Destination Brand Awareness of Region Center of Portugal: Tourists' and Tourism Professionals' Perspectives

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Abstract:

Current research focuses on destination brand awareness/brand image of Region Center of Portugal. A questionnaire-based survey was applied (816 valid responses), based on random sampling at BTL 2013.

The image of the Region Center of Portugal reveals key cities: Coimbra, Fátima, Aveiro and Figueira da Foz (specific city-related attributes are associated with academia, monuments, culture, religion, nature/sun&sea and food). Regional strengths are Food and Nature.

Future developments include: a) implementation of a tourism observatory in the region to measure key variables for brand image consolidation; b) place marketing/branding with national positioning/differentiation based on diversity, uniqueness and quality under one umbrella brand "Center of Portugal"; c) development of methodologies/strategies to promote place brands close to tourists and regional stakeholders using social media.

Practitioners could benefit from integrating these results in their business strategies, hence motivating the alignment of their strategies with DMOs, using Region's strengths to differentiate themselves.

1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding and measuring tourist destination images has a long history in tourism-related academic research and it has been an increasing concern for destination management organizations (Jenkins, 1999; Saur-Amaral, Ferreira & Conde, 2013). It is a key concern for destination marketing, specifically relevant for market segmentation, as well as for the development of new touristic products and services for specific market segments (Buhalis, 2000).

While tourism-related literature develops thoroughly the process behind the creation of brand awareness (e.g. Veasna, Wu, & Huang, 2013), emphasizing the importance of qualitative studies to develop scales and constructs to better understand that process in quantitative studies, marketing-related literature emphasizes the importance of quantitative studies for brand awareness (e.g. Homburg, Klarmann, & Schmitt, 2010; Huang & Sarigöllü, 2012).

As Saur-Amaral and colleagues (2013) emphasized in their systematic literature review on consumer-behavior in tourism and on marketing practices in tourism, there are many areas in marketing-related literature that are still understudied in tourism-related literature and that could bring new approaches, more efficient, for destination marketing actions and strategies.

We build upon marketing-related and tourism-related literature in order to study destination brand awareness and brand image in a specific case: Region Center of Portugal. We applied a quantitative approach, a questionnaire-based survey that led to 816 valid responses, in order to identify brand awareness and brand image of that region. Data analysis was performed with SPSS, using univariate and multivariate statistical analysis.

Results are presented and discussed and in the end of our paper, we present limitations and future research directions, together with implications for practice and policy.

2. DESTINATION BRAND, IMAGE AND AWARENESS

Countries, cities and destinations, in a general perspective, face new important challenges. They seek on a daily basis their competitive advantages, thus place branding and place brand management are key to their success. Competitive territories are those who succeed in creating knowledge and facilitating learning, publicly discriminating their differences and their distinctive competencies (Cidrais, 2006).

Braun and Zenker (2010) and Saraniemi and Kylanen (2011) a destination/place brand is a network of institutions and actors located in a physical or a virtual place where marketing-related transactions and activities take place, that is built in the mind of the consumer from visual, verbal and behavioral expressions of a place. Communication, values and culture build the brand, based on the perceptions of the consumers over those elements (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006).

Place branding tries to create emotional, cognitive and psychological associations with the destination, being a good starting point for an integrated communication and marketing approach of the respective destination (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006; Rainisto, 2003). However, before being able to brand a place and position this brand, the place must define its identity, its attributes and its improvement areas (Rainisto, 2003).

According to Williams, Gill, and Chura (2004), destination brands are designed to create a unique and appealing identity conveying values that are consciously or intuitively linked to that destination's sense of place.

When building a brand, one must define what the approaches to the respective tourism destination are, choosing between: economic geography-oriented; marketing-management oriented; customer-oriented or cultural (Saraniemi & Kylanen, 2011). It is also necessary to build

a brand consistently, and put in place a sustainable process and structure for its management (Correia & Brito, 2011), or else the effective relationship with the consumers may not be achieved.

As an effect, cities and regions should be able to clearly identify which values should integrate their brand identity and only afterwards should they communicate it close to the stakeholders, in order to achieve a coherent place image. However, Wheeler, Frost and Weiler (2011) alert towards the risks of performing a branding process over too narrow values base and argue to consider a broader suite of values, including social, historical and cultural, geographical, economic and environmental, in a multifaceted and diversified offer over the region. The right equilibrium should be sought.

