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Communication and advertising of sustainable tourism in city brand construction. The case of the international certification 'Biosphere Tourism' in Spain

Comunicación y publicidad del turismo sostenible en la construcción de la marca ciudad. El caso de la certificación internacional 'Biosphere Tourism' en España

Abstract

This study addresses the analysis of sustainable tourism communication and its contribution to the construction of the city brand. The case of medium-sized Spanish cities attached to the Biosphere seal is analysed, comparing their communication policy with that of the country's main tourist centres. The investigation concludes with a survey assessing the degree of knowledge of environmental sustainability policies and their influence on the choice of destination. The results obtained reveal the minimal importance accorded to environmental and sustainable values in the external communication of the cities studied.

Keywords

Tourism; communication; sustainability; city branding

Resumen

El presente estudio aborda el análisis de la comunicación del turismo sostenible y su contribución a la construcción de la marca ciudad. Se analiza el caso de ciudades medias españolas adscritas al sello Biosphere, comparando su política de comunicación con los principales centros turísticos del país. Se completa la investigación con una encuesta que valora el grado de conocimiento de las políticas de sostenibilidad medioambiental y su influencia en la elección de un destino. Los resultados obtenidos nos permiten verificar la escasa presencia de los valores medioambientales y sostenibles en la comunicación externa de las ciudades estudiadas.

Palabras clave

Turismo; comunicación; sostenibilidad; marca-ciudad

1. Introduction

The concept of brand refers to identity and image. It is traditionally associated to a product or service. The brand refers to the name, logo, and design which aim to identify goods and services in order to differentiate them from the competition (Kotler & Gertner, 2002), and which relate to emotional and strategic elements to produce a set of associations in the public (Louro & Cunha, 2010). According to Kotler (2003) "a brand is, in essence, the promise from a seller to consistently provide a specific combination of characteristics, benefits and services". Hence, the brand is "able to satisfy the needs while creating in the mind of the consumer a combination of emotions, knowledge and experiences" (Baños & Rodríguez, 2012).

Consequently, and depending on the communication that is executed by a brand, this will enable the development of emotional links with the users, such as a "culture" around it. It is the coherent building of an identity and its external projection (Olins, 2000). Thus, a clear vision, well defined values and a unique and distinguishable personality are key attributes which must exist (Kapferer, 2007), in order to influence the public (Heilbrunn, 2006).

Furthermore, it represents a concept related to the projection of the nation states, and more recently, and considering the changes which we are experiencing on a global scale, to territories and places: `Territorial Marketing´ (Aranda & Combariza, 2007), '*place branding'* (Anholt, 2003) *and specifically with cities*: '*city branding*' (Ashworth, 2009; Kolb, 2006; Kavaratizis & Ashworth, 2006). In the case of countries, "the brand constitutes an umbrella which aims to establish a recognisable image beyond its borders. It has a transversal focus, as opposed to a more reduced reach of region and city brands" (Garrido, Estupiñán & Gómez, 2016).

The strategies of city branding are the result of related processes over the last three decades: economic and communicative globalisation and the configuration of a new international order with a focus on decentralisation of the states (Calvento & Colombo, 2009). Tourism has experienced how trip durations and destinations have become redefined, hence, cities recognise the need to compete with other areas in terms of productive and economic aspects (Florida, 2009; Dinnie, 2010; Braun, 2012).

This transfer of competence and power to the local environment has brought gradual changes in the sphere of action of these administrations, adding to the management of public works, security and the management of basic services, citizen information, economic and social development planning, fostering synergies and lobbies with corporate actors and representatives from diverse productive sectors, with a strictly local focus (Fernández & Paz, 2005).

Thus, the image of the city now constitutes the most important variable as regards to the acquisition of investments, whereby complex and subjective factors such as 'business culture' or 'territorial identity' come into play (Cotorruelo, 2001; Singer (as cited in Friedmann, 2003). That is to say, the existing developed strategy for the consolidation of the country brand on a local scale.

