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## The Role of Internet and SEO in Branding Destinations: Case of Albania as a New Destination in Balkans

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### Abstract

*The Development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has recently been changing almost every aspect of society and economy. Within the new technologies, Internet with has impacted the interactivity between people and the variety of products and brands. When the discussion is not simply about a common product/service, but about a tourist destination, the concepts of marketing and ICTs are even more intertwined. An important aspect of tourist destination marketing is its branding. Destination Branding concept is very important because it make possible for a destination to differentiate from competitors through an unique name and identification in the perception that the target market will have. The aim of this paper is to investigate the impact that Internet has in destination branding, especially for relatively new destinations. The role of Internet is present through a variety of tools, such as web-sites, e-mail, social networks, blogging etc. We will bring the Albanian Case as a new destination to illustrate how the use of Internet and its related tools has helped in constructing a good brand image. Nowadays people find themselves firstly searching for information online about the destinations they want to visit, through Internet and the various platforms, so they are becoming very important as means for branding a destination. Many Internet elements can make a difference in branding if included as needed in the e-marketing strategy of companies that are making the important work about destination branding. The most important elements that have a positive impact in Albania, are content and keywords of Websites and a good level of sharing with social media. While there is much more to do with forms such as blogging, very important tools in SEO and the use of the right elements to raise brand awareness and differentiation.*

### 1. Introduction

The Development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has recently been changing almost every aspect of society and economy. Within the new technologies, Internet with its Web 2 applications has impacted the interactivity between people and business. The boost of Websites, social networks and their connection, is impacting more and more the relationship with the customer and the marketing function of organizations. With all the diversity of businesses, products, brands and their websites online, trying to attract the attention of customers, in the growing

competitive environment, a good website development is necessary.

When the discussion is not simply about a common product/service, but about a tourist destination, the concepts of marketing and ICTs are even more intertwined. A tourist destination may be included in the group of destinations recalled mostly by the consumer, but still it is not enough. An important aspect of tourist destination marketing is its branding because the destination must be unique in the mind of consumer as well as differentiated from competing destinations in order to be selected as a final decision. According to Qu et al (2011) the concept of destination branding is critical for a destination to be identified and differentiated from alternatives in the minds of the target market.

According to Inversini and Buhalis (2009) before making any decisions about their travel reservations, travelers spend time locating appropriate information on the Internet, checking different information providers (Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009). So, a lot of studies in the online information search field (Xiang et al., 2008), have attracted the attention of researchers. As a result, one of the most researched topics by academics has become online information search (Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006) because of the importance that the search has in the information that is given to the traveler and the image that can be communicated through the results of search.

The aim of this paper is to *investigate the elements that Internet uses to design web-sites and other Internet tools with the right principles of branding a destination in general and illustrate with the case of a relatively new destination such as Albania. The role of Internet is present through a variety of tools, such as web-sites, e-mail, social networks, blogging etc. This paper will focus more on web-sites and Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and their relation with social networking.*

The core of destination branding is to build a positive destination image that identifies and differentiates the destination (Cai, 2002). According to Aaker (1996) and Konecnik and Go (2008), consumers have to develop a relationship with a particular brand through a value proposition that either involves benefits or gives credibility, based on the desired identity of the particular brand. In addition to the function of identification, a destination brand differentiates itself from its competitors based on its special meaning and attachment given by consumers.

According to Buhalis et al. (2011), tourism destinations gain with the the development of ICTs because it raises efficiency and help in re-engineering communications strategies. While according to Morrison (2013) The Internet and online platforms become the most important venue for destination branding, as well as being the first option when citizens decided to search for information on destinations (Morrison, 2013). The impact of Internet marketing in tourism industry today is profound as it reaches the stage where destination branding cannot be effective without the support of online promotion. This is the way to build up brands from bottom up perspective.

But which are the most important elements present on Internet that must be used to effectively construct brand destinations? Is there a relationship between brand constructing elements of a destination and the Internet search process of travelers to choose the preferred destination? How can a new destination such as Albania implement effectively the Search Engine Optimization Tools to affect the customer perceptions and differentiation from competitive destinations?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Destination branding and its importance

According to Buhalis (2000, p. 98) a tourism destination is a "geographical region which is understood by its visitors as a unique entity, with political and legislative framework for tourism marketing and planning". Moreover they can be recognized as "a perceptual concept, which can be interpreted subjectively by consumers, depending on their travel itinerary, cultural background, purpose of visit, level of studies and past experience" (Buhalis, 2000).