Caldwell and Freire (2004) alert that branding should be applied differently to cities, regions and nations. For these authors, the countries as they're functionally diverse, they should build upon the emotional dimensions of their brand identity while cities and regions should promote their most functional dimensions.

Models like Chernatony's (1999, 2009) brand identity model or Balakrishnan's (2009) branding strategy for a destination bring interesting tools for the development of a coherent brand. Ruzzier and Chernatony (2013) complement those models and present a new destination brand identity development case applied to Slovenia in a very interesting and practical-oriented paper, for academics, practitioners and policy-makers.

The usage of umbrella brands may be effective in order to enhance awareness while respecting diversity of the place. However, care should be taken to create a coherent identity while respecting the strong, local identities, covered under the umbrella brand and specific destination personality (Hosany, Ekinci & Uysal, 2006; Orth et al., 2012; Pike, 2012; Spilkova & Fialova, 2013).

Quality is a key element to be taken into account when building and promoting a destination brand, as suggested by Jansson and Waxell (2011), as fundamental to try and achieve regional competitiveness, and being deeply embedded in space. A strong positive brand may lead to differentiation and to a higher competitive advantage for a destination. For Hankinson (2001), Rainisto (2003) and Kavaratzis (2004), brand communication should focus on its significance for the consumers.

Brand awareness significantly impacts consumer decision-making as consumers generally use brand awareness as a decision heuristic. A known brand has a much better chance of being chosen by consumers over an unknown brand (Huang & Sarigöllü, 2012).

Awareness is related with brand image, brand quality and consumer loyalty, as indicated in several studies (Chen & Phou, 2013; Gartner & Ruzzier, 2011; Im, Kim, Elliot & Han, 2012; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Lee, Kyle, & Scott, 2012; Qu, Kim & Im, 2011; Su, Cheng & Huang, 2011).

When brand awareness is low, specific steps need to be taken to enhance brand recognition (e.g. advertising, public relation or promotion – knowing that regular promotions affect the image of brand's quality to should be used carefully) (Huang & Sarigöllü, 2012).

Destination brand is thus seen as an intangible asset of the place, whose value may be enhanced if following a process of definition of brand identity, identification of brand awareness, development of an effective communication plan close to stakeholders and then to consumers, and of constant monitoring of brand image, brand awareness and brand value close to those actors.

3. METHODOLOGY

Looking specifically at destination brand awareness and focusing on national territory only, we seek to evaluate brand awareness of a specific Portuguese region, called Center of Portugal, close to national tourists and tourism professionals.

Center of Portugal is a territorial unit NUT II and is a recent administrative unit created over a territory previously known as *Beiras*.

With 100 municipalities and seven touristic areas (Castelo Branco, Coimbra, Aveiro, Viseu, Leiria and Fátima, Serra da Estrela and Oeste), the Region Center of Portugal is a puzzle with quality, diversity and a wide geographical area served by rail and good road network, with no airport included.

At a regional level, several public entities interact in the management of the region in a independent manner. Some of those entities, like Tourism, did not even operate, till May 2013, on the full territory covered by the Region Center of Portugal.

At a regional level, the different political and administrative structures do not act upon the same administrative structure acting at a regional level did not act upon the same "center" of Portugal, which turned difficult the creation of a coordinated and aligned territorial development strategy in this region. Without a common strategy or institutional leadership, regional positioning as a brand and identification of brand identity and place branding strategies were a challenge.

We thus started from evaluating brand awareness for the Region Center of Portugal, with the final goal of creating a preliminary output that could serve to further define a regional brand identity and a brand communication strategy close to stakeholders and consumers.

We applied a positivist approach, organizing a face-to-face questionnaire-based survey. Scales were developed based on current image of Center of Portugal, and they were intentionally not drawn on scientific inputs. This choice was motivated by the need to assess the linkage with regular communication of the touristic destination performed by destination managers.