It can be considered that an important element in the process of establishing a city brand falls on the possibility – and the necessity – to maintain active dialogue between the city and the state, in the interest of consolidating more public policy actions, drawing the social actors to public and private cooperation, and in this manner have a bearing on the growth and evolution of the productive fabric. The design of the image and the emphasis on the urban identity, are key resources nowadays, not only regarding investments, but also in the design of a strategy directed at new urban tourism offerings (Calvento & Colombo, 2009; Fernández & Paz, 2005). In fact, the offering is constantly evolving, now, with a focus on more sustainable and responsible alternatives from an environmental perspective, in accordance with the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

The local political agenda favours and permits important, active and, even privileged economic scenarios, not only for tourism. A model of urban cosmopolitism is consolidated and presents a narrative of global cities which act against complex problems such as climate change and human rights (Manfredi, 2020).

Cities look to become global actors (Manfredi, 2020), hence more and more they invest resources in order to consolidate their international image, especially, in the areas of economic activities (Taylor, 2012) such as tourism.

1.2. *'Place branding'* & *'Destination branding'*

When a brand strategy or any marketing method is applied to a place, regardless of its size (village, city, region or country), directed at achieving a greater social, political and economic development, it is referred to as '*place branding*' (Anholt, 2003).

Hankinson (2004) adds that this 'place branding' should be the result of a coordinated process with the various involved parties: civil servants, entrepreneurs, business owners, politicians, activists, local community, including others. Without this united effort it is difficult, if not impossible, to build an image of a specific place. Consequently, it is an essential process as regards economic processes such as tourism. (Fan, 2006).

Thus, '*place branding*' is classified into two main categories: geographic entity or applied discipline. The former, clearly refers to the geographic area: '*country branding*' (Andrade, 2016; Fan, 2006; Olins, 2000), '*nation branding*' which relates to the cultural identity of a social group, that aims to reinforce its sense of belonging to a place (Anholt, 2007; Fan, 2006; Szondi, 2008), '*region branding*' (Bruwer y Johnson, 2010), and '*city branding*' (Ashworth, 2009; Kolb, 2006; Kavaratizis & Ashworth, 2006).

In the case of the latter, it refers to the context in which '*place branding*' is framed. In this regard, 'destination branding' (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2004), is designed to promote a place with a tourist focus (Pike, 2005). This is closely related with '*country branding*' and '*city branding*'. *Consequently*, there exists the possibility of combining the discipline with the geographic entity in the creation process of a '*place branding*' strategy (Blain, Levy y Brent, 2005).

Specifically, regarding '*city branding*', that is seen in the building the identity of the image of the city. It should be reiterated that the most important aspect is the required ties between and commitment of the various stakeholders (local community, businesses and companies, politicians, NGOs) to achieve this objective (Hankinson, 2004; Karavatzis & Ashworth, 2006). 'City branding' achieves competitiveness, sustainability and success, only when these actors support common objectives (Pashkaleva-Shapira, 2007).

Brand identity aims to relate the consumer to the brand and the product, by considering their needs and expectations. A city or place builds its identity and brand upon the same elements, looking to differentiate itself from other similar products (Florek, Insch & Gnoth, 2006).

The city as an independent identity, overcoming the state-centred focus, has gained more and more importance, especially in the international processes of exchange; even developing multiple identities according to the profiles and interests of residents, visitors and investors (Owen, 2015; Leffel & Acuto, 2018; Manfredi, 2020). Hence, the same city can be a commercial and financial leader, and at the same time be so in the cultural or gastronomic field (Cervantes y Muñiz, 2010), which is determined by the available resources, be them material or immaterial (Tinto, 2008).

However, Kolotouhckina & Seisdedos (2017: 122) warn "that the lines between investment, commercial interests, and urban development projects are becoming more and more vague, drawing a city more like a subsidiary of a "giant holding company" as opposed to an autonomous and authentic city".

There are more and more cities which are both stages and political actors in the framework of international actions, be it facing social and migration matters to become leaders in culture, science, or innovation, or acting on climate change, which presents an asymmetry in the sphere of actions and capacities between them (Barder, 2019).

Today they are made up of industrial and business lobbies which have an environmental and socioeconomic impact (Herranz, Sidorenko & Cantero, 2017). In particular, the environmental issue has gained great importance on the agenda of cities, with many currently looking to build a more efficient and committed profile.

Issues such as climate change place moral pressure on cities as actors on an international level, and the extent to which they emphasise the consequences of this problem on the lives of the residents, and those of the visitors (Bulkeley, 2013).

