

“Local people” a Critical Factor for **Place Brand Building**¹

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Abstract | Branding has become one of the most powerful tools in marketing strategy and its application has reached undreamed of areas. There has been a general agreement amongst academics and practitioners that places can be branded in the same way as consumer goods and services. However, destination branding is a relatively new concept and there is a lack of empirical academic research on the topic. It can be assumed the place brands will have some unique characteristics that are quite different from products or services. This exploratory research reveals that local people are relevant and important for a destination brand building process. Consumers use this factor to evaluate differences in destinations and to support their decisions about tourism consumption. It can be concluded that much of a destination’s image is likely to be created by stereotyping the “typical” local people.

Keywords | Branding Places, Brands, Tourist Behaviour, Countries, Cities.

Resumo | A utilização de marcas como instrumento de *marketing (branding)* tem-se tornado numa das ferramentas mais importantes nas estratégias das organizações. Actualmente, existe um largo consenso entre a comunidade académica e profissional que os locais podem ser submetidos à gestão da marca (*branding*), tal como são os produtos de grande consumo e serviços. Porém, esta aplicação de estratégias de marcas a locais é um novo conceito que não foi ainda extensivamente investigado. Existe claramente uma falta de estudos empíricos nesta área. Este artigo, baseado numa pesquisa empírica exploratória, revela um dos factores relevantes para a gestão eficiente de uma Marca Geográfica. No artigo conclui-se que as populações locais são importantes para a construção de uma Marca Geográfica. Basicamente, consumidores utilizam o factor “populações locais” para diferenciar e avaliar diferentes alternativas.

Palavras-chave | Marcas Geográficas, Marcas, Comportamento do Turista, Países, Cidades.

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1. Introduction

Branding has recently become one of the most important concepts in marketing, its application ranges from consumer goods and services to places, people and concepts (Chernatony and McDonald, 2001). The branding phenomena reached its peak when companies got a green light to incorporate the brand's intangible value in their balance sheet. It was the recognition that brands had financial value (Feldwick, 2002; Haigh, 1996). Following this trend, in the 80's, attention of senior management shifted from the production of products to the production of brands. For example, Stephen King, ex-Head of Development of JWT described a brand as being something that is bought by consumers as opposed to a product that is something produced by a factory (Haigh, 1996). When people buy a product they are not simply buying its functional features but are also acquiring certain symbolic features that are incorporated in the brand (Aaker, 1996). A brand is more complex than a product. Moreover King acknowledged that a brand's life cycle can be eternal while a product's life cycle may not (Haigh, 1996). By 1989 when the Marketing Society organised a conference called "The immortal brand", a famous quote, from the Group Chief Executive of United Biscuits, was used to publicise the event (Feldwick, 2002). This quote supports the idea of the extreme importance of branding:

"Buildings age and become dilapidated. Machines wear out. People die. But what live on are the brands."

1.1. Place branding

The use of branding techniques is not limited anymore to products and services; today there is a general agreement amongst academics and practitioners that places can be branded in much the same way as consumer goods and services (e.g. Anholt, 2002; Caldwell and Freire, 2004; Cai, 2002;

Freire, 2005; Hankinson, 2003; Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Morgan and Pritchard, 2000; Olins, 2002). Not only should products and services develop a system of brand management focused on their identity that helps develop a coherent execution, places should also develop a similar brand management system. Today a range of countries (Greece, Australia, Malaysia, Spain, Yugoslavia, and Croatia), regions (Wales, Western Australia, Oregon, Montana, etc.) and cities (Glasgow, Manchester, London, New York, etc.) has already adopted a place brand-building philosophy approach (Cai, 2002; Guilmore, 2001; Hankinson, 2001; Hall, 2002; Martinovic, 2002; Nickerson and Moisey, 1999; Pritchard and Morgan, 1998). Nevertheless, branding places is a relatively new development, and academic investigation in the area is just beginning to emerge. So far, there are not many studies, which investigate the rationale of branding places (Anholt, 2002; Cai, 2002; Caldwell and Freire, 2004). But, can we really talk about branding places? Is it nonsense to talk about place branding as Prof. Michel Girard (1999) argues? Freire (2005) argued that it is not only possible but also desirable to talk about place brands or geo-brands (brands applied to places – countries, regions or cities). His initial argument is based on the idea that:

"(...) for a consumer a place will always mean something implying a place name will function as a brand, even if not managed under a branding conceptual framework" (Freire, 2005: 348).

Furthermore he argues that consumers' place images are usually no more than stereotypes. Although stereotyping is usually seen negatively, because it is alleged to be a crude simplification of reality, that strategy will be always present because it is the simplest process to deal with an unmanageable information flow. Nevertheless, and because stereotypes are dynamic and evolve it means that National or Regional Tourism Offices around the world can build and develop strategies

to manage those perceived images in a positive way (Freire, 2005).

The geo-brand or place brand concept faces serious challenges because it is threatened by different sectors of society (e.g. Girard, 1999). Normally the use of marketing tools is seen as a first sign of cultural commercialisation (e.g. MacCannell, 1999), exploitation of local people by dubious entrepreneurs (e.g. Boorstin, 1992) and the creation of a plastic world (Klein, 2000) – the hyper-reality world (Eco, 1986). In the present case the arguments that are used to attack the geo-brand concept are flawed and should be reviewed. Freire (2005) used two distinct arguments to counter these not uncommon positions. Firstly, the geo-brand concept and its relevance emerged from society and not from clever entrepreneurs. Secondly, it will be society in general and not only individuals in particular who will benefit from this tool. These arguments are supported by one of the most basic concepts in marketing – clear positioning by differentiation. Due to the geo-brands' own nature and its conceptual framework, it is expected that policies that promote differentiation, with all its benefits, will be the ones that any geo-brand manager will seek to promote. These policies will directly imply combating the tendency of global modern standardisation and will use local culture and its artefacts and rituals as main weapons. The consequence of this approach will be the promotion of local sustainable development.