The questionnaire was divided in five key areas:

- Portuguese Regions (spontaneous and assisted regional brand image);

- Experience in Region Center of Portugal (as a tourist or as a tourism professional);

- Attributes of the Region Center of Portugal (Sun and Sea; Cultural Touring; Nature; Business Tourism; Health and Well-being; Golf; Food and Wines; Religious Tourism);

- Tourism Professionals (characteristics of tourism professionals part of the sample);

- Sociodemographic data.

We aimed to interview tourists and tourism professionals visiting Bolsa de Turismo de Lisboa (BTL), one of the most reputed tourism destination exhibit with a high visiting rate from national tourists all over Portugal. In 2013, Center of Portugal was BTL invited destination, being given emphasis all along the exhibit (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Entrance to BTL 2013 figuring a typical boat (Moliceiro) from Aveiro, part of the Region Center of Portugal

Source: www.btl.pt [Accessed on March 15th, 2013]

We aimed for a representative sample, thus we planned to do face-to-face interview with tourists and tourism professionals chosen in a random manner, in various places at BTL 2013, during the whole duration of the exhibit, morning till evening.

Data was introduced in SPSS and next subject to statistical analysis, univariate and multivariate, according to the nature of the variables analyzed and taking into account the exploratory nature of the survey.

Results: Our sample was obtained during BTL 2013, from 27th of February to 3rd of March, 2013. We obtained 816 valid responses, which compose our working sample.

Sample: Gender distribution was balanced. 51,8% of the sample were male, 48,2% were female. A larger number of respondents lived in Algarve and Alentejo (41%), in the North (21%) and in Lisbon (17%). About 39% of the respondents had superior education, and 39% had finished high-school (12th grade).

63% of the respondents were tourism professionals, yet as later mentioned T-test performed on key variables showed there were no significant differences in most variables among regular tourists and tourism professionals. 40% of tourism professionals worked in hospitality.

4. PORTUGUESE REGIONS (SPONTANEOUS AND ASSISTED REGIONAL BRAND AWARENESS)

Results of spontaneous brand awareness (top of mind) are presented in Figure 2. They reveal a dominant position of the Algarve Region (22% of the respondents), followed by Lisbon and Alentejo (15% of the respondents for each), then North (10% of the respondents), Center and Porto (7% and 6%, respectively).

Figure 2: Spontaneous brand awareness for Portuguese Regions

Source: authors

Results from assisted brand awareness are presented in Table 1. The most visited Portuguese regions among the respondents were: Lisbon and Tagus Valley (31%) and Porto and North (26%), followed further away by Algarve and Center (around 14% each) and Alentejo (11%).

Table 1: Portuguese Regions most visited by the respondents

Region	Frequency	%
Lisbon & Tagus Valley	253	31,00
Porto and North	212	26,00
Algarve	113	13,80
Center	111	13,60
Alentejo	90	11,00
Azores	16	2,00
Madeira	11	1,30
NS / NR	10	1,20
Total	816	100,00

Source: authors

Out of the 816 respondents, only 600 knew the Region Center of Portugal (around 74% of the respondents).

Top of mind awareness regarding most important cities in the Region Center of Portugal brought about one leading city: Coimbra (31%), followed by Aveiro (11%), Lisboa (10%), Leiria (8%), Viseu (7%) and ultimately Santarém (3%), Castelo Branco (3%) and Figueira da Foz (2%), as showed in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Top of mind awareness: Most important cities in the Region Center of Portugal**

Source: authors

Top of mind awareness regarding key attributes associated with the Region Center of Portugal indicated several options, with close-by percentages: food (5%), followed by nature (4%), beauty (4%), university (3%), culture (3%), beach (3%), mountains (3%) and then Coimbra, center, students, fado, history, sea, Mondego, Aveiro river, ovos moles, tradition, tranquility e wine (2% each).