As noted by Latour (2013), Vanolo (2017) and Manfredi (2020), we are experiencing a hybrid model whereby cities and countries are facing the same problems and challenges, which determine agendas, actions and offerings, as much together as individually on an international level.

1.3. Sustainable Tourism

Tourism, beyond a human need to discover other distant places to the normal place of residence, constitutes an economic activity which has a vast impact on the territories where it is developed (Pike, 2008). In the case of Spain, tourism represents a strategic activity in three fundamental economic aspects: balance of payments equilibrium, contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and employment stimulation (Franco y García, 1999).

In 2018, tourism generated almost 148 billion euros in Spain, which represented 13.3% of the GDP and provided 2.6 million jobs (12.7% of the total employment), according to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE, 2018 – National Institute of Statistics).

In an article published in the newspaper *La Vanguardia* in March 2020 (https://bit.ly/30ORLfB), it documents that during 2019, 83.7 million tourists (1.1% more than the previous year) visited Spain. The majority of those visitors originating from the United Kingdom, Germany and France; figures which coincide with the data from the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020).

In comparison with the figures from 2018, the article points out that in 2019 foreign tourists alone spent more than 92 billion euros (2.8% more than in 2018, according to the newspaper), with the Canary Islands, the Balearic Islands and Catalonia being the most visited regions. Furthermore, national tourism was extremely active, with coastal areas well sought after, especially in the regions of Andalusia, the Valencian Community, and Catalonia.

Nonetheless, the tourist industry also has a significant negative impact, especially on the environment: large-scale construction, contaminated water, noise pollution, loss and destruction of arable land and natural parks and biological reserves, construction of new transport links and networks, increased consumption of resources, increased production of solid waste, and increased energy demands, among others (Franco & García 1999).

To build a 'place brand' requires long-term planning, although climate change is a variable which Olcina and Miró (2016) already warned would have consequences, for example, with the rethinking of the holiday calendar:

> (…) the possible decrease in tourists in the months of July and August, due to the less comfortable climatic conditions at the height of summer, is balanced out by the more favourable weather in the months of spring and autumn. This requires changes in the policies of destination promotion, adapting to the new labour holidays and actions relating to capturing new markets (Olcina & Vera, 2016:323).

Consequently, it is an unclear context where it is difficult to take action, although possible scenarios regarding climatic vulnerability in the European region are beginning to be established (see Espon-Climate https://bit.ly/3gloMHG), which are dependent on variables such as the rate of CO_2 emissions, socio-economic development, and climate change models.

Furthermore, Olcina and Vera (2016: 326-327) discuss diverse reports by national and international organisations that predict an increase in temperatures in the coming years, which require appropriate actions to be taken in order to reduce the environmental impact of all human activities, among them, tourism.

These scenarios, according to Scott (2011) and Weaver (2011), should not take longer than two decades to unfold, and focus, in particular, on the changes in behaviour of tourists in relation to the economic conditions (such as, shorter holiday periods), and especially, the changes in habit as a result of climate change.

Thus, sustainable tourism is a development model with an emphasis on: economic sustainability, environmental sustainability and sociocultural sustainability (Cardoso, 2006), which, according to the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), is growing globally at a rate of 20% annually, that is to say, two or three times more rapidly than conventional tourism (Ostelea, 2017). Hence, far from the theoretical debate proposed by Hunter (2012), simply put, sustainable tourism is the economic, social and environmental development of a place.

In this context, with the substantive 2030 Agenda and international actions on the SDGs, Spain through the Secretaría de Estado de Turismo (Secretary of State for Tourism) and the Ministerio de Industria, Comercio y Turismo (Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism) has started working on what is referred to as the "Estrategia de Turismo Sostenible de España 2030" (Sustainable Tourism Strategy of Spain 2030). The aim is to form "a national agenda of tourism to address the mid and long-term challenges of the sector, bolstering the three pillars of sustainability: socioeconomic, environmental, and territorial", as stated on its official website (see https://bit.ly/3hHpNsT)

Goal eight and twelve of the SDGs have a direct implication for sustainable tourism (Fundación Codespa, see https://bit.ly/3349IK2). As can be observed in Figure 1, in Spain, these indicators reflect a deficit compared with the "progress of certain SDGs with values towards the higher end of the range".