Nevertheless, there is a structural condition which has to be respected in order reap all the benefits from a geo-brand managerial approach. This condition is based on the presuppose that a geo-brand is being built, supported and managed by local politicians that represent the interests of all geo-brand's prime stakeholders – local people and local businesses (Kotler *et al.*, 2002). It will be the local politicians, supported by the prime stakeholders that have to decide which kind of development they want to undergo. They will decide which spots could and should be elevated to tourism sites and which marks should be used (MacCannell, 1999). This rule

prevents outsiders from exploiting the geo-brand for a short-term profit. This is vital because brand building is fundamentally a long-term endeavour, which will guarantee and affect the place's future sustainable development.

By scrutinising the relevant literature it could be concluded that several places have already adopted a brand management perspective. But if a place can be managed as a brand it is essential to understand which dimensions are involved in the brand's construction. It is reasonable to assume that geo-brands will have some unique characteristics that will be quite different from product or services brands. This article seeks to give an answer to this problem and is the result of a much broader investigation. Although several important dimensions emerged from this research, only one will be discussed in the present article. This dimension, which was considered one of the most important for geo-brand construction was labelled as "local people". Its definition is straightforward and based on the perception of the geo-brand's "typical" local people.

2. Research aims and method

This research is exploratory in nature and intends to understand, without imposing any kind of reference or preconceptions, which factors consumers use to evaluate geo-brands. In order to have a meaningful answer to the research problem a qualitative methodology based on in-depth interviews was employed. Applying qualitative methods, and specifically the use of non-structured in-depth interviews, was thought as the most appropriate methodology to solve this type of problem (de Chernatony and Riley, 1999; Goodyear, 1990). Among others, elicitation techniques were used. Question such as "If the Algarve were a car which brand would it be?", "If the Algarve was a person how would he or she be?" were asked. Moreover, the

interviewer routinely asked interviewees to compare different destinations such as Algarve, Costa del Sol, French Riviera, etc. These regions could be perceived as functionally similar. The main objective was trying to understand which dimensions consumers would use to evaluate geo-brands.

2.1. Empirical field

The current research used the Algarve as the main empirical geo-brand, yet other geo-brands were involved in the study. It was also relevant to carefully distinguish Portugal from the Algarve and, likewise and where required other geo-brands such as Costa del Sol from Spain. This decision, of trying to distinguish regions from countries was essential because it was expected that individuals would use different dimensions to evaluate each type of geo-brand. These expectations were based on Caldwell and Freire's (2004) findings, who argued that it is different branding a city, a region or a country.

"The factors that influence the image of a country are different from the factors that affect a region and city. In this sense, the work of branding a country is different from that of branding a region or city." (Caldwell and Freire, 2004:59)

In this case the research was centred in the Algarve, as opposed to Portugal. This does not mean that the two types of geo-brands did not mix, they did. Interviewees sometimes and in certain contexts, referred to the country and region interchangeably.

2.2. Participants

This research was focused exclusively on consumers (current or future tourists) as the main geo-brand audience as opposed to, for example, investors. Therefore, the participants involved in this study were exclusively composed of British

consumers. It is critical to identify the market segments because it will affect the geo-brand construction. Each segment is motivated by distinct needs and desires, which means that the factors investors will use to evaluate geo-brands will be different from the ones used by tourists (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). While investors will look for infrastructures, local government, taxes, cost and availability of labour (Kotler *et al.*, 1993) the tourist might not be so worried about those aspects and might be looking for other aspects such as natural beauty, sun, adventure, gaming, events/sports, cultural/history, status, etc. Tourists will choose a place that better suits and fulfils individuals' motivations (e.g. Gnoth *et al.*, 2000; Iso-Ahola, 1982; Krippendorf, 1987; Moutinho, 1987).

For the data collection process the researcher used several locations as opposed of just one; accordingly data was collected in Portugal – Algarve, Spain – Costa del Sol, and UK – London. This decision was based not only on the belief that interviewing British consumers in different contexts but also to guarantee a highly diversified sample. These two aspects were considered important in order to enhance the emergence of diverse relevant geo-brands' dimensions. Essentially the sample was divided in three distinct groups, which were later on split in sub-categories. Tourists that were in fact consuming the Algarve geo-brand composed the first group. In this case, it was assumed that participants' brand experience was important and relevant for the study. Initially three levels of experience were identified: the one-visit, the multi-visits and the property owners. It was expected that people with the uppermost loyalty level, people that owned a property in the Algarve, would have the most favourable view of each geo-brand's dimension. Likewise people who returned to the Algarve repeatedly were also expected to evaluate positively certain characteristics inherent to the brand. Finally the first time visitor had also to have some sort of positive geo-brand's image, which was based on some dimensions transmitted

by any medium. By involving tourists with several levels of experience it was expected to get a deeper understanding of the factors that are implicated on a geo-brand's construction. People who chose not to consume the Algarve brand composed the second group. The author wanted to interview individuals who, in some way, chose not to consume the Algarve brand and decided for a competing offer – Costa del Sol, Spain. Costa del Sol was selected because it is a popular destination among the British and shares many functional attributes with the Algarve brand – both regions have extensive popular resorts with a strong sun, beach and family holidays appeal. The third group was comprised of British people who were in the UK. In this case a third battery of interviews was conducted in London. It was expected that new and different dimensions could emerge when interviewing people who were not on holiday and were in their home environment.

2.3. Data collection

Within each region (Algarve or Costa del Sol) several locations were selected as appropriate to conduct the interviews. In the Algarve people were interviewed at a 4 star resort near Albufeira, at bars in Carvoeiro and Praia da Rocha. The sample was not selected randomly but by either previous selection or by observation. In Albufeira and, at the 4 star resort it was only possible to conduct the interviews with the target sample (property owners) thanks to the extremely efficient and a reliable resort's management. They kindly assisted the researcher by contacting and booking interviews with British resort's home owners. In all the other areas, Carvoeiro and Praia da Rocha, the selection process was based on observation. Any British person, seated in a bar would be approached and asked about his or her availability to be interviewed. In-depth interviews were conducted with 16 couples and three individual people, what meant that on total 35 people were interviewed in the Algarve.