Assisted awareness regarding key attributes associated by the DMOs (Destination Management Organizations[1]) with the Region Center of Portugal and included in the strategic touristic national plan revealed two leading attributes, Nature (56% of the respondents) and Food & Wine (41% of the respondents), followed by Sun and Sea (27%) and Cultural Touring (25%), as illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Assisted Awareness: Key attributes of the Region Center of Portugal

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[1] (Buhalis, 2000)
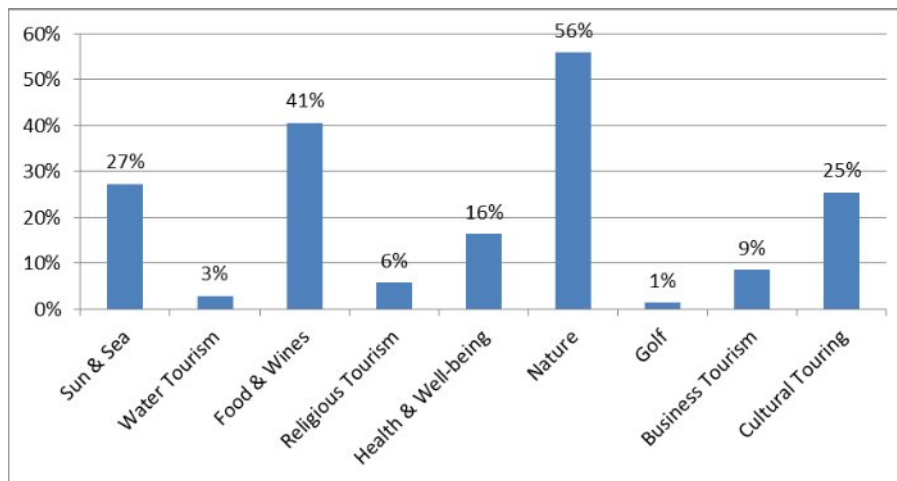
Source: authors
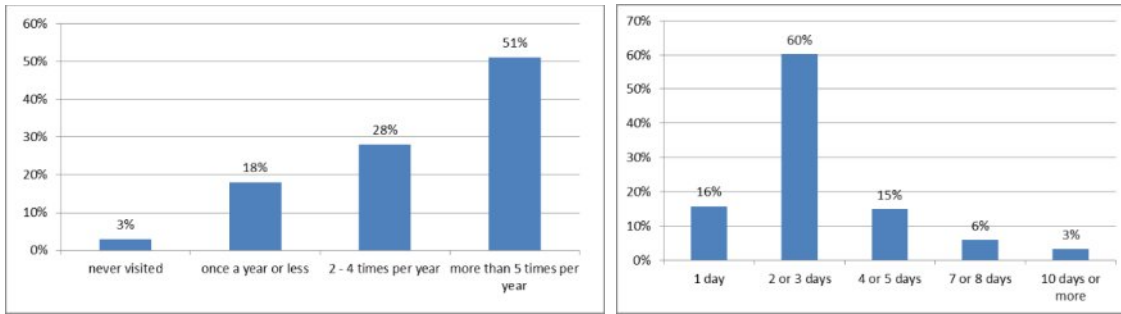
We may conclude that, for our sample:

- Top of Mind Regions of Portugal are Algarve, Lisbon and Alentejo;

- 75% of the respondents know the Region Center of Portugal;

- For those respondents, Top of Mind cities are: Coimbra, Aveiro, Lisbon, Leiria and Viseu; while Top of Mind Attributes are: food, nature, beauty, university, culture/history, beach and mountains, tranquility and tradition, fado, wine and ovos-moles.

Key attributes in assisted awareness are: Nature, Food & Wines, Sun & Sea and Cultural Touring.

4. EXPERIENCE IN REGION CENTER OF PORTUGAL (AS A TOURIST OR AS A TOURISM PROFESSIONAL)

Most respondents visit the Region Center of Portugal more than five times a year (51%), and most of them (60%) stay two or three days in the region (see Figure 5).
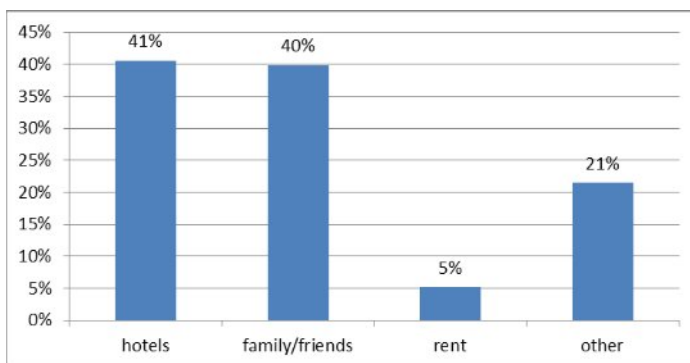
Figure 5: Frequency of visits in the Region Center of Portugal and average nº of days

The type of accommodation most used by respondents are hotels (41%) and family/friends' houses (40%). A relatively low number of respondents rent houses. In the other types of accommodation, 10% of the respondents indicated their own house, and 3% indicated camping (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Frequency of visits in the Region Center of Portugal and average nº of days

Most respondents spend on average two or three days in the region (26% of the respondents) or more (22% of the respondents).