According to Morrison and Anderson (2002) destination branding is defined as "a way to communicate a destination's unique identity by differentiating a destination from its competitors". Destination brands, like brands in general, exhibit two significant functions: identification and differentiation. The literature that deals with branding shows that the meaning of "identification" deals with the description of the product source to consumers. Florek (2005) has defined place as a product as large entity, which uniqueness is formed by various material and non-material elements. Generalizing the identity of a destination in a brand could not be avoided, because it has a complex nature. So to generalize the desired characteristics by the supplier, brand identity is crucial. In this case, by the desired characteristics, it is meant what the supplier wants the target market to perceive about the destination. Fan (2006) in this context explains the importance of defining a target market because of some aspects of a destination which may be evaluated by one segment while impaired to another. The construction and communication of brand identity of a destination in fact is based

on two components, the value of the destination perceived by target market (supposed travelers) and the differentiation from competitive destinations. A destination should focus in this value that it is delivering for the traveler, according to types of tourism that is offering and types of tourism services, where according to Baker (2007) tourism destinations point out strengths such as best accommodation, quality restaurants and food, well-designed public spaces, etc. It is more critical to understand what associations of a brand are advantageous over competitors (i.e., points of difference). Points of difference associations help consumers positively evaluate the brand and attach to the brand (Keller, 2008, p. 107). Nowadays planning and strategy for branding a destination is very important for tourism industry in a destination. A destination tries to be differentiated by its unique characteristics, to give the right information to visitors and to promote the image, through branding.

## 2.2 What is the role of Internet and SEO in branding destination

Digital marketing, as an important approach developed in the times of Internet, is used along with other marketing techniques in branding strategy as part of an overall marketing program. This part deals with, as according to Charlesworth (2009), how digital or online marketing can impact the process of destination branding.

The role of Internet includes firstly the capability it has to fill the gap between destination organizations and tourists, side by side with offline marketing.

The role of Internet in e-marketing and especially in e-destination marketing, is present through a variety of tools, such as web-sites, e-mail, social networks, blogging etc. Nowadays, the impact of Internet in tourism industry is visible in the destination websites to support online promotion. But the goal is to have a more profound effect, because online marketing is a really important support for the effectiveness of destination branding. This is how brands are built from a bottom up perspective (Eurocities 2010).

On the other hand, some issues in destination branding, such as communication costs or getting world-wide distribution in a short time, are solved by the use of Internet marketing tools.

Sheehan (2010) has mentioned that important tools in website marketing that show their usefulness in destination branding are search engine optimization and social media marketing.

### 2.2.1 Web sites and SEO

As part of an e-marketing strategy Search Engine Optimization (SEO) deals with the process needed to achieve the highest possible rank in the search results in a search engine, with the need of proper keywords, resulting in an increased number of visitors. A set of optimization methods are used by a website to achieve a good result in SEO. The key element is the way how a search engine filters the results by the match of keywords used by the visitors with those of the website. The chance of visiting the site by the searcher raises if the website is ranked higher by the search engine. This probability is higher with a good match as mentioned earlier.

Olbrich and Schultz (2008) and Thelwall (2001) state that the literature strongly reasserts the crucial role of SEO as an strategic element of internet marketing, which use can increase the ranking for website, making possible the market domination of the product/service of the website.

SEO is not only about search engines. It is about the people, which in case of destinations are the travelers. The most important factor to achieve SEO from this people point of view is to provide the information they are searching at every stage of the travel planning process. The updates that search engines are constantly undertaking in their algorithms, are not used by them to hinder the lives of marketers, but to bring benefits to both the traveler and tourism operators (or destination), as long as visitors meet with the highest quality search results.

Web 2.0 applications are offering more ways for web developers to create websites with friendly appearance, better exposure, and options for customers' feedback. But website development process and their content need to include the principles of SEO to raise exposure, information and ranking. Related to destination branding, the information about the brand and its desired characteristics by the target market should be important keywords to develop website not only by destination management organizations or other destination administration and marketing organizations, but also by individual hotels, travel agencies and tour operators. In fact, each of the individual website of hotels, resorts, tour operators, etc. should support building up the destination brand through the appropriate elements that meet brand image and SEO.

### 2.3 Web 2.0 and Social media

Gruber (2008) says that users have an important opportunity for sharing knowledge, opinions and product information online, because of Web 2.0 application development. The growing influence of this trend on tourism promotion, marketing and sales (Buhalis & Jun, 2011) is making possible a two-way information communication between tourism sector and travelers.