Figure 1. Current status and progress of Spain in achieving the SDGs
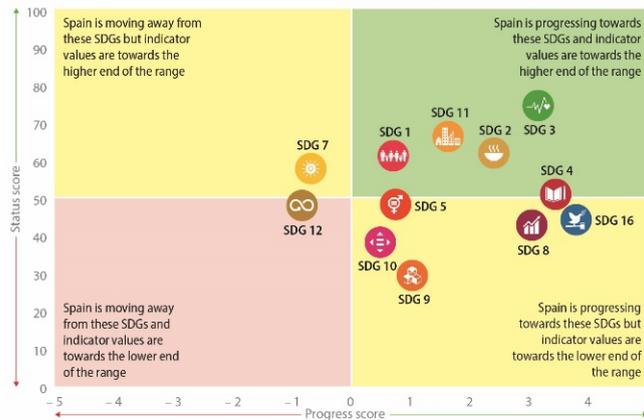
Source: Eurostat (consulted on 28 July 2020)

Thus, an incentive and work commitment with the aim of achieving these objectives lies in the certifications awarded to places and businesses, which aim to enhance the standards of quality. Currently, 18 accreditations and certifications exist on sustainable tourism on an international level (Ostelea, 2017) of which the most recognised are: *Biosphere Tourism, Green Globe 21, Norma ISO 14001, and EMAS (Eco-Management and Audit Scheme) certification.*

The main objective of this research is to determine how communication is established from the municipal authorities of these cities concerning the promotion of sustainable tourism and the building of a city brand around it.

Based on the argument by Blain, Levy & Brent (2005) in regards to the possibility of the discipline and the geographic entity converged in the creation of a '*place brand',* the specific case of the Biosphere seal of sustainable tourism has been employed, being it an important element in the building of the destination brand and, as a result, the city-brand.

This particular certification is considered as the Responsible Tourism Institute (RTI) who awards it is the first international organisation of sustainable tourism to be recognised by UNESCO. In Spain, 20 destinations hold this accreditation or are in the process of achieving it, according to the RTI website. These 20 destinations include villages, towns, cities, major cities and regions. Globally, the organisation is present in 27 countries.

This research establishes the following hypotheses:

H1. Small towns and cities do not communicate in an effective manner sustainable tourism to differentiate themselves from large touristic cities and as a result in the construction of a city brand.

H2. There is a significant lack of awareness by tourists in regards to sustainable tourism.

H3. Sustainable tourism is not a determining element in the choice of destination by tourists.

2. Methodology

For this study small towns and cities were studied (towns and cities with a population of more than 10,000 inhabitants) which have been accredited with the *Biosphere* destination seal, as is the case of: Sitges, Villafranca del Penedés, Vitoria and Gijón. The main criterion for this choice is that, a priori, they can be considered places with less resources for self-promotion and attracting tourism and thus need to employ a more effective communication. Although Barcelona holds this certification, it does not form part of the main sample as it is categorised as a metropolis.

In order to carry out the research, a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative techniques was performed (Soler y Enríquez, 2012: 887), with the aim of identifying the vision, awareness, and actions surrounding sustainable tourism of those involved in the process, that is to say, municipal authorities and tourists alike, to obtain a greater contextualisation of the object under study. The compilation of data was performed throughout the month of July 2020 as is herewith detailed:

In-depth structured interviews were carried out (Flick, 2015; Gibbs, 2012) with the heads of tourism of the councils of the chosen towns and cities, in addition to a survey (Sierra, 2008) with 150 Spanish tourists to measure the level of awareness of sustainable tourism and whether this was a determining element when booking a holiday. The interviews with the councillors for tourism were performed during the first two weeks of July 2020, while the survey with the tourists was carried out throughout the whole month of July 2020.

The interviews were focused on understanding how long the towns and cities had held the aforementioned accreditation and the considered benefits of holding it, if they performed other activities related to sustainable tourism, and to what extent they were willing to invest in campaigns to create visibility of this type of commitment to the environment, with the aim of building an image of urban sustainability as regards external communication. The obtained data was contrasted with the information published on the official council websites and the official tourism websites alike.