Hotels are used mostly by respondents that visit the region once a year (63% of the respondents) and by respondents that visit it between 2 and 4 times a year (53% of the respondents).

The houses of family and friends are used by more than 30% of the respondents, independently from the frequency of visit, with emphasis to the respondents that visit the region between 2 and 4 times per year (44%).

Rental houses are a relatively low percentage (between 3% and 6% of the respondents), independently from the frequency of visit.

Other types of accommodations (34%), e.g. own house or camping, are mostly used by the respondents that visit the region more than 5 times a year.

Regarding the evaluation given to the touristic infrastructure (see Figure 7), most respondents evaluate as Good key infrastructures: accommodation (66% of the respondents), food (58%), accessibility (62%) and transportation (43%).

Food was evaluated as Excellent by 31% of the respondents. On the other hand, more than 18% of the respondents evaluate as Average the accommodation, accessibility and transportation.

**Figure 7: Evaluation of the touristic infrastructure**
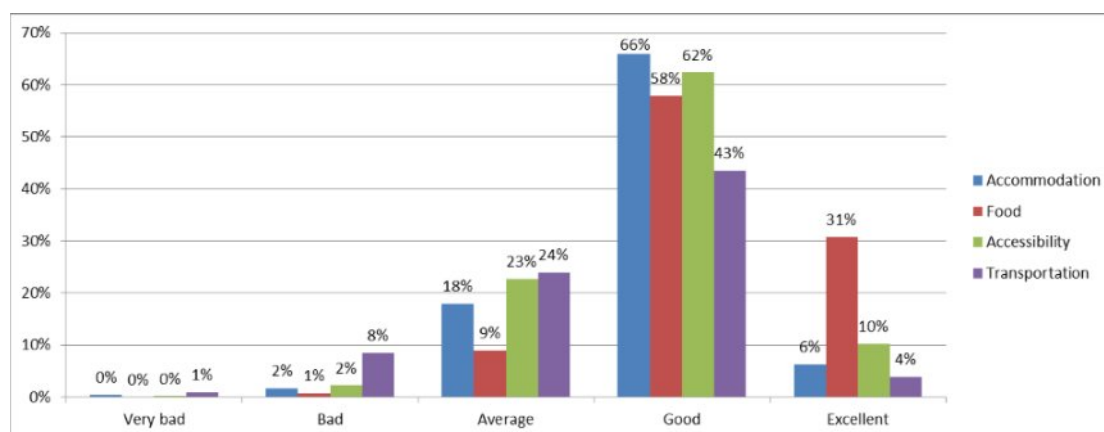
Source: authors

Regarding the evaluation of the quality of the touristic information distributed in the various points of the territory, information available in the Tourist Offices, Train Stations and Bus Stations were evaluated as Average or Good (closer to Average – more than 35% of the

respondents – compared with 21% that evaluated as Good) and even as Bad (more than 15% of the respondents overall, with more than 26% of the respondents for Train Stations and Bus Stations).

Information available in Restaurants, on the Internet and in Hotels was classified by more than 48% of the respondents as Good, knowing that the information available on the Internet and in Hotels was classified as Good by more than 57% of the respondents (see Figure 8).