This strategy of interviewing people in different locations paid off since it was possible to collect data from people with different ages, income, lifestyle, lifecycle and motivations. In Costa del Sol, the sample selection was similar to the one in the Algarve and people were also interviewed in several cities within the region: Marbella, Torremelinos and Fuengirola. By selecting different locations it was once more, possible to capture a more diversified sample. As in the Algarve the selected chosen participants were British consumers that were seated at bars. In this set of batteries, 6 couples and 2 individuals were interviewed, making the total of 14 people interviewed. Once more individual's personal characteristics varied extensively; from retired couples to young couples. Likewise, in London people from different backgrounds, lifestyles, family life cycle, age, education and occupation comprised the interviewee sample. Experience with the Algarve brand was not a set criterion. Actually, it was only during the interview that the researcher would learn if the interviewee had previously consumed the Algarve brand or not. Once again, the sampling technique used was of non-probabilistic nature. The sample was not chosen by random methods but by the researcher's personal judgement and following a snowball process. The researcher wanted a diversified sample, so in order to have such a sample interviewees were selected because of the nature of their occupation and age. Overall nine people were interviewed.

For each interviewee a code was created. This code had the objective of pointing out where the interview took place and gives some indications about individuals' characteristics such as gender and relation with the brand (visitors, residents). The codes were as follows: A – Algarve, S – Costa del Sol, L – London, P – propriety owners, T – tourists, F – female, M – male. So if a female interviewee had a house in the Algarve she would be codified as being: APF3. The number was used to distinguish different interviewees. The interviews took on average 30 minutes duration and were tape-recorded.

After recording the interviews were transcribed for later analysis. The data was collected between May and October 2004.

Although several important dimensions emerged from this research, due to space restrictions, only one dimension is analysed and exposed in this paper. This dimension, which was considered as one of the most important for a geo-brand construction was defined and labelled as "local people".

3. Data analysis

3.1. Local people used as a cue to evaluate geo-brands

The dimension "local people" was one of the most important and relevant variables that emerged from this research. "Local people" was strongly used to justify action. Likewise, a great number of interviewees made use of this dimension in some way or another to evaluate and/or to differentiate geo-brands. Interestingly it seems that the relevance of this factor was dependent on where the interviews took place. When the interviews were conducted in the Algarve, and regardless if the interviewees were tourists or residents, the factor "local people" emerged quite often and always linked to positive aspects. In the Costa del Sol (except for the permanent residents who justify their decision to move to Costa del Sol partly because of the local people) the factor "local people", when emerged was usually used to evaluate negatively the local geo-brand. Some people interviewed in London also mentioned "local people" as a relevant factor for making decisions about consumption. Nevertheless in London the concept was more abstract, which can be partly explained by the fact that people were being interviewed in their working place.

The "local people" factor was used in several occasions, with several different purposes. It was

used to justify an action, such as buying a house in the Algarve or a holidays or it was used to differentiate distinct geo-brands. Based on this findings it was concluded that "local people" is a relevant factor for any geo-brand. Nevertheless, this should not come as a surprise. Tourism activities and geo-brands usually involve consumption of services where the degree of satisfaction is intimately linked to the employees that provide the service (e.g. George, 1990; Tansuhaj, Randall and McCullough, 1988; Mohr and Bitner, 1995). This argument provided a first hint for the relevance of the factor "local people" on a geo-brand.

The relevance and the role of the "local people" factor on the Algarve's brand became obvious when the author asked interviewees to define the Algarve in 5 words. From the words chosen it is clear that "local people" is a relevant factor for the geo-brand image:

AT1M) Of course...It's nice weather, there's a nice breeze as well here, because it's on the Atlantic. We've been going to the Mediterranean and people are very friendly, especially here.

AT1F) This is a nice area, friendly.

AT7M) Fantastic beaches, fantastic people.

AT2M) Warm, pleasant, friendly, restaurants.

AT6F) Sun, pleasant people, picturesque.

AT3M) Hot, cold sea, windy (for the moment), nice friendly hot place.

AP1F) Only the Algarve? Friendly, beautiful weather, complexes are lovely, the food is wonderful and our house is lovely.

AP5F) Number one, the people (...).

This last interviewee had a very strong relationship with the brand, which is partly rooted on the factor "local people". It starts to become quite evident the relevance of this factor on the geo-brand construction.

AP5F) I love it, it's just fantastic. It's just like home away from home.

(...)

AP5F) I probably thought – I’ve been in Spain quite a few times – Portugal was just one of those places I thought about. Greece personally I love, but I prefer Portugal now.

Interviewer) Why is that?

AP5F) Everyone is just so friendly and everything is so nice, obviously special here.

When the author asked interviewees’, who were visiting the Algarve for the first time, what were their previous images from the Algarve, the relevance of “local people” became apparent once again. Their statements confirmed that “local people” is a major factor influencing geo-brands’ images and probably influencing choices.

Interviewer) What did you know about the Algarve before coming here?

AT1F) Nothing, we just knew that it would be very kind people... my son loves it. He has been coming year after year, and then we followed him.

Interviewer) Did you have any specific image of the Algarve?

AT6M) Not really, we just knew that people were friendly towards the English, fair enough...

Basically “local people” is a relevant factor used to evaluate geo-brands. In this case, this participant uses local people to describe and evaluate her experience with the Algarve brand.

AT6F) It has been very nice, everything has been very positive. The people I’ve spoken to, everyday... yes very nice, people are very friendly... not one negative word about Algarve or Portugal, really.