In regards to the surveys, the 150 participants were residents in Spain, adults, and with possibilities of mobility within and outside the country. They were asked if they had any actual intentions to travel, which if affirmative, led to a follow-up question on the destination category (within the province, in the national sphere, or internationally). Further questions included, if they had heard of the term *sustainable tourism*, if aware that the chosen destination held any corresponding seals, certification or recognition, and if that was a determining factor when taking a decision.

Figure 2: Participants by gender
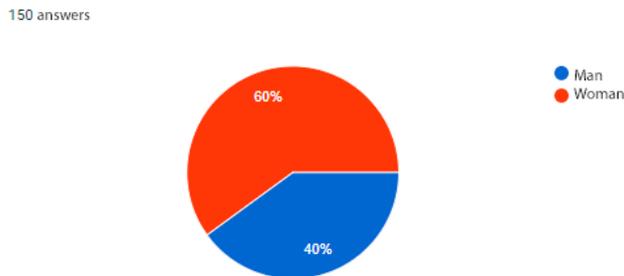
Source: Google Forms using the obtained data

The third procedure involved a comparative analysis between the destinations under study and the four most visited cities in Spain: Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and Sevilla. Cities which have been working towards other types of certifications and directing their city brand towards sustainable tourism using various actions, and have established an important image on an international level as leaders in tourism in Spain.

In the elaboration of the analysis table, the following variables were considered:

- Number of accreditations and awards for sustainable tourism visible on the official council website -(AACW)

- Spotlighted information regarding sustainable tourism on the official council website - SIST)

- Advertising on sustainable tourism on the official council website - (STA)

- Section on sustainability on the official city tourism website – (SSTW)

- Evidence of the participation of *stakeholders* regarding sustainable tourism – (STS)

Consultation of the official websites of each city were carried out during the last week of July in 2020.

Table 1: Overview of the data compilation techniques and the applied methodologies for the study

Data compilation techniques & applied methodologies	Sample
Consultation of the municipal and tourism websites	Towns & cities under study: Sitges, Villafranca del Penedés, Vitoria & Gijón
In-depth structured interviews	Councillors for Tourism of the chosen destinations
Surveys	150 adult Spanish tourists
Comparative analysis of communication regarding sustainable tourism	Between the destinations under study and the four most visited cities in Spain: Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia & Sevilla

Source: own elaboration

The aim of this triangulation is to determine to what extent the resources or the size of the town or city represent key variables in the creation of effective communication and advertising of a city brand with an emphasis on sustainability, in accordance with the guidelines of the 2030 Agenda and a commitment to the SDGs.

3. Results

Of the 150 Spanish residents surveyed, 63.8% (149 responses) (Figure 3) claimed they plan to travel and almost 20% left the possibility open, taking into account the restrictions and precautions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Of the 82.6% that expressed a definite intention, or the potential to travel, the majority (85.2%) (135 responses) indicated that they would travel within Spain (Figure 4), which displays an intention to travel outside their autonomous community and thus their province of residence.

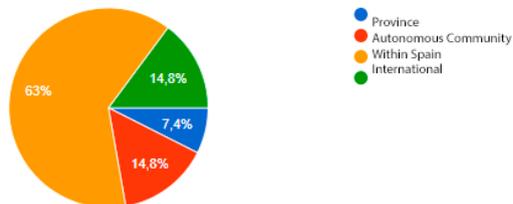**Figure 3: Are you planning to travel in the next few months?**

149 answers
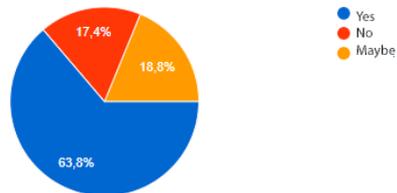
Source: Google Forms using the obtained data

**Figure 4: What is the main destination of your trip?**

135 answers

Source: Google Forms using the obtained data

On asked whether they had heard of the concept of sustainable tourism, of the 96% (145 responses) who responded, 62.1% gave a positive response (Figure 5), although 73% (141 responses) claimed that it was not a determining factor when choosing a travel destination or holiday (Figure 6).