Figure 6: Evaluation of the touristic information
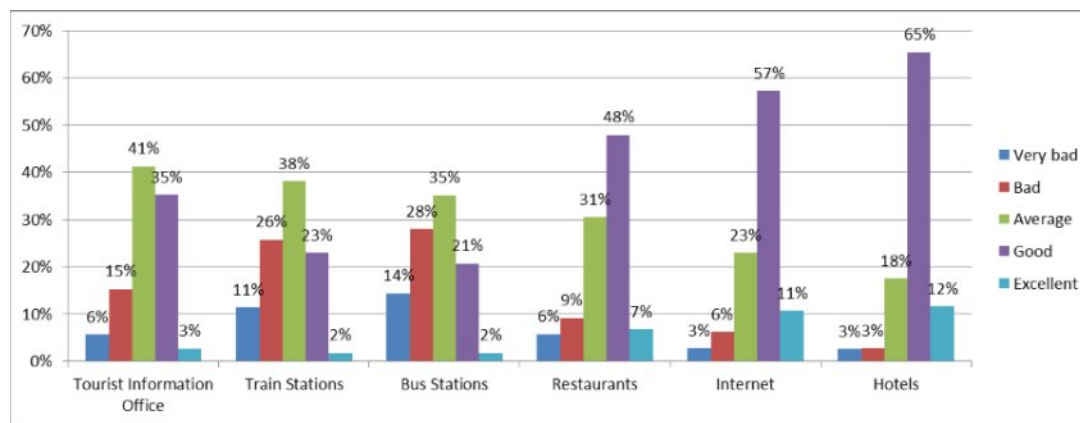
Source: authors

Therefore, we may conclude that:

- Most respondents visit the Region Center of Portugal more than five times a year, staying on average two or three nights, in houses of family or friends.

- The respondents that visit the region less than five times a year stay on average two or three nights as well, but they also use hotels.

- Key touristic infrastructures (accommodation, food, accessibility and transportation) were evaluated as Good, knowing that food was evaluated with Excellent by a high number of respondents while accessibility, transportation and accommodation have a significant number of evaluations with Average.

On the overall, the Region Center of Portugal was globally evaluated in terms of hospitality and of global satisfaction with Good (more than 61% of the respondents) or Excellent (more than 27% of the respondents), which is a quite satisfactory result.

5. ATTRIBUTES OF THE REGION CENTER OF PORTUGAL

Regarding the attributes of the Region Center of Portugal, more than 48% of the respondents evaluated with Good all the attributes. Additionally, Food and Wines was evaluated with

Excellent by 44% of the respondents, followed by Nature, which received Excellent from 28% of the respondents (see Figure 9).

Figure 7: Evaluation of the Attributes of the Region Center of Portugal
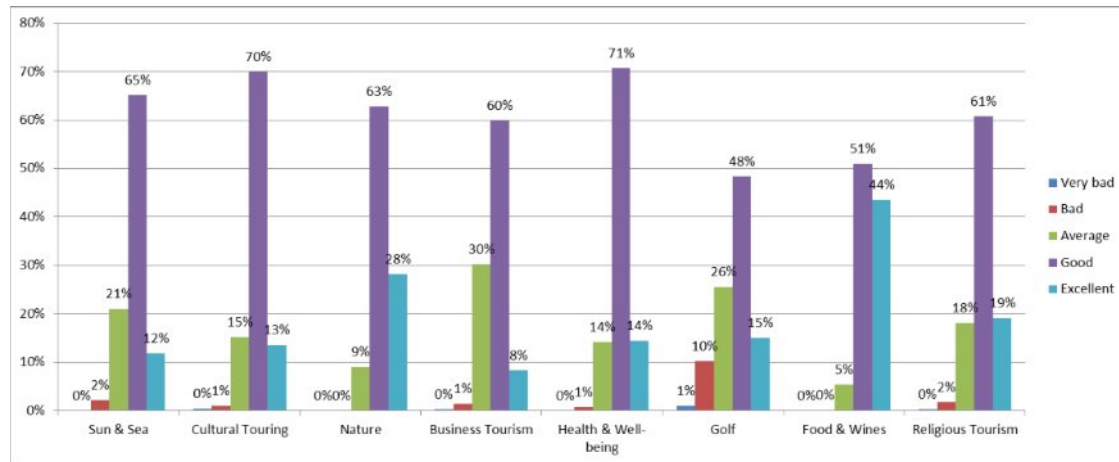
Source: authors

Diving deeper in the nature of the attributes, we discovered that top of mind touristic attractions in this region are Fátima Sanctuary, beaches, food and monuments (5% of the respondents for each), city of Coimbra, university, culture and nature (3% of the respondents for each) and ultimately Aveiro river, city of Aveiro, Serra da Estrela and history (2% of the respondents for each).