3.2. Local people used as a factor to justify geo-brand consumption

The factor “local people” is used as a cue to infer quality and helps consumers to select, choose and “buy” a geo-brand. This supports the idea that tourists use “local people” as a relevant factor to make decisions about competitive offers.

Interviewer) Why do you normally go to Spain?

L1F) I don’t know. But I really like the language [Spanish]; it’s very easy to learn. I think the people [Spanish] are very easy to get a long, are very friendly.

L2M) From what I heard and if I had time to spare I would like to go to Portugal...ammm... it is a destination that I would like to go...it’s not just a tourist destination such as some parts of Spain. There is enough of local character you can have the tourists and resorts but you also can have the local flavour. It’s a quiet, friendly culture and very open I think it’s a characteristic of the Mediterranean Spanish, Italians alike, the social life, social culture ammm... you can say a very rich culture. I just think that people from the Mediterranean are deeper.

AT2F) We just come to the Algarve.

Interviewer) Why is that?

AT2F) Because we like it, people are lovely.

An interviewee who owned a timeshare in the Canaries gave one of the most illustrative examples of the relevance of “local people”. Although he had that timeshare, he ceased to go to those islands and became highly loyal to the Algarve brand. Interestingly, the reasons he evoked, for why in the last 3 years he only considered the Algarve for holidays, were based exclusively in the factor “local people”.

Interviewer) So now you are more oriented to Portugal...

AT4M) Yeah, I much rather come to Portugal than Spain.

Interviewer) Why?

AT4M) I don’t know it is just this place, it seems a nicer place, people seem nicer, the locals seem friendlier and it’s just...the thing is that when you have three small children, you want to come to a place that you know it will be suited.

For some British interviewees, who had a deeper relationship with the Algarve brand, such as homeowners, “local people” was also identified as an important factor when deciding to buy the property.

AP2F) So I decided to buy in the Algarve because of the climate...the scenery, the Portuguese people, the Algarvians are always very nice and helpful and all the guests that have been to my apartment have thoroughly enjoyed it.

Interviewer) What do you experience here that you cannot experience in the UK?

AP4M) Constant sunshine, this is the main difference, yes. Also all [people] laidback here and not stressed comparing to the UK. People there ... very...unpleasant (...).

AP4M) People here are friendlier. People here are more laidback, maybe sometimes too laidback, [laughing] (...).

This factor was also identified and mentioned by homeowners in Costa del Sol. For them, "local people" was also a relevant factor to evaluate and support their consumption decision. Basically, and once again, some British in the Costa del Sol justified moving to Spain because of the "local people" factor.

SP2M) Here people of our age can go anywhere. You cannot go in England, it's dangerous.

SP2F) Yeah! It's dangerous for old people. The law, they are very slack on public offences. We find on the whole the young generation here in Spain does respect old people a little bit more. They do tend to listen to you, to what you say and they don't bother you. You walk at night through Torremelinos at 1 o'clock in the morning and it has been packed with young people but you don't feel threatened in any way. They might fight with each other, but they don't seem to bother with our age group. It's nice to be able to go out and sit in a bar and have a drink with civilised people and nobody bothers you. You couldn't do that in London, nor in Manchester where I am from. It's not like when I was a girl when you could go about and not feel threat.

(...)

Interviewer) So you are at home?

SP2F) Yeah. I like the Spanish people. We like to sit in Spanish bars we don't...

SP2M) We never go to the English bars.

SP2F) We like the Spanish bars. You get a lot better service, much better service.

SP2M) The English bars are not quite so clean.

SP2F) We like to stay here very much. We love the Spanish people.

Similarly, a bar owner in Costa del Sol, also based her decision to move from the UK not only because of the weather but also due to the local people.

Interviewer) Why did you open a bar, here, in Costa del Sol?

SP1F) I prefer it to England.

Interviewer) Why?

SP1F) The weather is not very good. It's not a nice place to live anymore.

Interviewer) Why?

SP1F) The people are not nice anymore...it always rains in Manchester.

However, on the opposite spectrum, "local people" was also used as a justification for deciding not to consume a geo-brand. There are strong evidences that some consumers based their decisions about not consuming a geo-brand due to the "local people" factor.

AP1M) I've never been to France. I don't fancy France.

Interviewer) Why is that?

AP1M) I don't know, I don't like the French. That's being honest I don't like the French.

"Local people" is a relevant factor because it influences how consumers experience the geo-brand; it has an impact on consumer's psychological state. In this case satisfaction with the geo-brand consumption might be dependent on the local people.

AP6F) Sometimes when you go to other countries people pressing you all the time to try...here you can just relax.

ST4F) More peaceful [comparing Cyprus to Costa del Sol]. To be honest I think people [in the Algarve] will be friendlier.

"Local people" is also relevant if the tourist is trying, and likes to interact with the local communities. In this case if motivation to travel is

based on a seeking dimension (looking for something new) then the relevance of having local people ready to talk and interact with the visitor might be paramount for tourist's satisfaction. The possibility of interaction and satisfaction resulting from that will obviously impact the geo-brand's image.

L2M) ... trying to go to a place with local people where you can start talking with people and share experiences, be part of a different community rather than taking your own community and your own ideas to a place.

(...)

L2M) sometimes you want to be isolated in a beautiful place but sometimes you want to be interacting in a place with the local people.

For consumers, the factor "local people" is a pertinent and relevant one. This factor is a fundamental cue that helps and facilitates the geo-brands' consumption decision process. It looks like tourists will decide consumption based partly on how local people are perceived. Favourable images of local people will induce geo-brand consumption.

3.3. Local people used to differentiate geo-brands

The "local people" factor was also used to compare and differentiate geo-brands. This is supported by several interviewees, who, when asked about the similarities and differences between destinations around the Mediterranean, used "local people" as a factor for differentiation. Generically people were being asked if they felt that locations around the Mediterranean were similar or different. The objective was to understand which variables consumers would use to evaluate geo-brands; "local people" was the factor most used to differentiate geo-brands.