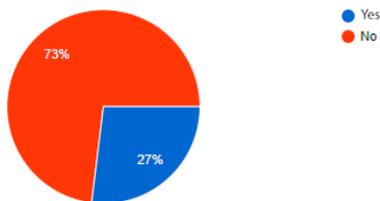**Figure 5: Have you heard of sustainable tourism?**

145 answers
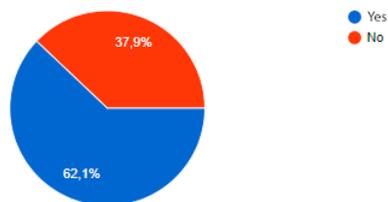
Source: Google Forms using the obtained data

Figure 6: Do you notice or look for an environmental accreditation or award when booking a travel package?

141 answers

Source: Google Forms using the obtained data

Based on the responses, it is clear the minimal importance that those surveyed place on the environmental recognitions which some destinations have attained. As displayed in the data in Figure 7, 73% (135 responses) are unaware whether the place which they are travelling to has, or is working on initiatives focused on sustainable tourism.

Figure 7: Do you know if your chosen destination has initiatives for sustainable tourism?
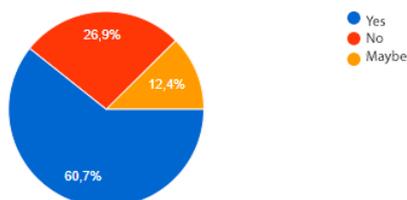
135 answers
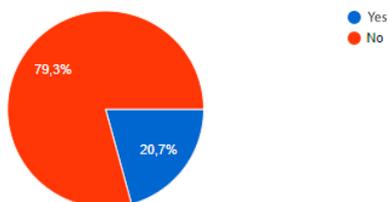
Source: Google Forms using the obtained data

An even more salient piece of data regarding the concept of '*destination branding*' and '*city branding*' is that obtained from the question of whether the chosen destination is a city, with 60.7% (145 responses) indicating, yes (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Are you planning on visiting a city in the next few months?

145 answers

Source: Google Forms using the obtained data

In regards to the comparative analysis between the tourism destinations (Table 2), on consulting the official websites of the local councils of towns and small cities: Sitges, Vilafranca del Penedés, Vitoria and Gijón, in three of the four studied cases there is no clearly visible reference to the accreditations and awards that they hold for sustainable tourism. Vilafranca del Penedés is the only town which displays GIF images on a loop of the four recognitions it has achieved as a sustainable tourism destination. On clicking on the hyperlink in the rolling images, leads to a dedicated page, 'Certificates', with detailed information (see https://bit.ly/2Dq1X65).

The same lack of spotlighting occurs when searching for information on sustainable tourism (SIST) or basic advertising of offerings and activities related to sustainable tourism (STA) on the official council websites of the four towns and cities in question. Once again, Vilafranca del Penedés is the only town which refers to diverse actions related to sustainable tourism, as well as an alternative promotion and offering of specific touristic experiences.

On referring to the tourism websites of the destinations and searching for a section dedicated to sustainability (SSTW), in the cases of Sitges and Vilafranca del Penedés, no such information exists. Although, Gijón (https://bit.ly/2QDAT6N) and Vitoria (https://bit.ly/3jZ9Os6) display information on alternatives, goals and specific actions focused on the sustainability of the city and a corresponding adapted tourism.

In this respect, the involvement of the community should be acknowledged, as well as that of commercial and industrial actors in the development of strategies focused on sustainability. In the cases of Sitges, Vitoria and Gijón alike, unless an internal search is performed on the official council website or the city tourism website, it is practically impossible to discover related information. Contrary to Vilafranca del Penedés, where in the tourism offering the involvement of all stakeholders is clear, displaying the contribution to a tourism less damaging to the environment, which involves the community and supports the development of the area.

Table 2: Communication elements related to building a city brand around sustainable tourism – Consultation carried out during the last week of July 2020

	AACW	SIST	STA	SSTW	STS
Sitges	None	No	No	No	Web consultation required
Vilafranca del Penedés	4	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Vitoria	None	No	No	Yes	Web consultation required
Gijón	None	No	No	Yes	Web consultation required
Madrid	None	No	No	No	Web consultation required
Barcelona	None	No	No	No	Web consultation required
Valencia	None	No	No	No	Web consultation required
Sevilla	None	No	No	No	Web consultation required

Source: own elaboration

Despite not being a considered variable in this analysis, the city of Vitoria displays a logo on its official council website of the title, "European *Green Capital*" (Figure 9); the award it received in 2012 in recognition of the volume of actions and strategies focused on a municipal management and promotion of a more and more sustainable tourism.