The existence and spread of Social media has led to the power of consumers. In the case of tourism industry, travelers depend on comments about past tourism experiences of others to decide in an effectively informed way, depending on official websites (e.g., destinations and hotels) as well as on unofficial ones (e.g., tripadvisor.com, blogs) as stated by Inversini and Buhalis, (2009). Buhalis et al., (2011) continues that, to increase tourism revenues and enhance innovation and competitiveness, web pages and social media should be used correctly for communicating the destination uniqueness. This will affect positively in supporting interoperability, personalization and constant networking. While Morrison (2013) claims the important role of Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), in the process of websites design and development or social media account content, for providing reasons and purposes for a visit. Using social networks, such as Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Twitter, Pinterest, etc, not only as separate e-marketing tools but linked to official websites is becoming an usual practice for tourism destinations, by DMO's and other interested tourism operators. The goal is to build and maintain communities of interest and to collect content generated by the user, which is more reliable and varies in multimedia.

### 3. Methodology

The methodology of the study includes an exploratory case study that includes two steps both using secondary data. First of all we will investigate the promotion campaigns of Albania as a destination in the last five years. The first analyses with serve to identify by a *semantic analyses* the key words that may lead to the search for this new destination in the two main search engines, Google and Yahoo.

The second step will identify and include observation of all the websites that communicate the image of Albania after searching with the key words that are supposed to be used by the visitors. The set of around 70 websites according to both main search engines have been observed according to the elements that construct brand image and Internet strategy that literature review has pointed out.

*The case study as a research method* investigate contemporary real-life phenomenon through detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions, and their relationships. Yin (1984:23) Since the case study method enables a researcher to closely examine the data within a specific context (Stake 1995), the case study of Albania will focus on identifying the key elements that are constructing its brand as a destination through digital tools as SEO and social media.

### 4. How Web Marketing Tools are Contributing in Branding Albania as a Tourism Destination

#### 4.1 Actual branding strategy of Albania

In the last five years, in fact since 2009 Albania has tried to identify itself in the international tourism market as a valuable and excellent destination of choice. In this market, where technology is very important because of the very nature of tourism product and the way information is delivered to tourists, the branding of Albania as a relatively new destination is very important. It is for this reason that last two Albanian governments had paid attention to the communication strategy and promotion. The last two slogans of Albania in fact are: Albania – A new Mediterranean Love” (from 2009 to 2014) and “Albania, Go your own way” (2014-2016).

The comments for the first slogan were not very promising. In fact the slogan tries to identify Albania as one of the Mediterranean destinations giving an image of love, to impress and stay in the mind of the tourist. According to Matador, the world's largest independent travel publisher, with over 12 million unique monthly visitors, this tourism slogan had good intention: “a signal to the world that it is a newly emerging destination with coasts that are still unspoiled”<sup>1</sup>. Anyway the comments found it to come across wrong, while sounding a bit promiscuous. While the blogger Nathan Griffiths says that

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<sup>1</sup> <http://matadornetwork.com/trips/the-anatomy-of-a-tourism-slogan/>

another good example from the slogans of 2012 is Albania, 'A New Mediterranean,' "which gives you a completely different idea about Albania to the one you probably have before you go"<sup>2</sup>.

The second slogan, on the other hand, was born as a need to adapt to reality and an effort of the Albanian government to increase the number of tourists, foreign ones in particular, among other reasons. The aim was to launch the new image of Albania and its tourist potential, for a European Albania, an Albania of the next Generation. The logo and the slogan aim to convey Albania through a message that represents the country and for a better promotion of tourist potentials.

Does the core of both slogans in the last five years help in finding this destination as the right one from Web searchers? Is Albania identified as a distinguished destination through the Websites? And how can help other tools such as SEO and social media in this process? The second phase of exploratory research continued to answer these questions.

#### 4.2 Analyses of Websites

The observation of websites through two search engines was done according to two groups of keywords. The first group was selected based on place: with the keywords: "visiting Europe, Mediterranean, Balkans", supposing that the searcher knows the region where he/she would go. This search is reasoned on two elements of the first slogan: "Mediterranean" and "New", which are used to identify Albania as a New destination in Mediterranean. Place is the basic segmentation in the first slogan.

The second group of keywords tested the motive of travel, because this is thought to be the meaning of the second slogan. The differences in search results with the keywords "visiting" and "vacations" are shown in the table two below.

After analyzing the sites, we can see that Albania has not appeared in anyone of the websites as a result of the searches in Europe and Mediterranean destinations. Other destinations in the Balkans such as Montenegro and Serbia, appear only occasionally in these test searches, except for Croatia, which is the Balkan destinations most included in the Tour operators, Internet Distribution Systems (IDS) and other Information agent Web-sites. In fact the challenge to identify Albania as a new destination in Europe can not be considered successful from these test results in the Web.

**Table 1.** Results of Web search according to place keywords

Key words	Europe	Mediterranean
Common Websites for both search engines	5	4
Frequency of Albania	0	0
Frequency of a Balkan destination	6	4
Total of web-site visited	20	20

**Source:** Authors study

Another element that can be analyzed is the difference in search results in different search engines. Since this is an exploratory study, It is important to know if there is differences in results in different Search engines, because the Websites to be seen by different searchers. We can see that the number of common web sites for both search engines is very low and there is little difference according to keywords used.