AP3M) No, they are not similar, at least I don't think...we don't know Italy, we know the South of France fairly well and we know Costa Brava and Costa del Sol. And there are considerable differences.

Interviewer) In which aspects?

AP3F) People are nicer in Portugal, much nicer.

AT1F) No...we love Spain, not Spain, not mainland... Majorca.

AT1M) and Ibiza.

AT1F) ...but we come here...the whole actual experience is much, much better, much friendlier, much...

AT1M) Laidback...

AT1F) People are helpful, aren't they?

Interviewer) Do you think there are differences between Costa del Sol and the Algarve?

L3F) Well, the people are different. Portuguese people seem to like the English. There is an old alliance isn't it?

Interviewer) What about Turkey [when comparing several Mediterranean places]?

AT6M) The Turkish were nice people, contrary to what you believe they are very nice people.

AT6F) People outside the main places are nice... the smaller places.

AT5MY) People [in the Algarve] are friendlier than the Greeks.

AT5MX) Yeah, we are tolerated by the locals, in Greece that has been hammered for years and I don't really have patience for that anymore.

AT5MY) It's not so much about the service, but it's the locals [the Greeks] that just want you for your money...they are not really friendly towards you...

Interviewer) Do you think there are differences between there [Malta] and here [Costa del Sol]?

ST2M) People seem a lot friendlier back there [Malta].

Local people were also used as a reference point to identify similarities between geo-brands. When asked if places around the Mediterranean were similar and in which dimensions were similar...

AP1F) Just the people, they are lovely. They are very similar, I just know Cyprus and here...very, very friendly.

ST1F) Ah...Greece, Italy...the sceneries is quite similar. People are friendly.

Tourists do use “local people” to differentiate distinct offers in the market. They also use this factor to define and explain how similar some geo-brands are. This is further evidence to support the idea that the factor “local people” is extremely important for a geo-brand construction.

3.4. Definition of friendly people

The adjective mostly used to define “local people” was friendly. But what does friendly mean? What are the basic components that make “local people” friendly? Three dimensions were identified as having an impact on the definition “friendly people”: ready to help others, talkative and family oriented values.

Ready to help others was identified as being one of the main characteristics that positively influenced the perception of local people.

AP1F) Very friendly, very helpful anything you want they will try to do. They are great, very good. They are like the people from Cyprus, they are easy going, do everything to help you, just the same.

AT7M) I think the locals are helpful as well. The Portuguese like to help and very welcoming.
(...)

AT7F) Pleasant, very pleasant.

AT7M)...and relaxed, which is nice. Here you ask some question they will have time to draw a map, or show you to turn left, turn right.

AT7F) In the UK...just that way [laughing].

AP5F) Really friendly, always eager to help, I just know a few words in Portuguese, but I always try and they always appreciate it. They might laugh, but they laugh with you not at you [laughing].

Moreover, the fact that local people normally salute everybody and that it seems, have enough time to talk with the visitors is relevant and had a major impact on how tourists perceived the Algarvians, which consequently affected their satisfaction with the Algarve brand. Moreover, the

majority of the local people that interacted with tourists spoke English, which means that probably all or great part of these people worked for the tourism industry.

AT1M) We found the Portuguese people are very friendly and very nice to you. Everybody says good morning, good afternoon...they are very nice.

(...)

AT1M) They are very friendly. I mean we cannot speak the language, because we haven't learnt it, but in general a lot of Portuguese people speak English anyway and I think they will communicate perfectly with us. I mean if we are friendly, you know...

AT1F) Yeah, well it's Europe.

AT1M) Yeah! They don't ignore people, they are friendly.

AT1F) They talk with you.

Being able to speak English is particularly important because it means that local people can communicate with the British visitors.

L2M) British people like to go to a place where there is sun; they tend to go to places with a coastline. Somewhere with a lot of various outdoor culture and tend to think about going to a place as being exotic because the language is not English but also tend to want to be in a place where people speak a little bit of English. So when they go there, there is some connection through the language.

Finally the Algarvians were stereotyped as having family oriented values, which were appreciated by some of the interviewees. These values were not only appreciated by the interviewees who were travelling with children but also by others who were neither travelling nor had children. It seems that this is a relevant characteristic for analysing and evaluating people.

L3F) Most European people would welcome children in a way that they are not welcome here [in the UK]. Well, it's better than it used to be. There were some restaurants [in the UK] that would say that they didn't want children...it's better than it was. There was a time when children were not allowed near a pub or

a restaurant. Europe has always been better on that. So I would feel... yeah... people [in the Algarve] are nice and safe. There is no reason not to be safe. And my child likes camping anyway, children love camping so...and she loves travelling. I'm not saying that we would say that we had to go to Portugal because it's good for Claire but than there are no negative ones either. We just have to be careful with the sun.

AT4M) They are friendlier from what I can see and compared to Spain... and I think from the moment that you have children... We used to go on holidays without children you don't meet as many people, as soon as you have children you talk to more people, everybody is interested in the children...it is a different holiday when you have children, you can't do what you used to do. It's just a different holiday it's nice to spend more time with the children because at home it is work and work, so it's nice.... I mean people here like children and... and that is nice and relaxing...it seems they are more family oriented...

Interviewer) What is your stereotype of the Algarvian native?

AT2M) Very pleasant, the family restaurants are very clean.

AT2F) Hard working, very family oriented.

The following interviewee reveals the general image and dimensions that are being transmitted about the Algarvian people. Although he never went to the Algarve he built a stereotype based on a friend's narration. The Algarvians stereotype coincides partly with dimensions previously identified.

L2M) No [his friend never had a negative experience in the Algarve]. I think the most interesting things happen when you go somewhere you don't speak the language and there might be some kind of misunderstanding. But generally, from what I understood people are very friendly very laidback, people have a chance to talk and their pace of life... particularly in small cities, life is slow and people have more time, so the general idea is positive.