Of the studied destinations, Vitoria is the only one which includes the element of an image of this nature on the official council website.

Figure 9: Logo displaying the "green identity" of the city in the official website of the Vitoria-Gasteiz City Council

Source: https://www.vitoria-gasteiz.org/ (consulted 29 July 2020)

In regards to the four most visited cities in Spain, there is a total absence of references to sustainability certification, related information, and promotion of focused actions and activities on a more sustainable tourism. In a similar manner, the official tourism websites have no specific sections which refer to these themes. As with the other cases under study, it is possible to find information on diverse actions which the cities are undertaking in terms of tourism and sustainability, if internal web searches are performed.

It is quite prominent in the specific case of Madrid that the most recent notification regarding sustainable tourism was posted in June 2017, announcing an advertising and communication agreement with a company in the context of sustainable tourism (see https://bit.ly/2P9Yb3B).

Certainly, it is true that in the section on the environment, in many cases, it includes an area on sustainability, however, there is no specific reference to tourism. Equally pronounced is the case of Barcelona, whereby only after performing an internal search on the official municipal website, appears - "Guide for Sustainable Tourism" - which can be downloaded free-of-charge in a PDF format. The authorship of the document corresponds, not to the authorities of the city, but to the Red Española para el Desarrollo Sostenible, (Sustainable Development Solutions Network – SDSN Spain) and the RTI https://bit.ly/39HLtSZ).

4. Discussion

As can be observed in Table 2, there appears to be a problem or an omission by the municipal authorities in the creation of a communication (information, advertising, visual identity) which strengthens investment and the efforts undertaken in the formation of a more sustainable tourism offering as established by the SDGs and, particularly, the 2030 Agenda which today acts as the guide for related actions in this respect, in all political and economic areas – national, regional and local.

This presents major challenges when considering that tourism represents one of the main economic activities in Spain, not only in terms of international tourism, but also national, as is clearly displayed in the graphs in figures 3 and 4.

From the obtained data, seven out of the eight towns and cities do not publish any accreditations or awards which indicate the status of the destinations as promotors of sustainable tourism, thus having a negative bearing on communication that aims to build a city brand around sustainability. The decision to not spotlight such could be justified, if the councils in question did not insist on sustainable tourism being an essential element in tourism policies.

It is also true that, although tourists are aware of sustainable tourism, it is not a variable which they consider when choosing a holiday destination. A factor which could lead municipal authorities to perceive the effort of investing in the promotion of this aspect, as pointless and unproductive, due to it being a non-determining element for attracting visitors. Nonetheless, it is important when it comes to tourist segmentation and creating a more community and environmentally responsible image of the city.

In regards to the reported benefits to the image of the city from holding the *Biosphere seal,* the council of Vitoria-Gasteiz state that it represents "a sign of coherency in the management of the municipality", in addition to resulting in an "improved destination positioning, strengthening it on an international level", with the aim of attracting "tourists with a profile which aligns with the city".

Mar Carrasco (Department of Tourism in Sitges), stresses that on a management level, this accreditation has led to enhancements in "transversality, co-ordination, communication, analysis, sustainable tourism policies and action plans", in addition to a greater "recognition and promotion" in relation to communication aspects, with the Biosphere organisation only recommending destinations which hold these certifications.

David Puig (Tourism – Villafranca del Penedés Council) emphasises that this type of recognition "enables a plan of work which focuses on work in terms of sustainability in the whole municipality, and at the same time fly the flag for being a destination committed to sustainability".

There is a clear agreement on the need for this type of recognition in order to establish an image which is responsible and committed to the environment, especially on an international scale.

An opinion which is shared by María Ángeles Alonso (Divertia Gijón), who as well as "valuing the work carried out by the city over many years on sustainability" and the objective of "the city positioning itself as a committed, sustainable and responsible destination", points out that this type of accreditation enables one to "have a standard which sets the directives to be worked on, form part of the community of *Biosphere destinations*, be able to involve companies which participate in destination programmes linked to sustainability, and to participate in forums, events and congresses to displaying the experience of the city in this field".