**Table 2.** Results of Web search according to motive keywords

Key words	Balkans	Visiting Balkans	Vacations Balkans
Common Websites for both search engines	1	1	1
Frequency of Albania	9	4	5
Total of web-site visited	35	17	18

**Source:** Authors study

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.timetowander.com/tourism-slogans/>

Types of companies that are shown in the web-site results of the search can be seen in table 3. It can be seen that the most results are Web-sites of Tour Operators, IDS and Blogs. In fact, organizations that can contribute for the brand image of a destinations may be private operators and not only public ones and/or DMS. Since the most frequently presented are blogs, we can say that individuals with a certain reputation and experience in traveling and tourism can also be very important in distributing image of a destination. In fact some of the blogs, especially in the searches related with Balkans, were helpful regarding the information for different competitive destinations. In fact Albania should confront with the reality of a raised number of articles written by this bloggers and the User generated content shown in other social media sites.

**Table 3.** Types of organizations that resulted from key word search

Typology of Web-site	Google	Yahoo
Media	4	2
IDS	8	8
Blogg	10	9
Organizations	3	3
Tour operators	7	9
Social media	0	2
Total	32	33

**Source:** Authors study

The third phase of the research continued with the specific search for Albania with keywords, visiting Albania or Vacations in Albania, as a logical result of the first search where this destination is shown 9 times in the Balkan search destinations. The web sites are categorized from the point of view of organization type as shown in the table 4. Then, they are observed according to the elements that must be considered crucial for the brand and according to the proper elements for SEO. The results are shown in the table 5.

**Table 4.** Type of Organization for search with keyword "Albania"

Typology of Web-site sponsors	Albania
Media	6
IDS	3
Blogg	3
Organizations	15
Tour operators and other private agencies	10
Social media	0
Total	37

**Source:** Authors study

In case of Albania, typology of organizations that sponsored for the websites shown in the search results is divided more between Private Tour operators and agencies in tourism industry and other public, non governmental and governmental organizations. But about 50% of these organizations are not sponsoring tourism sites. Only 22 out of 37, which is about 60% of the sites are tourism sites, which include the private Tour operators and agencies, blogging, IDSs<sup>3</sup> and organizations dedicated to branding Albania. In fact only three Web sites are public organizations that are aimed to Brand Albania in the international tourism market<sup>4</sup>. Media is also doing part of the job in branding Albania as a new destination in Balkans, Mediterranean or Europe. Media such as The Guardian, Tiranatimes, Telegraph UK, have articles which are showing the great nature and heritage in Albania, and in some cases include elements of Albanian Brand, but there are not present structured elements of the brand and the right keywords related to brand image.

<sup>3</sup> The IDSs are Lonelyplanet, Tripadvisor dhe booking.com

<sup>4</sup> Albania National Tourism Agency (with 2 links) and "Invest in Albania" an NGO.

**Table 5.** Analyzing websites from SEO perspective

Elements for SEO	Number of sites
The existence of keywords related to brand image	9
Brand-awareness	4
Blog	5
Sharable content	14
Total web-sites (Albania)	37

**Source:** Authors study

As table 5 shows the elements for SEO, they are only partly included in the websites visited. Web-sites that are talking about Albania lack very important elements of brand awareness, elements which are not structured as needed. Keywords also are lacking in most of the websites, but they are present in almost 25% of the sites. Elements such as blogging that impact substantially the SEO, are present only in 13% of the cases, while sharable content is present in almost 38% of the Websites.

## 5. Conclusions

This research found about the elements of electronic media that nowadays are very important in a marketing field such as branding for a destination. Internet is playing a great role in tourism industry, as in many other industries, to raise profitability through raising customer satisfaction, where brand awareness has a special importance.

The research of the case study linked three important issues: keywords which serve in searching for destinations, site description according to keywords and the recommendation that may lead to a better branding based on the help of technology, especially the use of SEO and social media and user generated content.

The study of Albanian case shows that the most important elements that have a positive impact are content and keywords of Websites, and a good level of sharing with social media. While there is much more to do with the update of information in forms such as blogging, which are very important in SEO and the use of the right elements to raise brand awareness and differentiation from other competitive destinations in the region.

Being an exploratory research about the Albanian case as a new destination in Mediterranean and the Balkans, further research may be very helpful for answering hypothesis such as:

- Different Search engines impact in search results with the same keywords.
- Different keywords according to visitor needs result in different search result about a destination
- Including the right branding elements depends on type of Web-site sponsors

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