When coming to food, the specialty most mentioned by the respondents is "leitão" (small oven-roasted pig), mentioned by 18% of the respondents, followed by "chanfana" (10% of the respondents), "ovos-moles" (5% of the respondents), "enguias", "bacalhau" and "cabrito" (4% of the respondents for each) and finally by "lampreia" (3% of the respondents).

The most popular traditions among the respondents are Students' festivities ("queima das fitas" and "praxes"), with 7% of the respondents, followed by folkloric parties ("rancho") and fado (3% for each) and ultimately by carnival and "romarias" (2% for each). The most popular annual events go in hand with traditions, knowing that "queima das fitas" was the most mentioned (13%

of the respondents), followed farther by BTL and 13th of May – Fátima celebration, with 3% of the respondents each one, and then by Expofacic, carnival, Festa dos Santos Populares – Lisbon, june -, Chocolate Festival in Óbidos, among others, with around 2% of the respondents for each.

In terms of monuments/sightseeing, the most mentioned were University of Coimbra (10% of the respondents), Batalha Monastery (5% of the respondents), followed by Old Church – Coimbra, Conimbriga ruins, Fátima Sanctuary, Jerónimos Monastery and Belém Tower (4% of the respondents for each) and Alcobaça Monastery (3% of the respondents).

The most popular beaches were Figueira da Foz (20% of the respondents) and Nazaré (9% of the respondents), followed by Peniche, Mira, Barra, Costa Nova, Caparica (3% for each) and Cascais, Ericeira, Baleal, Buarcos e Tocha (2% for each).

As a result, key touristic components of the Region Center of Portugal are:

- City of Coimbra (university, Conimbriga ruins, Old Church, as touristic atractions, and academic parties and fado as complement), with a monumental and cultural perspective.

- City of Aveiro (Aveiro River, ovos-moles, bacalhau and enguias), with a nature and food perspective.

- Fátima sanctuary, and 13th of May pilgrimage, with a religious perspective.

- Annual events like carnival, folkloric parties and chocolate festival.

- Nature, beaches, calmness, food, wines, culture and history.

Note that there are some elements mentioned as belonging to the Region Center of Portugal that do not belong to it, mainly monuments, events and beaches from Lisbon metropolitan area.

6. STATISTICAL-BASED SEGMENTATION

We assessed the correlation between the various variables included in our questionnaire, using SPSS. We performed T-tests and Square-Chi tests on relevant variables, to be presented. In some cases we identified statistical differences between groups, in other cases we did not.

We also performed hierarchical clustering. The latest technique led to no relevant results, indicating no specific segments of respondents.

So, we have not registered any statistically significant differences between male and female respondents. We used T-test and a significance level of 5%.

We did verify, however, the existence of statistically significant differences between the level of education of the respondents and their knowledge of the Region Center of Portugal, confirmed by Chi-Square test. The higher the level of education, the bigger the probability of knowing the Region Center of Portugal.

There are significant differences also between the respondents whose profession if somehow related to tourism and respondents whose profession is not related to tourism, with 5% significance level. This occurs only in the following variables:

- Average number of nights spent in the region (they spend on average one day less than the regular tourists);

- Evaluation of food (they tend to evaluate as Good or Excellent the food offer, while regular tourists tend to evaluate it as Good);

- Evaluation of accessibility (they tend to evaluate it as Average, Good or Excellent, while regular tourists tend to evaluate it as Good);

- Evaluation of the information available in restaurants (they tend to evaluate it as Average or Good, while regular tourists tend to evaluate it as Good);

- Evaluation of hospitability and Overall evaluation of the region (they tend to evaluate it as Good or Excellent, while regular tourists tend to evaluate it as Good);

- Evaluation of the attributes Business Tourism and Golf (they tend to evaluate it as Average or Good, while regular tourists tend to evaluate it as Good);

- Evaluation of the attribute Food & Wines (they tend to evaluate it as Good or Excellent, while regular tourists tend to evaluate it as Good).