These testimonials, however, contradict the findings in relation to communication, whereby, in the majority of studied cases, there is a notable absence of a corresponding visible and consistent informative and advertising message. An observation which is additionally confirmed by the fact that the official council websites in question, and even the municipal tourism websites, not only publish limited or no information spotlighting sustainable tourism, but they lack a specific section to spread the message of promoting a more responsible tourism with the environment and the community.

Mar Carrasco also claims that in Sitges "in terms of promoting the town, the importance of the accreditation is valued and referred to in all actions, be it in the content or design". In contrast, David Puig states that in Vilafranca del Penedés, "although there has been no specific campaign, the certification is included in all communication relating to tourism".

María Ángeles Alonso claims that in Gijón the accreditation has been used in various tourism campaigns, by means of physical features such as through content in the media, and "currently, although the seal is not displayed in the campaigns, sustainability is an aspect which is taken into account during the design and creation. For example, the last campaign, 'Xixón, en todas las ocasiones' (Gijón, at any time), above all, aims to showcase the cultural richness of the city, combining tradition with innovation".

In consideration of these testimonials, on visiting the different websites, be them of the corresponding official council or tourism sites, in the majority of cases a specific information search is required in order to be aware of the commitment to and promotion of sustainability of these cities; a search behaviour which goes against that carried out by the average visitor. Visitors tend to not delve deeper than the main website that indicates that there is a perception of communication and city brand related to sustainable tourism which is far from the image received by those who are outside the municipal institutions.

5. Conclusions

Although the effort which many towns and cities have undertaken to apply policies and specific actions towards a more sustainable environment should not be undervalued, in general, it can be affirmed that the first two hypotheses are confirmed. Towns – as with cities – lack an effective communication of sustainable tourism as a differentiating element, according to the observations from the analysed cases.

There is no evidence which leads one to believe that the achievement of a certification or award in the area of sustainable tourism is a determining aspect for the building of the city brand, with the exception of Villafranca del Penedés. From the moment of accessing the official council website or the website dedicated exclusively to promoting the city as a tourist destination, Vilafranca del Penedés presents an image with a special emphasis on urban sustainability, oriented, especially, towards attracting new visitors through a broad offering of experiences whereby there is a participation and commitment of shops, businesses and the local citizens.

In the majority of the cases, the responses of those surveyed coincide (Figure 7), whereby most tourists claim that they do not know whether the destination which they plan to visit promotes sustainable tourism, nor whether it holds any related accreditations or awards.

Moreover, there is no relation between the tradition of tourism, communication channels, reach, economic resources, the size of the destination of the contrasted cases, and being more efficient in the communication and promotion of sustainable tourism. In fact, in some cases it is the contrary, with certain aspects in the smaller towns and cities being more prominent than in larger cities that are presumed to be leaders in this sphere, which indicates that the third and final hypothesis is not confirmed.

On presenting the results and discussion, it is notable the difference which exists between those surveyed who have heard of sustainable tourism (62.1%), and the minimal consideration that this segment places on it when deciding on a destination for a holiday or weekend break.

With the 2030 Agenda on the horizon, it is undeniable the impact that tourism has on all of the Sustainable Development Goals. Aspects, specifically, related to this sector are included in goal 8 (decent work and economic growth), goal 12 (responsible production and consumption) and goal 14 (life below water).

However, as yet, the research demonstrates the limited or zero presence of attributes related to sustainability in the external communication of the destinations. The majority of which make no reference to the acquired accreditations and awards, do not spotlight relevant information, nor dedicate specific sections to sustainability, bar the identified rare case.

In this sense, despite cities such as Vitoria which claim that the B*iosphere* seal appears in all their communication, it is necessary to exploit, even further, this element as a quality distinction. In fact, a vast listing of accreditations of sustainable ecotourism exists, while some may be confusing, they enable the recognition of the work and commitment by all types of organisations. As a result, a greater emphasis on communicating environmental and sustainability values is required to support the growth of the city-brand and its differentiation in respect to other offerings.

An enormous opportunity exists, especially for medium sized towns and cities which, gradually, are obtaining seals of quality. A feature which permits an enhanced coherency between the identity and image of the city in tourism promotion campaigns.

This study enables the phenomenon to be addressed at an international level, verifying whether a limited or non-existing presence of environmental and sustainable attributes extends to other parts around the world.

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7. Bibliography

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