Subject AT4M sum-ups the definition of what friendly people means and used a taxi driver as an example. He defined the typical Algarvian as being: talkative, helpful, honest, family oriented, and

appreciated the presence of tourists for whom he tried to cater as best as he could.

AT4M) I think it will be a little bit like the taxi driver we took today when we went shopping. We took a taxi back here. He stopped and within a few seconds we were chatting away very friendly, prepared to help you, not rip you off, he is genuine. I think generally the Portuguese people are very family orientated, they like children and they like to feel that they are looking after you. Probably they appreciate being...of us being here, they get some satisfaction...they want to make sure you are having a good time.

From this analysis it seems that there are some relevant dimensions that define what "friendly people" is: ready to help the others, talkative and family oriented. Those are generic characteristics that on the surface seem purely culturally determined and for this reason non-controllable by any organisation. But in order to understand if these variables are culturally determined and for this reason non-controllable it is necessary to understand who those friendly local people are. This is an important point because if "local people" is such a relevant factor then it is expected that tourism boards should try to monitor, control and influence it.

3.5. "Local people" a controllable variable

After analysing the relevance and the meaning of "local people" the focus has to be on who those people are. As stated above, there is strong evidence that the "local people", who speak English, might in fact be people that work for the tourism industry. In this case their attitudes and behaviour can be characterised as being not only culturally determined and non-controllable but also a consequence of certain working practices, which will influence the interaction between consumers and locals. It can be asserted that some of the tourists' positive impressions from the Algarvians might be a consequence of well-managed and motivated employees. Likewise, some negative views, about,

for example, the Spanish people, can also be linked to employees, which it seems are not being properly trained or motivated.

The influence and impact of the resort, restaurants, bars and its employees on the geo-brand is evident when analysing consumers' statements. There was one that considered the Algarve as being home from home. Interestingly her proposition, home away from home, was set in a context that directly involved the resort's employees, meaning that it was the resort and its employees that influenced her perception towards the geo-brand.

AP5F) Just everyone is so friendly and everything is so nice obviously special here [at the resort].

Other interviewees also support this feeling and argued that the resort's employees had an important influence on how they experienced the Algarve brand.

AP1F) We go to Oura we know the restaurants and the people there, even though you are only going for a coffee, they greet you, you know, makes you feel good, especially in here as well and Tony [resort's employee] is really good.

The following statements enhance the relevance and are strong evidence that "local people" are people linked to the tourism industry and, for that reason partially controllable.

AP6F) The people we know are all linked to the tourism industry aren't they?

AP6M) Yes. In fact fishing has declined so much, oranges seem to be disappearing, so the people I meet...I am always amazed at how well they speak English, I am ashamed of myself...but the majority of people whose job it is to help...I always find them very unassuming, they are not pushy...

Furthermore, some consumers might spend much of their time within the resorts. In this context it is reasonable to assume that when some of the consumers were talking about "local people" they

were probably referring to the resort's employees. (This is especially true for the interviews that took place at 4 star resorts).

AT4M) I didn't expect this place to be as nice and... you don't really have to go outside if you don't want to. I suppose I didn't expect to be so self contained really the actual place, you have tennis, you have pool...beautiful trees...but no, I mean...it's probably what I expected generally [expected from the Algarve and from a nice resort]...just the people make a big difference...

Nevertheless, it was also revealed that not only the resort's employees had an impact on the Algarve's brand image. Employees from restaurants, outside the resorts also had a role and an influence on the geo-brand's image. Basically, the service supplied in a restaurant will have an impact on how a geo-brand is perceived.

L6M) I did have, going back to the hotel and restaurants that we went to [in Lisbon], there was a good feeling of courtesy (...) I think after I had gone to Lisbon I had that impression...very dignified and attentive people...

L3F) Yeah, lots of fish, I like seafood. Because all the restaurants were on the beach and were very good and I just like fish, very nice. There is one particular restaurant that we went 3 or 4 times, very nice seafood and very helpful and friendly people. They would try to help describing the fish because from the menu we couldn't really understand what kind of fish it was. And well their English wouldn't be the best but they would try to describe it. I tend to eat fish anyway. You have to eat fish there you are at the sea and the fish is particularly good. . Aaaa, that was a nice time... very good ... relaxing days...

If employees are a major factor in the geo-brand construction, then it is also relevant to understand which dimensions have an impact in their evaluation. Similarly to "local people" there are some characteristics consumers identified as being relevant at an "employee level".

3.6. Characteristics of the employees

“Local people” and more specifically employees are characterised as being: nice but without being overwhelming. Again, some of these characteristics are based on cultural aspects because, for example, shaking hands in Portugal is a sign of respect and education. In this case employees, by shaking hands are showing esteem and appreciation, they do not want to become friends or be more deeply involved as it might be the signal in the UK. It was also stated that people do not oversell and are not commercially aggressive. Those behavioural characteristics were identified as being among the most important to define the Algarvian employees. Those issues are important because it makes consumption experience relaxing and stress free which in the end will impact the geo-brand image.

AP6F) When you go to the beach bar to have coffee and we often meet...Tony [Tony, the waiter from the resort] does not speak great English, but he is always being... without being over.

AP6M) Yes, he likes to see us - “So nice to see you, sit down there” – shakes hands and...than he doesn’t... he is not overwhelming...I like that...

AP6F) Sometimes when you go to other countries people pressing you all the time to try...here you can just relax.

AP6M) They are not a particularly commercial people. Sometimes it is hard to get things [laughing]. I mean that must be the biggest difference, Spanish are more commercial...this is a terrible side of the Portuguese, on the other hand you can say it is not a bad thing.

AP6F) We have been travelling in and around and you know, different areas stop somewhere and as long as you can say a few words it’s ok. You just need a few simple words and everything is fine. Even when we are here we like to relax we are not the typical holiday makers but we...it is different we do go out for coffee and things like that and it is a big difference from England where you are rushing around. We can relax here.

