets (China, India). 4) Development of new forms of Tourism. 5) Quality improvement of the existing services aimed at increasing arrivals, average stay, and address seasonality. 6) Creation and regular updating of relevant databases, and 7) Formulation of tourism packages for special interests.

7.3 Strategic marketing

A market penetration strategy is suggested to enrich the existing gastronomic tourist product, the gastronomy tourism market, and the distribution channels by providing a high value for money. A cost leadership strategy is suggested to enhance 'city' and 'weekend' tourism, combining high promotion and low-priced products, focused on market niches, followed by a diversification of these markets. Regarding the Congress tourism, it is suggested to use a differentiated strategy, combining medium promotion and low prices and focusing on a niche market. This would be followed by a cost leadership strategy, focusing on providing both medium-low prices and high-value (value for money). To promote Health and Religious tourism, a focus on a niche marketing strategy, followed by the use of a cost leadership strategy that focuses on delivering low prices and a high-value product.

The forms of tourism mentioned above can target separate segments of the tourism market, based on the tourists' country of origin and their specific characteristics. For example, Thessaloniki receives a large number of tourists from Greece's neighboring countries, like FYROM, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Turkey annually. These tourists are interested in recreation or entertainment activities but also in shopping activities. Another characteristic of people visiting Thessaloniki is their religious/spiritual interest. These tourists are mainly Orthodox Christians, coming from Russia or Serbia, but also from Poland or Romania. They are interested in visiting churches, religious monuments, and monasteries. Other tourists with different characteristics are visitors from Turkey and Israel. Visitors from Turkey show a high interest in having comfortable accommodation, good food, shopping activities, and also in visiting Atatürk's house, which is today Turkey's consulate in the city.

Visitors from Israel have special and emotional ties with Thessaloniki thanks to the significant Jewish people living in the city before the Second World War. This is why the touristic product Thessaloniki is offering should be enriched in this field, since, apart from

the Jewish Museum, the city has no other places and sources of information to offer to Jewish visitors. One proposal would be to develop the "Pavlos Melas" military camp, which was used by the Nazi during the Second World War as a concentration camp for the Jews that were then sent to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp.

7.4 Proposals to improve visitors' services

Improving services and conditions in all coastal, rail, intercity buses and air routes to and from Thessaloniki, along with the internal (in the city) transportation services. Creating new accommodation premises fulfilling high standards, modernizing the existing accommodation infrastructure, and making good use of all the classical buildings in order to highlight the local features and the distinctive character of the city. Improving the operation of the Touristic Information office in Aristotelous square. Training the staff and entrepreneurs in the touristic business. Creating and promoting cultural events regularly (i.e., festivals, festivities/special events to promote local products), in order to enhance and enrich the touristic product of Thessaloniki.

7.5 City branding and promotion

It is essential to upgrade Thessaloniki's brand name and maximize the brand awareness campaign. "Many stories, one heart» (2012)," which was Greece's first city tourist sign (Fig.3).



Figure3: Thessaloniki's brand name

Create brochures in different languages, mainly in English, Turkish, Hebrew, Russian, French, German, Chinese, and Indian, which can be regularly updated. Create a new and smart TV spot for national, regional, and local TV channels. Launch campaigns on tourism via domestic and foreign media (Travel Channel, National Geographic). Create a webpage for Thessaloniki to be used in social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram). Publish articles on Thessaloniki in newspapers, magazines, and travel websites (i.e., Travel, Travel, www.100dorog.com, <http://www.traveldailynews.com>, Conde Nast Traveler, Sport, and Style). Publications in travel guides (Michelin, Explorer, TOP 10, Lonely Planet, Orama). Participate in tourism fairs and shows ("Holiday & Spa Expo" in Sofia, International tourism fair "Salon des Vacances" in Brussels, Exhibition "Outdoors" in London, "Sydney Holiday & Travel Show" in Sydney, and CMT in Stuttgart, Germany).

Place advertising posters to welcome visitors at the arrival terminals in Thessaloniki's Port, at its airport "Macedonia," in the intercity bus station "KTEL" building at Monastiriou str., in the train station's "OSE" waiting room and at Thessaloniki-info. Place information

signs it the "KTEL" intercity buses and stations, at the port, the train stations "OSE," in the archaeological museum and at its flagship monument the "White Tower."

8. Conclusions

Taking into account the internal and external factors of Thessaloniki for the environment and assessing the results of our primary and secondary research, we conclude that City Tourism can become an asset of the city if it develops further. That can be accomplished by focusing more on gastronomic tourism, congress tourism, pilgrimage, and medical tourism.

Apart from promoting unique forms of tourism, the targeting of tourism market segments according to the tourists' country of origin should also be ensured. Such countries that have a particular interest in the city of Thessaloniki are Turkey, Russia, Israel, and the neighboring countries, FYROM and Bulgaria. Moreover, the development of the comparative advantages of Thessaloniki and the implementation of actions aiming at its promotion can enhance tourism to the city.

In order to achieve successful coordination of all tourism players in Thessaloniki, there should be a supervising authority, such as the Organization of Thessaloniki's Tourism Promotion, whose role would be the implementation, the monitoring and the evaluation of the Strategic Marketing Plan for tourism in Thessaloniki. The proposed Strategic Plan is intended to enhance the city's competitiveness by creating new touristic products in the form of niche tourism for specific market segments.

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