We thus consider that for the indicated variables it is important to address tourism-related professionals and tourists in a differentiated manner, considering also as important segmentation variable the level of education, especially for place brand awareness.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The current study allowed identifying the main attributes of the Region Center of Portugal, evaluating its brand image based on a statistically significant sample for the population of visitors at BTL.

The respondents whose professions are related to tourism have statistically significant differences in the evaluation of specific attributes of the Region Center of Portugal when compared to regular tourists, which might be explained with different work-related experiences in the region or while contacting with tourists that visited the region.

The image of the Region Center of Portugal is associated with some of its main cities: Coimbra and Fátima, Aveiro and Figueira da Foz. Each city has different attributes associated with its brand image, reinforcing results by Zenker and colleagues (2013), which in this specific case are:

- Coimbra is associated with university, academic events (Academic Perspective), with Old Church, university towers (Monumental Perspective) as well as with fado and history (Cultural Perspective);

- Fátima is associated with the Sanctuary (Monumental Perspective) and with the 13th of May pilgrimage (Religious Perspective);

- Aveiro is associated with the river, the sea and the beach (Nature/Sun & Sea Perspective), with enguias, bacalhau and ovos-moles (Food Perspective);

- Figueira da Foz is associated with its beach (Nature/Sun & Sea Perspective).

The strengths of the region stays in the Food offer and in Nature (our results are here consistent with the study of Tobias and Wahl, 2013) knowing that the remaining attributes have received an overall positive evaluation from our respondents.

One under-evaluated attribute is golf, and there are also clues that specific touristic infrastructures (accessibility, transportation and accommodation) need to be improved.

The implications of our study are limited to the population available at BTL and in this case more relevant for Portuguese respondents. The number of foreign respondents was insignificant and therefore the results cannot be considered relevant by any means to that type of population.

Following future research directions and policy implications may be pointed out.

First, a policy recommendation: implementation of a touristic observatory in the region that could use the existing touristic infrastructure (restaurants, hotels, train/bus stations, tourist information offices, among others) in order to measure:

- the perceived image the tourists have immediately after visiting the region;

- the impact of specific communication actions regarding destinations in the Region Center of Portugal oriented towards tourists;

- the origin and destination of tourists (where did they came from and how and where they are heading and how/why).

Second, another policy recommendation: place marketing and branding for the Region Center of Portugal should include national positioning and differentiation of this region based on its diversity, developing a communication plan (Pike, 2012) able to build upon this diversity while reinforcing the uniqueness and the quality of the region under one umbrella brand (Orth et al., 2012; Wheeler et al., 2011) "Center of Portugal".

The communication plan should naturally involve key stakeholders at regional and national level to ensure aligned communication and development of coherent touristic products and services (Klijn, Eshuis, & Braun, 2012; Pike, 2012).

Third and last, an academic research direction: development of methodologies and strategies to promote and develop place brands (Region Center of Portugal and subordinated brands like city of Coimbra, city of Aveiro, among others) close to tourists and regional stakeholders using social media (Spilkova & Fialova, 2013).

This is still an understudied field and new methodologies tested duly in various contexts are urgently sought to take advantage of the global reach and low-cost opportunities (Edelman, 2010). There is a pioneering work to be undertaken in social network sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, integrating the mobile marketing perspective (availability of digital and social media solutions in multiplatforms: desktop computer, laptops, tablets, smartphones and distributed kiosks in the territory).

For practitioners, the key insights are linked to the way they decide to integrate the results of this statistically significant academic study in their business strategies. It would help to the development of competitive advantage to align their strategies and communication plans with DMO's strategies for place marketing and to take advantage of the strengths of the Region to differentiate them outside (and inside) the region (Jansson & Waxell, 2011; Saraniemi & Kylanen, 2011).

As final note, it is never too much to reinforce that the partnerships between regional stakeholders and DMOs are key to the consolidation and communication of the brand "Center of Portugal", as well as to the regional development and competitiveness as a whole (Saraniemi & Kylanen, 2011).

Having a strong regional umbrella brand (Orth et al., 2012; Wheeler et al., 2011) supported by strong local brands developed as part of the diverse territory and communicated in accordance

with DMO's strategies may swiftly allow the development of a flourishing region where quality of service and diversity of touristic offer is key to gaining sustainable competitive advantages.

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