AP4M) People are more laidback, maybe sometimes too laidback [laughing]. (...) If they say I’ll see you tomorrow at two they will come two days later [laughing].

But this last aspect, people appearing two days later, does not upset the interviewee; it is a characteristic that he seems to enjoy because he characterises the Algarve brand as offering a good service. It looks as if the fact of having less commercially aggressive employees is an important advantage for the geo-brand.

AP4M) Volkswagen Golf. Reliable, not so expensive, but good service.

Probably in this case the positive associations with a good service in the resort off sets all the other negative aspects that occur outside the resort. He later defined the typical Algarvian natives as:

AP4M) Very, very friendly. I never met any awkward one, to be honest I haven’t. Probably I met more awkward English people, there are a lot...and they [the Algarvian’s] are always ready to help you.

3.7. Low turnover

Moreover and apparently there is another relevant factor that has a positive impact on how Algarvians’ employees are perceived. This one is based on the level of familiarity that exists between employees and consumers. Having a low turnover within the industry, and in this case at the resort or in some restaurants where tourists like to return, has a great impact on how people experience the Algarve’s brand. In the limit it can be argued that decisions for buying a house in the Algarve might be partly influenced by the level of turnover at resorts and restaurants.

AP6M) We got details from the rentals and the following year we came and so we rented maybe five years before we had any money to buy anything so...But we used to play tennis and really, it was just a very friendly place and many of the people who worked then are still here. So very nice. Every body is very helpful.

(...)

AP6F) In the winter it's fine. We go down there to have some coffee we can have some meals. We go to our restaurants, the same people are there, and they like their winter customers.

AP5F) Just everyone is so friendly and everything is so nice, obvious special here. And...yeah...you know...I only come out on my own for a week and then I have friends and family coming for a week. But on my own I feel very safe. I already know everybody here, and so it's nice coming back every time ... yeah... Everybody says "Hi, nice to see you!" "How are you doing?"... It's like being at home... ummm...better than at home [laughing].

3.8. Employees and negative impact on a geo-brand

On the opposite ground, it can be argued that a geo-brand might face some problems if their controllable variables, such as employees in restaurants and bars, are not managed sensibly.

ST3M) I've stayed in Malaga for four nights. I've been there last year, but Malaga is just a horrible resort. There are not many resorts I don't like, but I don't like Malaga. It's more like a city, you are on the beach and you have busy traffic, noise and everybody is stressed, the bus drivers shouting at some guy like yourself if you are on the road. You are on holidays and you want to relax...it's just a very hostile environment as well. You go to a bar you ask for some food and they slam the food on the table and the general attitude is just they cannot be bothered. I don't know why but the place is awful.

This was a specific example about Malaga but it seems that the problem is not confined just to this specific Spanish city. Several interviewees demonstrated discontentment with the Spanish service, which contributed not only to have a negative experience with the brand, but also gave a justification for not consuming the brand in the future.

AT1F) Right...as I said Spain has gone down hill in that sort of thing, the personal tact; it's not there anymore, is it?

AT1M) Yeah! No, not anymore. Unless you go somewhere...the big bucks...but they need it...we will want to go there again but at the moment we are all for Portugal.

AT1F) All for Portugal!

AT1M) We never realised it was so nice in the Algarve.

ST4F) I mean when we went to Cyprus that year. We used to drink in this little pub and next year we went to the same place and the waiter remembered us and knew us. We've been to Spain a few times, to the same places and they just didn't have a clue.

(...)

Interviewer) Are you returning here [Torremelinos] next year?

ST4F) No.

ST4M) No.

AP6M) It always seemed more, in my opinion, slightly more commercial, because more business orientated and you just have to have a look at their farming. You cross the border and look at their farming. It is farming on a big scale, massive...it just seems more noisy and...I like a little of the peace here, if we were in Spain the waiter would have already come to ask if we wanted anything else...in Portugal it's the opposite, which can be annoying sometimes [laughing] but I like it here.

ST4F) I think some of them [Spanish]...I think... there are some of them that are arrogant. I think they are arrogant, I do.

It seems that dissatisfaction with the service received at restaurants and bars has a negative impact on geo-brands. Employees from restaurants and bars have a major relevance on a geo-brand, if not managed cleverly they can contribute negatively for its image influencing and provoking a future decline on sales, i.e., visitors.

Due to their nature, tourists are expected to spend the bulk of their time with people that work in the tourism industry. Consequently it seems that stereotypes and images of the local people will be built by using the tourism industry workers as role models. Interestingly and although part of employees' behaviour might be culturally determined there are some characteristics that are or can be controlled by

organisations. Being commercially aggressive and avoiding high turn over in the industry might have a positive impact on geo-brands.

4. Conclusion and implications

Different interviewees used the “local people” factor as an important variable to define geo-brands. This might not come as a surprise, nevertheless, what was unexpected is the weight this factor has on a geo-brand. For this reason the understanding of this variable is paramount in order to guarantee success in the market place.

“Local people” was used not only to justify consumption but it was also used to differentiate positively (e.g. Algarve, Portugal, Cyprus, Mediterranean, Greece, Spain) and/or negatively (e.g. Spain, Greece, France, UK) distinct offers in the market. Algarvian “local people” were characterised as having family oriented values, willing to help and having time to talk. Those were qualities considered relevant and positive for the consumer’s experience. Moreover being less pushy and commercially aggressive were also relevant features that validated the positive idea about Algarvians’ employees (Portuguese) and enhanced the positive image that the Algarve brand apparently enjoys. Additionally, it is seems that knowing English is also an important aspect. Its relevance is not only based on the idea of its usefulness for commercial dealings, but also based on the premise that it will then be easier for consumers and local people to interact socially.

An important issue related with this problematic is the understanding of the “local people” nature. Is it a controllable variable? What are the characteristics that are used to evaluate the “local people”? What are the relevant characteristics that transform the “local people” into a geo-brand asset? From the research it could be concluded that “local people” has a mixed nature: it is partly controlled and partly non-controlled. There are some aspects that might

be controlled by an organisation but then there are aspects that are intimately linked to the local culture. Commercial aggressiveness is by its nature partly controllable. It will be managers and/or entrepreneurs that will motivate and train their staff to behave in a certain fashion. Hence, caution must be taken when applying new managerial tools to increase short-term profits. For example, in the catering industry it is not unusual to have entrepreneurs setting up sales revenues objectives per table. These target objectives, if not carefully monitored might pose extra pressure on employees who might pass it on to his or her clients. If allowed to happen, the potential goodwill and positive capital the Algarve brand has today might be at risk. The consequence of having well trained employees is detailed in Figure 1.

Low turnover in the tourism industry appears also to have a great impact on the geo-brand, obviously and especially for the loyal customers. Because of

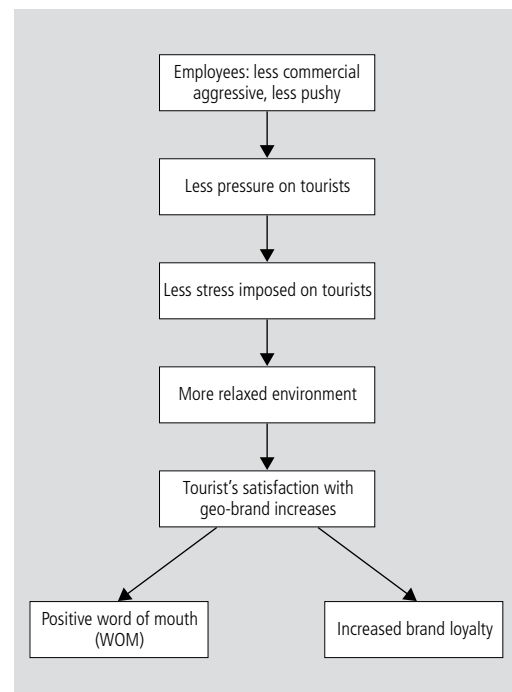


Figure 1 | Tourism employee’s impact on a geo-brand image.

the low turnover, employees are able to develop enduring relationships with visitors, who thoroughly appreciate this personalised intimate treatment. It seems that, for tourists, it is extremely important being recognised and treated as loyal clients. This is one characteristic that contributes positively to the experience of the geo-brand consumption. This is also a controllable variable, which is somehow dependent on local managers and entrepreneurs. Hence, it is suggested that extra attention should be given to retain employees, who will not only have an impact on the local business (becoming a strong asset for the entrepreneur) but it will also have an important impact on the geo-brand (Figure 2).

If “local people” has such a relevant role on a geo-brand, which might even affect its competitive position in the market, then extra consideration should be given to this factor. In addition, and because this factor is partly controllable, then it

is reasonable to argue that there should be some kind of central managerial tools to help monitor employees performance. In order to achieve a satisfactory service levels, the local geo-brand authorities should develop tools to scrutinize how entrepreneurs and managers train and motivate their staff. In this case the tourism boards should control directly or indirectly performance in different businesses. As revealed in Spain, a bad experience might jeopardise the overall competitive stand. No doubt tourism boards have the obligation to, not only inform entrepreneurs and managers on how they should care for the tourists and train their employees, but also grant some kind of incentives in order to achieve excellence in services since a good or bad experience will have an impact on the overall brand. Moreover, the organisations involved in this process are not confined to bars, restaurants and resorts. It is more than reasonable to assume that all entities that deal with tourists will have an impact on a geo-brand. This research has showed that, for example, bus and taxi drivers do have an impact on the geo-brand image.

These findings imply that geo-brand construction should strongly focus on the “local people” factor. Having all the relevant functional attributes in place is not a source of competitive advantage anymore. For consumers seeking the sort of holidays that the Algarve is usually associated with, having good climate, beautiful landscape, golf camps and/or good hotels are just basic requirements. This means that having these characteristics in place do not assure consumption; “local people” will be a strong factor, which will help to differentiate and sell the geo-brand. Today there are hundreds of regions with similar functional attributes, which supply the same kind of offer for the same price. Hence, in this highly competitive and standardised market the “local people” can be a value element to promote differentiation. For example, in terms of promotional activities the use of “local people” variable might be a more persuasive theme than a beautiful landscape.

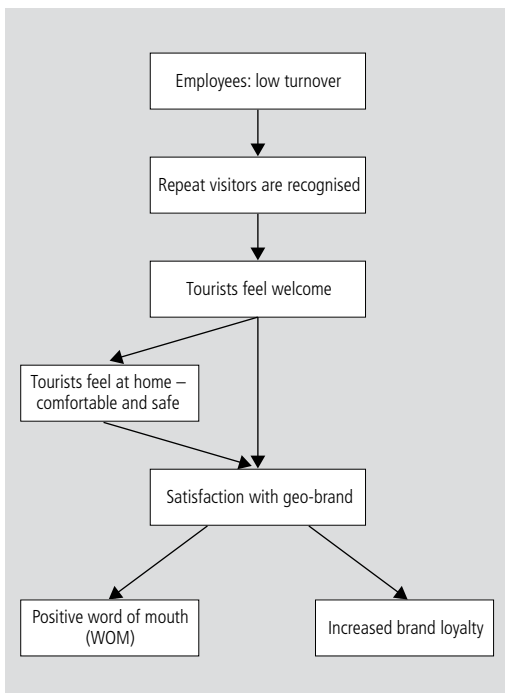


Figure 2 | Impact of a low turnover in the tourism industry on a geo-brand.

In the future it would be interesting to know and understand if consumers from other countries give the same relevance to the “local people” as British do. It will be interesting to know if, for example, for the Spanish this factor is as relevant and which dimensions do they value more?

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